

RESILIENT

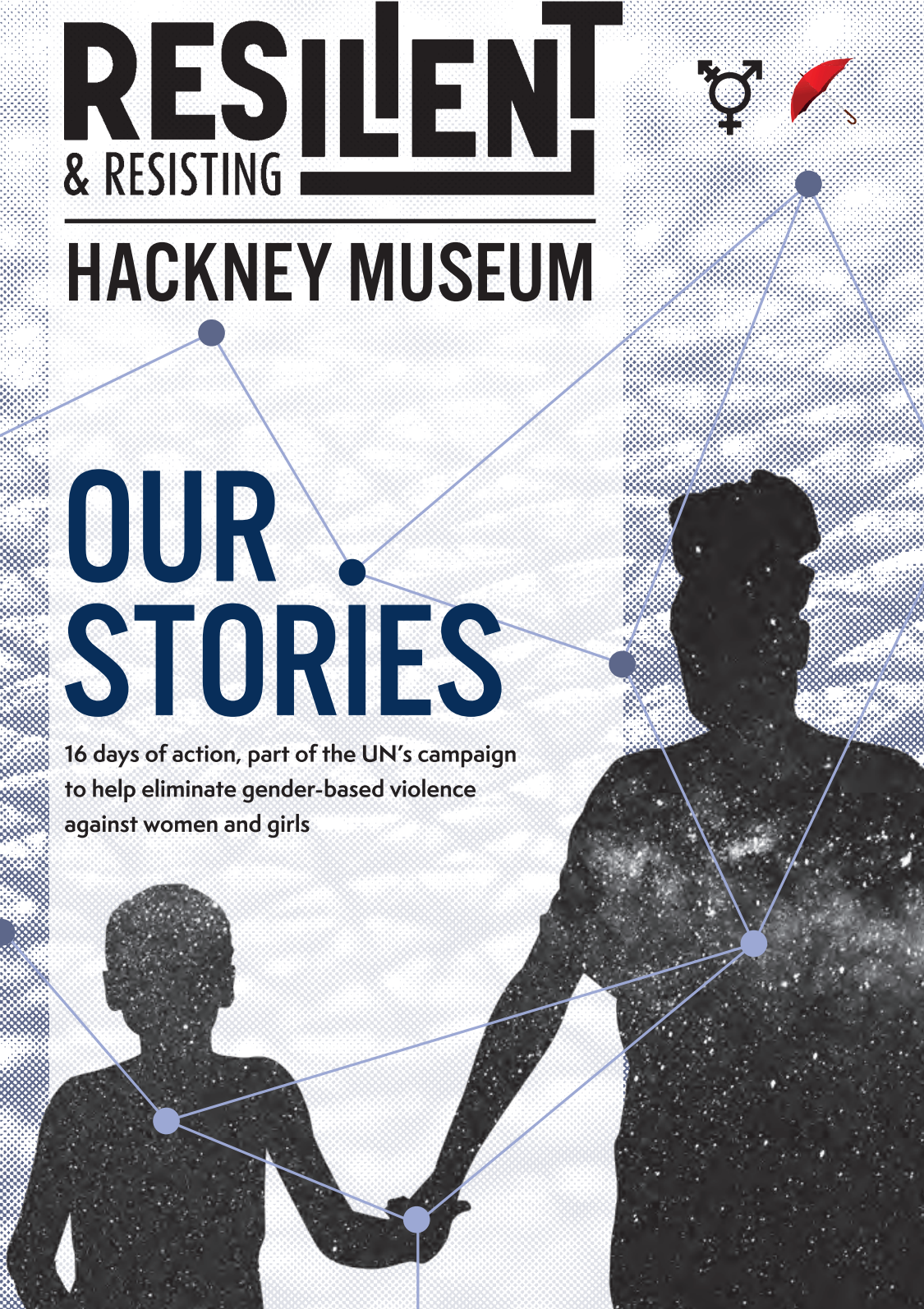
& RESISTING

HACKNEY MUSEUM



OUR STORIES

16 days of action, part of the UN's campaign
to help eliminate gender-based violence
against women and girls



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17. 16 DAYS - THE HACKNEY MUSEUM

This event is a collaboration between
Hackney Museum and Resilient and Resisting.



OUR STORIES

Resilient and Resisting
in collaboration with
Hackney Museum

At this event, we invite you to come and listen to stories of survival and agency, focusing on the theme of violence against women and girls.

They contain explicit content and mention domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape and gendered violence.

All stories are produced in collaboration and ongoing consultation with interviewees.

The readings focus on first hand accounts which show how, through individual or group resilience, people have found ways to speak up, name experiences, organise and survive.

This event is Trans and Sex Worker inclusive.

The stories presented are from longer pieces collected as part of Resilient and Resisting, an oral history and collaborative storytelling project.

The event is supported by Hackney Council's 16 days of action against gender based violence, part of the UN's campaign to help eliminate violence against women and girls. This years campaign has the theme #HearMeToo, linking to movements which feature the voices of the voices of survivors and activists.



