

# DEEP

A LITERANDRA PUBLICATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH  
INSPIRED BY THE 'X-RAY' EXHIBITION  
BY UYI NOSA-ODIA



# DEEP

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

ALESSANDRA FERRARO, FOUNDING EDITOR OF LITERANDRA

**How do you continue living when the unspeakable has happened to you? How do you carry on when you feel like you may not make it to tomorrow? And how do you speak about something that you can barely admit to yourself?**

Ever since I first met Uyi Nosa-Odia, alongside our usual banter, our conversations have in one way or another always revolved back to discussions about mental health, how we, as humans, cope with trauma, and how our respective experiences continue to shape our daily lives. Long talks over tea or wine naturally became a form of informal therapy, a meeting of minds and a merging of experiences. Considering our shared passion for any form of art, it seemed inevitable that we would eventually create something that was inspired by those discussions, and the 'X-Ray' project seemed like the ideal place to start from. Ever since UNO first told me about the idea behind 'X-Ray', I knew that some of the questions I may have had for him, but may not have had the opportunity to ask, would be answered through his work.

What I did not expect, however, was that this exhibition would not just provide answers to questions but raise even more questions and inspire a myriad of conversations and discussions.

This publication is the result of the long and sometimes painful conversations about our past experiences with trauma, the lack of awareness, understanding and focus on the importance of mental health of people around us, and our shared need to find ways to express ourselves and provide a platform for others to do the same.

Inside this magazine, you will find a touching exploration of UNO's personal ordeal and its expression in his art. You will find interviews with public figures such as Natalie Silva, the mayor of Larochette, alongside an important personal essay by Awa Nani Ndiaye, a secondary school student in Luxembourg.

I would like to thank OMEGA 90 asbl for their vital support of 'X-Ray' and Marc Gengler and Natalie Silva for their immediate support of both the exhibition and DEEP. I would like to extend my gratitude to Marc Nicolay, Paul Ewen, and everyone at Larochette Castle for hosting us.

And to everyone suffering, you are not alone.

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# IN THIS ISSUE

## **05** MENTAL ILLNESS IN MY FAMILY? NOT A SERIOUS TOPIC

Awa Nani Ndiaye

## **10** HOW DEEP DOES IT GO? AN EXPLORATION OF THE PAINTINGS IN X-RAY

Alessandra Ferraro

## **36** MENTAL ILLNESS: THE WAY WE SEE IT

Dami Ajayi

## **40** INTERVIEW: NATALIE SILVA



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# MENTAL ILLNESS IN MY FAMILY? NOT A SERIOUS TOPIC

A PERSONAL ESSAY BY AWA NANI NDIAYE

Discussions about mental health are rare in my family, as the general stance on mental illness is a negative one. This has meant that every time I have told a family member about how I have felt, I have been told to stop acting like a victim or to stop being so ungrateful. Although I understand my illness as a part of who I am, I often struggle to accept it and occasionally perceive it as a 'personality flaw'.

We do not communicate or help each other out that much. We have struggled with making a difference between their reactions and their religious beliefs. We are a Muslim family and don't really show much love to each other, but surely, not every Muslim family is like this, or are they? Would you say it's normal that I have never even hugged any of my siblings or even my parents? It's almost as if it is a taboo subject.



*La Famille, by Uyi Nosa-Odia*

**I THINK MENTAL ILLNESS IS AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN A SERIOUS TOPIC. UNFORTUNATELY, IT HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN TAKEN SERIOUSLY IN MY FAMILY, AND IT HAS BEEN A DIFFICULT TOPIC TO DISCUSS OPENLY.**

I battled with depression last year, and my family did not know about any of it, because I felt like they wouldn't support me in any type of way. I didn't consult a therapist or a general doctor. I just dealt with it.

I was mostly sad because I was gaining insane amounts of weight and I was not going out and making unforgettable memories, as is expected of a girl my age. I had nobody to talk to or confide in, since talking about emotions or feelings is pretty much a taboo subject in my family and most of my close relatives are emotionally unavailable, at least to me.