#Hear MeToo

HOW THE STORIES ARE WRITTEN

These are not verbatim texts, they are a collaboration in which myself and another person participate in a process together. I have started to record interviews where permission is given. Interview is a loose term to describe a conversation in which I ask very few questions, encouraging the other person expand on those as a monologue. Mostly I sit and listen, trying to absorb the story, and paying attention to individual rhythms of speech and turns of phrase.

I write a draft from memory, then check this against the recording, picking up phrases, noting details. I tell the people I interview that I will look for a narrative, also that I like to write things that put the personal in it's political context.

After writing a draft I share this with the person I interviewed, asking for feedback, and if there are things they would like to change. Some people correct details, sometimes we rewrite together. Often there is work in anonymising the text, producing a piece which makes the person feel safe about their details and what is told. The process varies from person to person.

In each instance where the material is used, if this has not already been agreed on or if there is a new context, participants are consulted and permission sought. The stories included in this reading are shortened versions of the original texts.

Jet Moon

A LIONESS

My earliest memories?

My earliest memory is of my beautiful mother who I adore and the colour violet all around, violet everywhere, surrounding me. Another is age three, putting on a dress and running out the door. I was missing for hours. Everyone was out in the streets looking for me, searching for a little boy. They couldn't find me anywhere, then an old woman said, 'Oh, but there was a little girl, I saw a little girl go that way.'

The beginning of my difference, my quirkiness, or even my pain if you like began at age 5. At the age of 5 I was closer to my older sister than my brothers, I was the youngest. I didn't like to play football, I didn't like to climb trees. My sister always wanted a younger sister, she used to tell me 'Pray to God to become a girl, so we can be Sisters.'

We played with our dolls. I had my Barbie or was it Cindy? The one with the fringe. And I loved Wonder Woman and The Bionic Woman. I loved all those strong powerful woman, with beautiful make up. I used to tie t-shirts on my head so it was like a long hair, and another around my shoulders like a cape, then jump from the living room table shouting 'Wonder woman'. Then somebody said to me 'Take that thing off your head, stop behaving like that, stop walking like that. Boys don't do that. Stop being like a girl.' That's the first time I remember feeling humiliated. I felt shame. I had a very fortunate upbringing in the beginning,

I was born in Paris and raised in Italy. We had a big household, with lot of people to help us, integrated into the household like an extended family.

When the war in East Africa happened we had to leave Italy and go to Egypt. We went from living in a large home to all of us fitting into a two bedroom flat. This was not the Egypt that tourists know, it was the real Egypt.

That was also the first time I was molested, this guy took me, I didn't want to go with him. He kissed me and put his tongue in my mouth, that was the most disgusting thing. I remember washing my face over and over again, trying to get rid of that feeling.

Eventually we went to the South of France as refugees. Starting school there, I fought countless times. Going out in the world I had to fight like a Lioness. I would fight like a cat. I would bite scratch, I didn't care, that was how I defended myself. Fear, pride, adrenaline, I did what I did.

Again it was all to do with my colour. I would get so angry. I would fight tooth and nail, I would battle with those who tried to put me down, I was not taking it. Oh I would fly into such rages. There was so much anger inside me. The people left me alone after a while because I was a Lioness. I started to have my first experiences with sex at 14, it was the same as before, I felt disgusted, but it became a routine. I would run away from home and sleep with older guys. I think

I've always been looking for that Daddy figure. But also there has been always that thing where I felt sex wasn't about me, I felt a lot of shame and pain and anger.

Because I felt there was something shameful about me, I started to keep secrets. Not being honest was a way of protecting myself. I didn't want to reveal things about myself in case it was considered shameful. I didn't want to bring shame into my family.

I found the gay scene, it was like I arrived. I completely blanked my family for a whole year, even leaving that close bond with my mum that none of my other siblings had.

Prostitution, I started at the age of 20, a guy i was dating he pimped me out. He said 'Oh, you can go to Porte Dauphine, you can work there.' I went there with another guy, I had my first few clients and I thought, 'This is fantastic'. I was going there for a whole summer and I loved it. I tell you why I loved it: it was outside, it was in a beautiful place, it was the cars, the people, the transsexuals, the prostitutes, the gigolos, the dealers. All of these people, I was drawn to them. I didn't have any embarrassment around them, they made me feel at home, they embraced me. That summer was amazing. I met many many people and some nights we would talk, talk talk, till the sun came up. Those deep encounters, they shaped me and made me love life more, those beautiful people made me feel there was a way out. Those prostitutes were poets, nurses, mothers, all kinds of people.

It was very dangerous as well, I'm lucky that I haven't been killed, some times people were disappearing. You know, 'Where is Jon François?' 'Oh he went into the woods and we haven't found him since.' But I wasn't scared, I was excited. I wasn't excited because of the danger, I was excited because there was something else, a kind of life I could relate to.

Struggles with mental health, gender, sexuality. Experiences of violence, fear, sexual abuse. Prostitution, rejection from society, family, the LGBT community, the black community, the Muslim community, gay Community, trans community. Racism, homophobia, being disowned, being an outcast. I subscribe to all of the above.

All of the things we take inside that turn to anger. It must come out, no matter what, it has to come out, it must find a way out. Or otherwise all that shit is going to be in there and it will destroy you. Once I started to be me, that's when the anger subsided. Being me with my clothing, with my not specified gender, I feel more relaxed. It doesn't mean I don't get scared. Sometimes I do get scared, when I get looks on the underground or whatever, but I've got nothing to hide, I expose who I am, I'm stronger for it.

Sometimes I take my bravery as irrelevant, I had to be brave all my life, thats just the way it is. My bravery is so inbuilt, I almost forget about it. I don't see it. Perhaps I should honour it more. I'm one of those people who think you just have to get on with it.

I learned a lot through my mistakes, I'm less defensive, less with a chip on my shoulder. I don't believe in being constantly chronically angry, but I do believe that when you have had enough you have the right to expose your anger, without hurting people. My anger comes when I feel cheated, ostracised, less than or less of a human, when I think people think they are better than me.

I want every one to feel love.

I searched for joy for all my life. All the things that bring me JOY are all the things I used to feel ashamed of.

Everything that could bring me happiness was in front of me the whole time. I don't feel shame anymore.

SPEAKING & silence

Speaking and silence, or rather silence and not speaking, has been a big feature in my life. I didn't speak properly until I was around seven, I was silent up until about 4, and then there were only three people who could understand the kind of speech I was capable of.

As an adult, as an activist, I've spent hours sat in meetings full of men, where there were maybe three other women. Listening to those men discuss endlessly, for hours and hours, why there were no women in the meetings. 'We have to get more women to come to meetings, how can we get women to come to meetings?' They never asked our opinion. Always talking about inclusion, without thinking that maybe the people they wanted to include were already doing something else.

There was a lot of not talking in my family as I grew up. We yelled, but we never talked about what was going on under the surface. I didn't know that the things that bothered me were important. We just didn't talk. Other things were happening outside the family home. Implicit and explicit violence, things that shook me and changed me, but I never told anyone. I always wondered if I could have changed what happened if I had said something. Not talking was the way things were dealt with.

I decided to train to be a nurse and I was housed in the nurses hostel. That was where I had my first breakdown. I just woke up one morning and I couldn't

move. It was as if all of my years of silence had come to revisit me, that morning when I woke up I literally was not able to move or speak. Except my housing was at my place of work, the nurses housing was there right next to the hospital where I was working and training. If I wasn't able to go to work, then I wasn't housed.

Squatting gave me another option, even if I didn't have a job or any money. Except squatting is a full time job. I didn't feel I possessed most of the valued skills for it. With squatting you have to be a valuable member of the group. Because when the squat is about to be evicted, there are always those discussions about who is going to go to the next place. Who who do the other people want to live with? Being depressed and anxious doesn't give you many Brownie Points.

In one of the squats where I lived, a few of us all used confide in an older man, we used to 'Dad'. He would spend hours and hours patiently listening to our problems. We didn't know that he was a corporate spy, sent to find out what the environmental movement was up to. He would photo copy and send everything I wrote in my diary to British Aerospace. British Aerospace have received A LOT of information about depression and anxiety.

All this is a bygone era, as the laws changed to make squatting next to impossible, but in the 90's and 2000's squatting was a major part of my life.

Squatted social centres and community spaces meant there were places that were just open and you could just go and be there. Plus you could go there and be really WEIRD. You could be among the weirdest of the weird and you still wouldn't be the weirdest person there.

I met a lot of people through social centres, hanging out, getting talking. It was through social centres that I met other mad women. I went to a social centre for a political meeting and met a couple of women there who were also mad. We ended up totally ignoring the meeting and just talking to each other. It was like the words poured out of us, we couldn't stop talking! I had that for quite a while, my mad women's group, we would meet up and just talk.

Ordinary housing, places that weren't social centres, but were squatted to live in, there used to be a lot of those. I was living in one of those squats with a group of others and my boyfriend. Everything was ok, until my boyfriend raped me. At that point I decided I'd had enough of being silent. I knew where that had got me in the past, like back in the nurses home where I couldn't move or speak. I didn't want that to happen again.

I told my friends and I told people who I thought needed to know. I said they could pass on the information if they wanted to, it was their decision. But on one condition, I asked them not to name me, or share information that could identify me.