On top of that they sometimes make jokes like: 'Depression is for white people.' I don't think it's funny, never thought it was, and never will think so. I mean, I laugh at the jokes, so no one thinks I'm trying to be disrespectful, but how could a particular illness belong to a particular group of people? That doesn't make sense, does it? I think that a lot of other people in other families are also struggling with mental illnesses, whether it be ADHD, depression, social anxiety, ED (eating disorder) or something else, and I wonder if they deal with similar types of reactions from their families.

I became interested in the topic of mental illness when I was 12, due to struggles that I began to notice within myself. Now, I'm not saying this for you to have pity on me, but, as we moved quite a few times when I was younger, it was almost impossible to make friends at school. I once asked a girl if I could play with her and her friends, and the response I got was: 'you're too black to play with us'. Mind you, that girl was of mixed heritage, so she had a darker skin colour, too. Just not as dark as mine. So, from then on, I never made an effort to make friends anymore and I'm pretty sure that's the source of my social anxiety.

Even in class, when the teacher asks me to go to the blackboard I literally start sweating and shaking. I don't make it obvious because I don't want anybody thinking I'm shy. When in reality, I am. I literally feel extremely awkward when I have to give an answer to a question in class. I only feel comfortable talking and joking around with my neighbour. And even that took time.

Here's another example: I prefer taking the bus rather than the train to school, not because there are less people on the bus, but rather because I don't have to walk through the tunnel that leads to our school. I start overthinking and believing that the many people standing there like Lego characters to 'chill' or to smoke, stare at me as I walk past them in the tunnel. The walk through the tunnel normally lasts about 20-25 long seconds. During that time, I usually pretend to be typing something on my phone, or to be shuffle-playing my playlist over and over again, just so they don't think I'm weird for only staring at the floor while walking.

Since I don't know anyone from where I live to take the train with me and walk to school together, I have to go through this alone. And so, as often as I can, I avoid the scenario altogether and take the bus instead.

I also get very self-conscious about what I wear to school. I always try to dress a certain way that is a bit different than everybody else. My mind tells me that by dressing a bit different than everybody else, I am going to attract 'cool' people and we could potentially become friends. Unfortunately, this has never ever been the case. No one has ever complimented my style. Actually, that was a lie. I just remembered that a guy who is in my class this year told me I had 'drip', which is basically another word for 'cool style'. I got so attached to that compliment that I told myself that he liked me when he's just like that with everyone else. He's super friendly with every other girl and kind of has a flirtatious personality, I guess. So his compliment had nothing to do with me personally.

Sometimes, when I dress a bit too well for school, my mum likes to make this stupid remark: 'Are you going to school or to the strip club?' No mum, I'm going to school, and I'm dressed like this because I'm trying to impress people I don't even know.

Still on the subject of school, I hate doing presentations in class. I don't know exactly why, but I just feel like my classmates look at me and my body and just think: 'Damn, she's fat' or 'Jeez you really are ugly.' I just start overthinking the situation and then I start sweating like a dog who just ran half a mile in wet grass.



So, to distract them from focusing on me, I love to do a nice and long PowerPoint presentation that I just project on the white wall next to the blackboard. That way, everyone can focus on that, rather than on me. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'd rather live life alone and miserable than to get out of my comfort zone and try to make new friends, because I am terrified of rejection. It makes me feel like I am not enough.

I once opened up to my parents about how the kids in my class were unkind to me and that I didn't feel comfortable because I was the only Black, or even person of colour, in that class. I also told them that some boys were making racist jokes about me when I entered the classroom.

Once, for example, someone asked loudly: e.g., 'What can a pizza do that a Black person can't do?... Feed his family!'. Of course, this was followed by loud laughter from everyone around him. There were even times when they would bring my mum into their stupid racist jokes, and of course I did not let them get away with that. Even though I'm not and have never been close to my mother at all, something just triggered me in that moment and so I responded with a stupid mum joke'. s soon as the class heard what I had said, everybody basically said: 'Why did you have to bring his mother into this joke?' or 'Why would you say something like that?' They didn't know my side of the story, but I didn't care as long as he stopped... he never did though.

Anyways, I would tell my parents about that, but they'd just say something like: 'It's okay, they're just joking around, don't take it personally'.

So, obviously that's when I started to get depressed because no one understood me and I felt lonely. I didn't have a friend I could talk to about it. And the people in SePAS didn't really help much at all. I'd talk to them about these incidents and they'd ask me if it was possible that I was the problem in those situations. I would tell them everything in detail, and they'd still sit in front of me asking if I had provoked them in any way. In any case, they said they would talk to the specific boys I told them about and so I thought they'd stop with the bullying. And they did so, but only when the teachers were around, as soon as they left, however, they'd make me feel like shit for 'snitching' on them.