That didn't work out. I would walk into rooms and people would be having political meetings about it! People were naming me and discussing whether they thought it was really rape or not. Some people would be talking about what a good guy my ex was and how difficult this was for him. People would approach me to give me their opinion, or to tell me about their experiences, or to talk to me

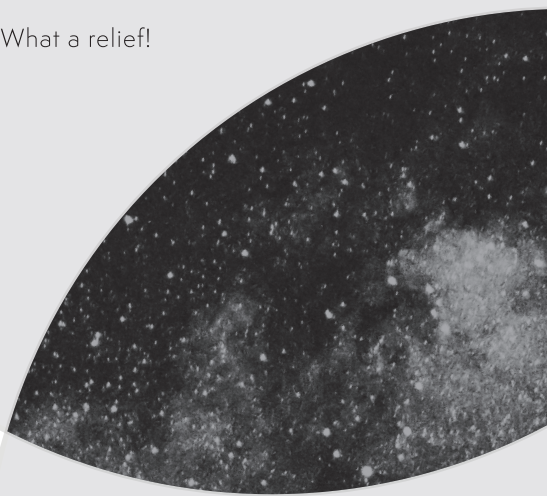
about HIM. What was missing in all of this was any real ability to LISTEN.

I didn't want to stop speaking but had to get away from all of that and I had nowhere to go. That was how I ended up in a homeless hostel. I remember telling the support worker when I first came into the hostel that I would just keep my head down, keep to myself, and just get through my time in the hostel. He told me 'No, that's not how to do it. You need to learn how to socialise and make sure people know you.'

The level of homophobia in that hostel was off the scale. As a queer person I felt unable to say anything. I didn't want to become the subject of all of that talked about violence.

Being housed, finally being permanently housed, it's been years and the novelty still hasn't worn off. To be able to make my own choices about being involved in groups or not. Not to have to deal with bullshit people or their gossip. I realised I wasn't dependant on other people liking me anymore to be housed!

What a relief!



LOVE OF THE LAND

I came out as a lesbian when I was 20, I fell in love with a woman who moved to Open Women's Land in Wales. I left my job to go there. There were 27 of us including a lot of German lesbians (someone had put an advertisement in a German magazine) but there were also women from other parts of the world. It was all very anarchic. God, I think we took a different drug every week.

What I came to realise was many of those women had quite a lot of money that they kept in their bank accounts. So they were free to experiment. It was like they were playing at rebellion.

With Open Women's Land, eventually everyone decided that they were going to South America. The other women could all just get out their cheque books, or dip into their savings and buy a plane ticket. I didn't have that option. I ended up going back to London, getting a job to save for my ticket.

That's how I ended up squatting in Vauxhall in the 70s living with other women in collective houses.

We were political, which seemed to mean we went on a lot of demonstrations: Reclaim the Night, Pride marches, anti-racism marches. Being political also meant trying to live authentic lives as "out lesbians". Being a dyke was about being able to live fully, to be really you.

There were "gay ladies" who liked to play cricket and golf and who hung out with other ladies. Then there were us, the dykes. We would go to the disco at Venus Rising in Brixton every Wednesday then Fridays and Saturdays we would go to Rackets at the Pied Bull in Islington, just hanging out with other dykes.

I had become very disillusioned with those women in Open Women's Land. I had the burning desire to buy a bit of land for myself, it was doable in those days. Instead of flying off to South America, I carried on scrubbing women at Iron Monger Row Baths, saving up my money to buy land in Wales. Eventually I was able to buy a smallholding, to go and live there and start working the land.

The woman I bought the land from was working for Women's Aid, in refuges for what was then called 'battered' women. She told me about taking children from the refuge on a trip to the zoo, driving there in the van, going past a field of sheep and some of the children said, 'Oh look, there's a load of cows!'

They didn't know the difference between a sheep and a cow.

The children had witnessed very violent scenes in their homes, terrible, awful things. But in the refuges, it was like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. The refuges were overcrowded.

Children and their mothers were jammed in with a load of other women and children, who were all having major breakdowns. There was no way to settle and recover from the experiences they had had.

I thought if I could just take those children and give them time away from it all then maybe that could help.

I started a summer holiday program for the children on my bit of land. Kitted the place out with bunk beds, so there was room for ten children. I would move out of the house for the summer months, and workers from the refuge would bring groups of children up from London. They would stay for a week at a time.

At first when the children arrived they were very wound up, running around the place, throwing stones at the goats and all that. As the week went on, they would calm down. That was the first time they were away from being in a pressurised environment. We would take the children over to a neighbouring farm, where they had 200 organic Ayrshire cows and the children would help out with the milking.

By the end of the week the children's faces looked totally different. They had chilled out because they had a week of respite from the intensity of their situation.

I was 23 when I started the holiday project, I suppose that's young but I had the energy for it. I did that for seven years.

I think separatism has its value, it was very useful for me to be a separatist, I learned a lot of things about being a woman. There was also a lot of weird stuff around separatism in the women's community: women not wanting you to have male animals around the place, all of that.

I had heard that sometimes people who had previously only been interested in women sexually, suddenly became attracted to men when they transitioned. I had been a dyke for 30 years so I was sure that would never happen to me. I was a very confirmed lesbian, I was pretty sure I was done with men. Then, as soon as I started to take testosterone, all I could think about was cock!