But that is past trauma. I have kind of let it go and have tried to heal from it. Even though it has resulted in me having social anxiety today. I still see most of those boys in the hallways at school and sometimes they call me and laugh, but I just ignore them.

In case you're wondering why I've not spoken up for myself more, I guess it's because I'm actually very shy. As soon as I start talking to someone, I start shaking as if I was freezing, and my voice becomes all shaky and I just don't know what to say anymore. This means that I'd end up standing there sweating, terribly anxious, ready to cry my eyes out, and that is why I have never confronted them when I had the occasion.

I'm just sad that mental health and mental illness has not been taken seriously in my family. It would have helped me so much throughout my early teenage years if I had had someone to confide in. I'm now insecure and feel uncomfortable in my skin but I try to not make the most out of it.

I care about everybody's opinion, and I am a 'people pleaser. At my young age, I already feel like an old lonely and depressed lady who's been to hell and back, just sitting there, lifeless and in pain, waiting to die.

**Awa Nani Ndiaye is a 15-year-old Senegalese girl who was born in Paris, France. At the age of two, she and her family moved to Bristol, England and then to Barking in East London. She spent 5 years there, then they moved to a small village called Hosingen in Luxemburg. They then moved to Steinsel, also in Luxemburg. 5 years ago, they moved to Rodange in the south of the country. Since then, they have not moved.**

**I battled with depression last year, and my family did not know about any of it, because I felt like they wouldn't support me in any type of way.**

AWA NANI NDIAYE

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**I agreed to write this piece because I hope that if other teenagers who are going through the same thing read this, they will feel less lonely. But I also wrote this because I really hope that my story is going to reach those who do not believe that mental illnesses do exist. I want people to understand that the fact that they do not care, indeed affects a lot of people around them, whether it be teenagers or older people.**

**AWA NANI NDIA YE**

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**H O W   D E E P  
D O E S   I T   G O ?**

**An exploration of the paintings in 'X-Ray' and  
the mind of the man who created them.**

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**In the Head**



**‘Osamwonyi... Uyi’, he called reassuringly with a look that betrayed his words. The expression in his eyes was indescribable. I’ve never seen him like this. ‘I’ll do whatever it takes, sell properties, send you abroad’, he added. But I couldn’t make sense of all these words. I was hardly here nor there. I understood one thing though. It was in the head. My unbearable pain. But where?**

**Today, I think I can make sense of the look my father had on his face. It was that of hopelessness, that of a father who was helplessly reduced to watching his son agonise in so much pain.**

When UNO and I sat down for the very first time to talk about the paintings for the 'X-Ray' exhibition, I asked him what he remembers from the night of the accident, the night he was shot twice in the head. In response, he explained that the last thing he could recall was having a good time with his friends and a phone call to his sister to ask her to prepare dinner for them later that night. After that, 'everything just fell apart'. Waking up at the hospital, after miraculously surviving the attempted assassination, all UNO knew was that he was in pain, and that the pain was coming from his head. What had happened, when, where, or with who, he did not know. 'No one would say' what happened, until a couple of months later, when he had become a bit more stable.

The bullets had entered his head from the back of his neck, they travelled through his skull and brain, and finally left his body again through his mouth. The fact that he even survived this was inexplicable, and his family was not about to risk causing any more damage than had already been done, so they decided to delay telling him what happened until they felt he was in a better condition to accept the truth.

When he finally found out what had happened to him, family members and medical staff had to hold him down as he was writhing in shock. Everyone was desperately trying to calm him down and help him overcome the most intense shock and feeling of absolute terror in his life. 'I remember the first time I saw myself after the accident. I walked past a mirror and saw myself and I ran away. I was so frightened. It was real fear.