Cruising, getting involved sexually with men, I had a lot of ideas about how that would be as a gay man. I somehow imagined that men would be all rough and violent, quite sort of 'Raarr'. Except what I found was that men could be so gentle, caring, soft and tender.

In fact many of them were even gentler than the lesbians! I had all of those preconceived ideas about how men were and how they would behave, or how women were, but in reality I've had a lot of very intimate relationships with **PEOPLE.**

SEX, REPRESSION AND MENTAL WEALTH

Domestic violence, violence in the home, my first memory of that is my mum, she was very violent. Her being violent towards us kids or us witnessing violence toward her from men who came into our home that's what I remember.

She was this angry woman, politically she was very aware and really powerful. She was out there in the world doing all sorts of things that she wasn't supposed to do and that other people didn't approve of.

The local policeman would come prowling around our house, looking in the windows and checking on her. She was an independent woman, we were coming out of the 60's it was a time of experimentation and an explosion of sexuality.

From really early on I knew there was a connection of domestic violence and repression being connected, domestic violence and sexual repression.

Out driving with my mum in the countryside in our old Bedford van late at night, we got pulled up by the police. The local policeman pulled us over because he thought we were two women out alone at night.

The look of shock on his face when he looked in the window and saw I was really young and my mum was much older than he expected.

My mum she knew what he was after, and she explained that to me as we drove away.

What I ask myself when I think on this question of repression and violence, what I ask myself is, can women ever be safe?

We live in such a repressive society, and I see this relationship between sexual freedom and repression. The question I come out of it with is, If women are going to stand up and have a voice, will men always repress that?

What I come out of violence with is the knowledge that there was no avoiding it and those experiences have affected my choice making ability.

What I am left with is this fear, that if I am creative, if I am vocal, if I stand up, if I stand out, I will be hurt, and that is a really rational thing to think. Can women ever be safe?

Back when I lived in a street of squats, I had my own squat and I chose my lovers. I could be single, I could go off travelling on my own and come back. I think because of my sexual freedom, oh I don't want to say it, my lips want to button up! But I think because of my sexual freedom men wanted to beat me. Domestic violence one of the things I find so offensive about it, is how much what women are saying and doing gets minimised: saying no, saying men can't have something, saying you don't want to play a rape game, saying you are going to leave, you get battered for that.

That resorting to violence instead of exploring with words. I'm far more interested in WHY violence happens rather than what the acts are, because it's a failure of communication. I just cannot understand resorting to violence. I judge the arse off those who resort to violence, it's such a lazy way of communicating. I am angry, I am so angry, but I do not believe in violence as an answer and I do not want to resort to violence.

I always left violence, I was always leaving, cos I saw the violence coming. For a very long time I didn't know how not to get into violent situations, but I ran away a lot, I got myself away from those violent situations.

My first experience of sex work, I went to work in a massage parlour that was just on the corner of our road of squats. I was 18, I had no qualifications, what else was I going to do? I wanted to make some money. This was 1978, it was a really naive time in many ways.

In those days men were so bad at sex, they were really really terrible at sex, so having men coming in and me being able to tell them exactly what to do, it was a way of exploring. Having a room where I could play and discover, it was lovely. If I say that experience was good for me and I enjoyed it, it's like I'm not allowed, other people want to say that was a problem. Though I also knew that what we did was secret, because you couldn't tell other people about it, it also meant that if things went wrong you couldn't get help.

I've heard my mother blamed for all of my difficulties, well she had her own problems. What I come back to this idea I have about repression, that if women speak up, they will be told to shut up. Not just women, we live in a society that represses others. Mental health, how those words are used makes me so mad, because when people say mental health, what they actually mean is mental