Real fear gripped me and I honestly felt like I had seen a ghost. I didn't know that was me. I had lost every memory from before the accident, and I guess that included the memory of myself, and what I looked like.' He also had to re-learn everything else: how to eat, what food tasted like, why he needed to eat, and why people were doing the things they were doing to him. 'Whatever makes us human, I did not have that memory anymore.' Fortunately, he managed to re-learn most things, in fact, gradually, it turned out that he had not actually forgotten most things, but that his brain had just locked them away. So the key to his recovery lay not only in the hands of the medical doctors, but also in his own. He had to find the key that would unlock whatever had been stored away as a result of the accident.

'The better I became, the more memories I had access to.'

**Whatever  
makes us  
human, I did  
not have that  
memory  
anymore.**

**I remember the first time I saw myself after the accident. I walked past a mirror and saw myself and I ran away.**

**I was so frightened. It was real fear. Real fear gripped me and I honestly felt like I had seen a ghost. I didn't know that was me. I had lost every memory from before the accident, and I guess that included the memory of myself, and what I looked like.**





The Hole

**I remember that day in the doctor's office at the National Medical Research Centre for Neurosurgery in Moscow. After carefully reading the MRI scan on his computer with a look of disbelief on his face, he finally looked up at me and said, 'there's a hole in your skull'. Among the myriad of disjointed memories from the moment of my death is one of falling. Although I do not remember getting shot, I do recall the feeling of an unending fall. I felt a similar feeling during my struggles with depression in Luxembourg in 2017. I've come to the conclusion that we all have a hole in our head. We fall into it whenever we are depressed and the more we feed our depression, often unknowingly, the deeper we fall into this hole.**

UNO ABOUT 'THE HOLE'





**Dream**



'I grew up in a very religious environment, one that mixed all forms of beliefs and still called it 'Christianity' or whatever else it desired', UNO explained.

'In the society that I grew up in, when a child is born, we take the baby to church for what is called a "dedication to God" ceremony. This involves lots of praying, singing, prophesying and speaking good things into the future of the child.

I recall one baby boy who was being dedicated during my teenage years in church. The pastor, elders, deacons and deaconesses, and other members of the congregation all said many lovely things about the child. "You shall be a doctor", one said. Another, a professor, added that "your light will shine bright and these dreams will come to pass in your life".

On and on the prophecies kept coming... Well, the child died before his first birthday. Remembering it now, I wonder what happened to the dreams and aspirations that the people present had for this child?'

'Do you dream?', I asked.

'No, I don't.', he replied.

'Do you have dreams for your life?'

'No, I don't. Really, what should I dream about now? I was shot at 27 and I died. What should I be dreaming about now? What other aspirations should I have now other than to be living today. Live today. Live it all today. That is all I try to do.'

'Why are the boy's eyes closed in this painting, UNO?'

'Well, I was contemplating this when I painted it and decided to portray him with his eyes closed, because he is dreaming, because he has been told to dream.'

**What should I dream  
about now?  
I was shot at 27 and I  
died. What should I  
be dreaming about  
now? What other  
aspirations should I  
have now other than  
to be living today.  
Live today. Live it all  
today. That is all I try  
to do.'**

UNO

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**MY ART  
IS MY  
CULTURE.**

UNO





45 Seconds



**45 seconds  
pass by much  
quicker under  
water now.**

UNO



Before I could even ask a question about '45 Seconds', UNO randomly started counting: 'Twenty, twenty one, twenty two, twenty three...thirty, thirty one...hold on a little longer.... forty, forty one, forty two, forty three, forty four, forty five! Deep breath!' Only to then continue explaining that 'this is how I was counting in my head while swiftly walking and trying not to look at it.'

'Look at what?', I wondered.

He explained that: 'Myself and everyone else who lived in our community had to do this a few times a year between 1998 and 2001. I'd have to hold my breath for about 45 seconds on my way to Western Boys High School. Adults, Children, teenagers, adults, it did not matter who we were, we all had to hold our breaths.'

Everyone was putting whatever they could over their noses, everyone walked fast or even ran to avoid an extended exposure to the stench. I remember this particular instance, when I saw this woman. Her lifeless body looked dark, but not for long. By the 10th day, she had become pale and unrecognisable, inflated by microbes until her skin ruptured. Her body had become a feast for the flies and had started to produce a foul smell that horrified everyone who walked past Ramat Park. Her dead and decaying body was quite literally being looked over by the towering sculpture of the legendary Muemue, a mythical Edo hero famed for trapping and killing a dragon that terrorised the people of Oregbeni in the Middle Ages.