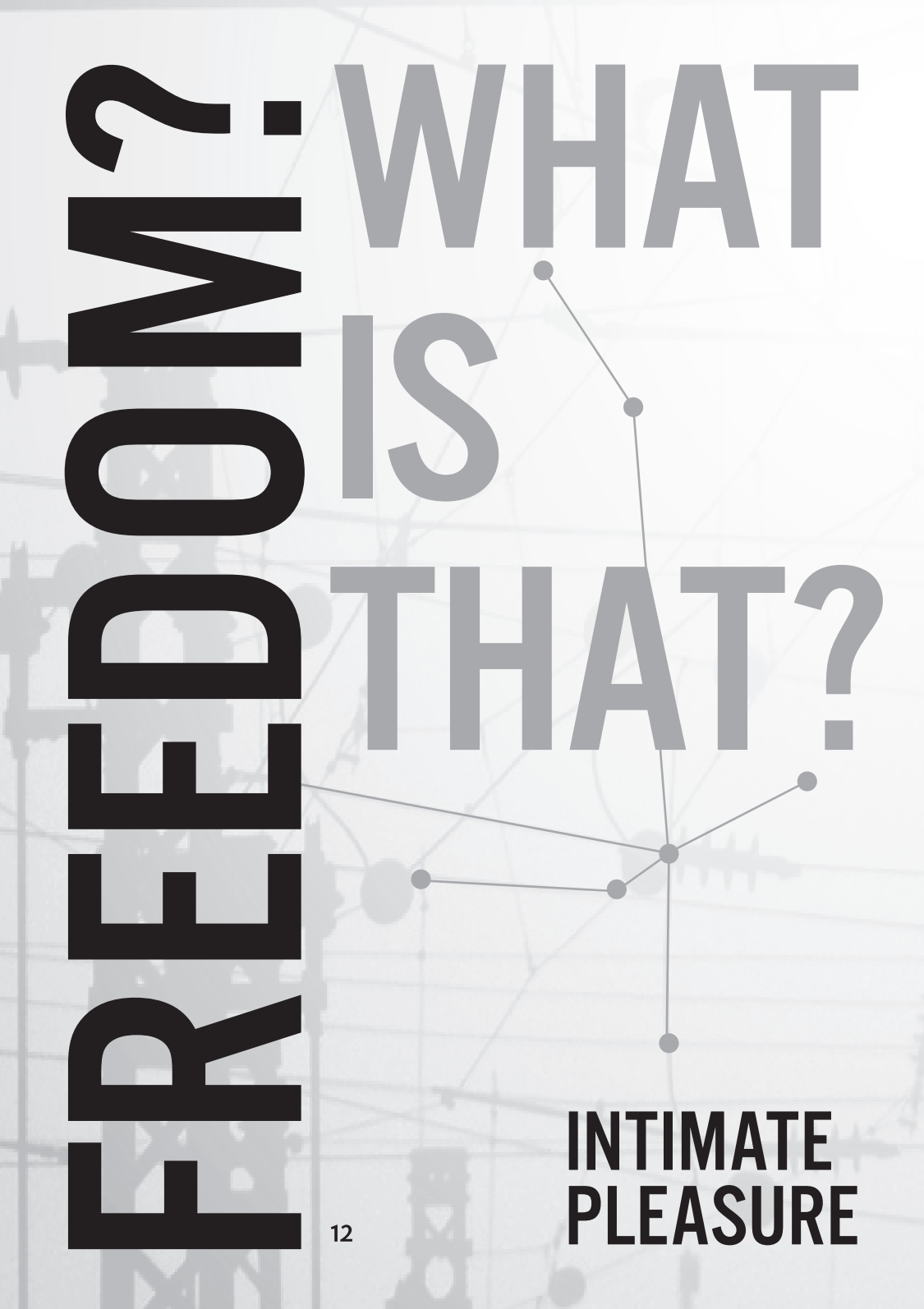
illness. That is the focus of services, from people who assess benefits, psychiatrists, professionals even a lot of support groups, the whole focus is on illness. What I want to focus on, what I want to put energy into and have skills for maintaining is my mental wellness!! For me mental health is mental wellness, but services, benefits, fellowship, support services in our society, when they say mental health, we are talking about ill health, they've got it wrong. Working in the the field of mental health I also bring up these questions, and end up having to resign from jobs because I just don't fit their roles and models.

My mental un-wellness, is simply that I do not fit societies borders.

One of the reasons mental health professionals get concerned about me is because I have thoughts about suicide, 'Will I go on?' Those thoughts are just part of me, I don't plan how to kill myself, but as soon as I mention that I am slapped with a diagnosis.

My understanding of that question is it's not a mark in the debit box, these are the questions humans ask themselves, these are the questions great thinkers ask. Its not wonderful, it's not sad, I just don't fit. If I stay with the thought of not fitting I can feel quite broken, but I'm not broken, I just don't fit. I'm not mad, this world is too small, it can't contain me.

FREEDOM? WHAT IS THAT? **INTIMATE PLEASURE**



I wish I could just go home but I'm not ready to go home yet. Oh, but London! This city takes so much more than it gives!

With going home it's complicated, I don't know how to be around my family anymore. If I try to talk about what happened, then it is me making a problem. Now so many years later where I come to understand more about what happened, then there is the feeling that my grandparents are too old to hear what I have to say, or it is too disturbing for them. I suppose I can go home when my grandparents are dead, maybe that sounds like a harsh thing to say but that's when I will feel that it is all over, that I am finally free.

In the last ten years if I counted, I've had more than 40 jobs. All of them casual, and a lot of those I got fired from for being unreliable. It's not so easy to be reliable for these jobs where you don't know from one day to the next if there will be work, or where it will be.

Regular work, I tell you one thing, with my sex work clients' they are not always nice, often they can be disgusting or difficult, but I can deal with that. But they don't yell at me. In my straight jobs, those situations where I was the 'free' worker, I never had a situation where they didn't yell at me. This was the price of having a job, that they are actually allowed to yell at me, to bully me and tell me what to do. I am supposed to act as if I am grateful for the job and the opportunity for them to treat me like shit.