Good at it or not, I love swimming. "You can do it!" I'd tell myself while holding my breath. 45 seconds pass by much quicker under water now.'

When asked how the experience of violence before the accident had impacted his life in general, UNO replied that for him, as for most people in his community, seeing dead bodies, which were the result of some form of violence, was the norm.

He added that some of the dead bodies that could be seen on the side of the road were not there as a result of some form of violence.

It was possible that someone had just died of natural causes on their way somewhere. The act of violence in those cases, however, was the fact that people left human bodies on the side of the road, instead of giving them the last honour of a burial.

'What is strange to me today, though, is that the culture we are taught is the opposite of the reality that I have had to grow up with. Our culture revolves around caring for the elders, for strangers, for each other. So I'm wondering, what could have led to that decay in our cultural fabric? What has happened to us, and why do we think it is okay to leave dead bodies on the street, for children to see?'

**These things that I have experienced growing up don't count for much until I decide to see them as negative. At least that's how I deal with it, mentally.**

UNO

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**The better I  
became, the  
more  
memories  
I had access  
to.**

UNO





**Amè (Water)**



**A man lost his dog, his house, his wife and his children to a great flood. While he despairs and grieves, he notices that he's very thirsty and quenches his thirst with a full jug of cold water.**

**Water kills, water we must drink.**

AN EDO FOLKLORE





**La Famille**

'My family saved me', UNO said when I asked what role his family had played and still is playing in his life.

He stated that when he set out to create the painting titled '**La Famille**', he wanted to show the kind of beauty that can be found in the ugliness and messiness that can often be found in families.

He explained that in his family, everyone is different, set in their own ways, doing their own thing, living their own lives. Each individual member of his family has their own beauty and ugliness, but it is only when all the members of that family, like the different pieces and faces in this painting, are put together, that a real, beautiful and unique, albeit sometimes ugly and messy, family portrait comes into existence.

**'This is the first time we have been separated and not been able to see each other for such a long time. Initially, I would often think about what I didn't have. But now, I think of what I do have. I may not see them all the time, but we still have each other. We didn't lose any one of us. We are all still here.'**

**I still owe my survival to my family.**

**I survived because my family never gave up on me.**

**My immediate younger sister took a crash course in nursing so that she could treat me at home herself. There was this fear of letting people come home to look after me, so she took it upon herself to look after me. They brought all the tools and everything home so she could treat the bullet wounds at home.**





The Unplanned Life



**Over the years of trying to forge a new existence, I've realised that much of my struggle is a consequence of losing a plan. I've always planned my future, or at least I've had an idea of what I wanted it to look like. This has caused me to not be able to appreciate the reality of my being. Take a look at this painting, for example, and tell me it's not beautiful. Yet it was unplanned. I almost entirely closed my eyes to create it. Yet it looks good. Such has been my life over the last two years or so. The less I planned every detail of tomorrow, the more I have enjoyed the twists and turns that life threw my way.**

UNO ABOUT 'THE UNPLANNED LIFE'





**Untitled**



'This painting is called "Untitled" because I could not think of the right title to give it. The thought behind it is about the dual life that I have somewhat had, the one before and the one after the accident, but most importantly, it is about the balance between the two', UNO explained when I asked him about both the title and the thought behind the painting.

It was the very first painting he created for the 'X-Ray' exhibition, and at the time of creation, he was still struggling with finding the balance between the past and the present, but also, in a way, the future. A continuous thought that accompanied this painting was how the future might be affected and shaped by his past but also his present experiences. 'Where do I start now? What's next for me? I continuously asked myself these questions, even though I usually try not to think too much about the future or plan for it. What's funny', he continued, 'is that the hair that one of the faces is having in this painting, was not what my hair looked like at the time.

In fact, I created this painting about two years ago, when my hair was still much shorter. Now, my actual hair looks a lot like that in the painting, so I see it as kind of a prediction.' The red strip that crosses both the faces, but not the blue middle part that intersects both, represents the pain he has experienced in his life and how it rubs off and connects both the past and the present, raising the question about how much of it will continue to be present in the future and how much influence it will have on the latter.'

'At what intersection do I hope that I cannot feel this pain anymore? At what point will my future no longer reflect too much of the pain of both the past and present. I still carry a lot of the pain of the past in my present, so I ask myself what will eventually happen to that pain in the future?'