Living alone, sometimes people just need to be alone, to have a space for themselves. Sometimes it is necessary to find your own space just to be able to think and figure things out!

Feeling ready to go into past trauma, to fall apart, sometimes it takes years to be ready, and then there is the question of how to function, how to survive when that is happening.

I realised I was telling the same fragments of stories over and over again to friends, and I was aware that there were gaps, things I was not telling or where I didn't

even know what happened. I wanted to know my own story and to try to make sense of that. I was tired of being angry all of the time, I know there are plenty of reasons to be angry but I wanted to understand where that anger was coming from, and to be able to know when I was angry what that was really about.

Except to have this space, to live alone, I have to work so much and have clients in my house all of the time. That's the thing with sex work, it's isolating. If you are not part of that visible sex workers community, then how do you find other sex workers?

I try to offer myself to go past isolation, to be there to support. I got approached by a couple of women back home who want to start some sort of sex workers project, because right now there isn't anything. What they are doing is part of another HIV organisation. I need to think about that, to think about what I want to do. I don't want to go there and position myself as a boss or a leader. I want to go there and show them some ways of how to do it and then go away again!

Now in my life on all levels, I can't deal with people's stupid questions and bigotry anymore, I got too tired for that. I can't deal with anymore of other people asking me if I really want to do this kind of work, or suggesting that if we really want to be together I should change, or saying they will struggle how to tell their friends about me. Fuck it. Now if some one wants to be in my life, friends, lovers, family, whoever, then they have to accept that this is what I do for a job, this and all of the other things they might wish to make 'respectable', no! I won't tolerate that anymore.

Freedom? What is that?

I have never been free. What does that even look like? I have always had to make money, to do what I am told, to find the ways to have basic things. That is not freedom. Everyone one has the right to housing, to have food, shelter, health care, because that is what it takes to live!

And everybody has the right to live!

HE WENT TO HIT ME AND
SOMETHING ABOUT
THE SPIRIT OF PUNK
WAS THERE IN ME,
INSTEAD OF THE
SPIRIT OF A
BATTERED
WIFE.

OUT AND ABOUT

It's a running joke with my sister, that book 'Angela's Ashes'. About the tragedies of a working class Irish family, we laugh about it sounding like a picnic in the park in comparison to our upbringing. I guess I always knew, that if you lived through a lot of trauma then guess what? It left you kind of fucked up.

Shit-head, I called him Shit-head for so many years I forgot his name, I was 16 when we married, I thought I could save him. I have an unfortunate Joan of Arc complex at times, which I have really worked on, no one else is getting saved. Shit-head was a batterer, he controlled me by hitting me. He was also a great one for asserting his legal rights, he actually waved our marriage certificate at me once before he raped me.

I've made some errors of judgement in my life, but I have a limited tolerance for bullshit. What ended my marriage, was a number of things, punk being one of them. I saw a punk band on the telly, Headbanger and the Nose Bleeds and it was the most exciting thing I have ever seen. Working class people making a noise and saying 'Fuck You!' I thought: if I wasn't here, I could be there.

Another thing was being kinky. Shit-head was always buying underwear for "me", that he wanted to wear and asking me to tie him up. I cooperated by tying him spread-eagled on the bed one day, then promptly exercising my new found power, by going out and leaving him there.


The real end was a failed threesome.

Shit-Head desperately wanted to have a threesome with me and my best girlfriend. It was the most exciting sexual proposition I'd had in a while. My friend and I had always fancied each other and so we went along with the idea. That didn't work out the way Shit-Head expected, he was sat there at the end of the bed twiddling his thumbs, as us two girls had a great time together. The beating I got after that, that was it.

He went to hit me and something about the spirit of punk was there in me, instead of the spirit of battered wife.

I spied a pair of bolt cutters sat next to our door, he was coming toward me with that look on his face, I just picked the bolt cutters and swung them at him. Mid swing I realised that if those bolt cutters made contact with his head, he would be dead. I threw down the bolt cutters and I ran. I kept on running the whole three miles to my mums house, and I never went back.

After that experiment with my best friend there was no going back sexually either. I wasn't ready to call myself (whispers) a Lesbian but I called myself 'Bi' for the next 6 years. Until I had made three babies with three different men, then I realised this 'Bi' thing wasn't conjuring up any action with women for me, so I came out. Except I was a punk and I was a pervy punk, I had to tone down my look, to become visible to lesbians.



So the leather mini skirt became a cotton hand sewn mini skirt, the fishnets became woollen tights, my killer heels became monkey boots and so on. Most lesbians were too vanilla for me, I started having some fairly tedious sex with women. I have to say, I've got no sense of commitment to boring sex, I just can't see it through.

In those days if you were looking for BDSM Dykes you had to go by clues. There was this one woman, there were rumours about her, that you had to watch out for her! Of course she became instantly attractive to me and we got together. It was messy.

If you were into SM in those days, you weren't allowed to be a member of 'Lesbian Line', the help line for Lesbians, I went to an interview and got turned down.

I fell into working with survivors, I was on the dole for years, then I got onto a government scheme. In those days they actually trained you. I worked in the queer centre first, giving workshops about lesbian sexuality. I like knowing about my own body.

Then there was a job going, working with survivors of sexual violence, I thought 'I could do that'. I wanted to give something back, seven years later I was still there. I'm not good at secretiveness, when I started at that place, it became swiftly apparent to my colleagues, that I knew about all sorts of sexual practices.

I had a very strong voice about the right of people to practice whatever they wanted to, as long as it was consensual. In the early years I had arguments with colleagues about sex work, about younger people, about mothers who were survivors, about all the assumptions that were made, but I did it to improve the work environment.

I don't think it is true that people can fix themselves by working with others, that's not sustainable. After seven years working in the field of trauma, it was all banging off of me. I was recognising a load of this stuff, but I never saw myself as having a mental health problem. So I had to look at my clients and think 'Hang on, why have these people been given these labels, these diagnoses? What's going on here?'

What people were describing to me, were layers upon layers of trauma, but they were being given these labels: borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, bipolar, severe and enduring unipolar depression. Really wild fucking labels and getting the message of 'You can't cope with what is going on in your life'. These are people who have had a hideous fucking shit load of experience, and guess what, they are having a perfectly normal reaction to it.

Maybe in the future we won't need to label people anymore. Now we're making the links between trauma and labels and finally understanding, that what we really need to do is address the trauma.

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES?

Hackney Museum is a local authority run museum with a national and international reputation for engaging local communities in every strand of the museum's work. They work collaboratively with residents and organisations to explore Hackney's rich history and the diversity of its people.

In more recent years, museum staff and academics have been on a journey to try understand how and why community engagement is so effective in Hackney Museum. This process has led to some dramatic changes, including the team restructured and job descriptions being rewritten. Museum staff have been given the freedom and time to work strategically with policy makers within local government on initiatives that engage a wide range of mainstream and marginalised local communities.

Working on the front line with communities for so long and seeing first hand the challenges they faced and the stories they had to share, I always believed we held the key to answering some of the bigger problems in Hackney, but I lacked the power and influence to really help to bring the challenges to light in a significant way and to effect real change for local residents. So over the years I, and the teams around me that have come and gone, have been embedding the museum in the community, but also embedding community in the museum.

We don't just work with communities because of strong and shared core belief that it is the right way to spend the tax payers money, we also work with them because we simply couldn't work in any other way, we don't have the funds to work on large scale and glossy projects, so we have to build networks and work strategically to get things done for mutual benefit.

The following text is an edited extract of a presentation 'Museums change lives?' given by Emma Winch, Heritage Learning Manager of Hackney Museum, at the Migration: Cities 2018 conference in Frankfurt. Reproduced here with permission from Emma Winch.

The whole talk can be viewed at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iH_eHGgE8

We don't have extensive collections, but we're realising through this work, many missing pieces of the jigsaw still exist in people's lofts and under their beds, so all of the time we are working on projects, we are trying to encourage people to think about their own collections and how they can help us to fill in gaps in ours and why it is essential that they do, so we can tell the most rounded and honest history of Hackney that we can.

So during this period of working more closely with policy writers and the equalities teams at the top of the council, I was finding ways to have a voice, and for the marginalised communities I work with to have a voice, in the more formal strategic aspect of writing policy.

Hackney have a great track record for engaging local people in policy writing, it is far more radical than other local authorities, but as a symbol of bureaucracy they still face enormous challenges speaking to communities that feel let down, pushed out or excluded by the council during austerity which has led to the closure of safe spaces in the face of gentrification and the mainstreaming of services, which have led to specialist understanding of marginalised groups being lost within staff teams.

The community are feeling the impact of austerity.

Shout loudly, you might be giving a platform for community voices to speak out to the visitors that come to the museum, but when the exhibition comes down what next? How will people hear those voices outside of a museum context? You owe it to those voices to not just drop the message and move onto the next project, but to find ways for as many people to listen to their message as possible and for their voices to be heard.



RESILIENT & RESISTING

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ABOUT RESILIENT & RESISTING

Fierce, intimate oral histories, collaborative stories, D.I.Y. research and interviews from people at the intersection of several kinds of marginalisation.

Resilient & Resisting is a collaboration between groups and individuals, with artist/activist Jet Moon, produced with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arcola Participation

<https://resilientandresisting.org/>

ABOUT HACKNEY MUSEUM

Hackney Museum is a community history museum that work collaboratively with residents and organisations to tell the diverse and rich histories of the people that have made Hackney their home.

The Museum's collection of over 8500 objects, artworks, photographs, documents and oral histories represent a unique record of the area's history and its residents, with a focus on migration, settlement and community organisation in the borough.

If you have an item that helps tell your story and are interested in donating it to our collections, please get in touch at hmuseum@hackney.gov.uk.

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