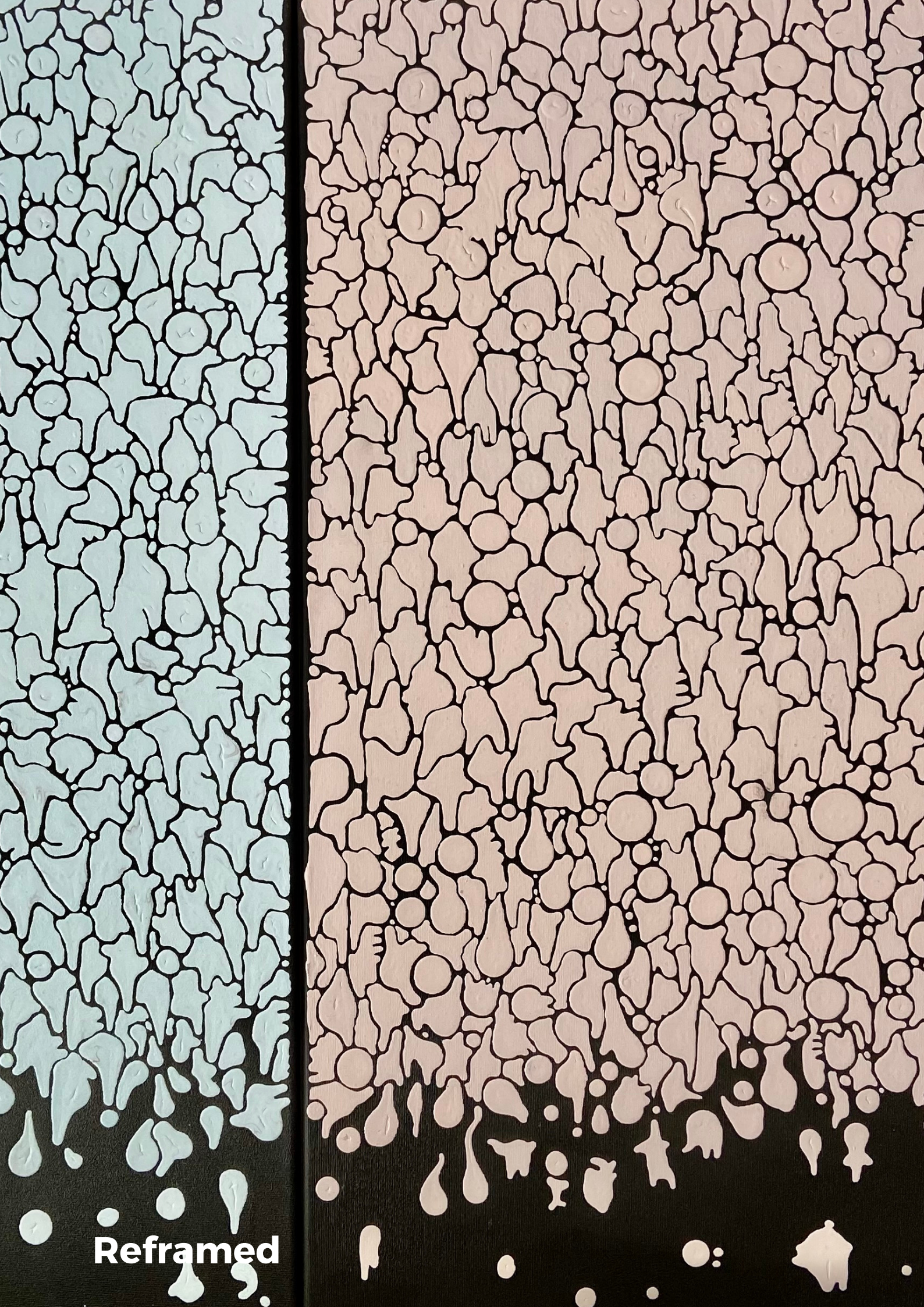
The middle part of the painting is kept in blue, because the colour represents calm and expresses a hope for a future that is not affected by the red, the pain.

**At what point will my future no longer reflect too much of the pain of both the past and present. I still carry a lot of the pain of the past in my present, so I ask myself what will eventually happen to that pain in the future.'**

UNO

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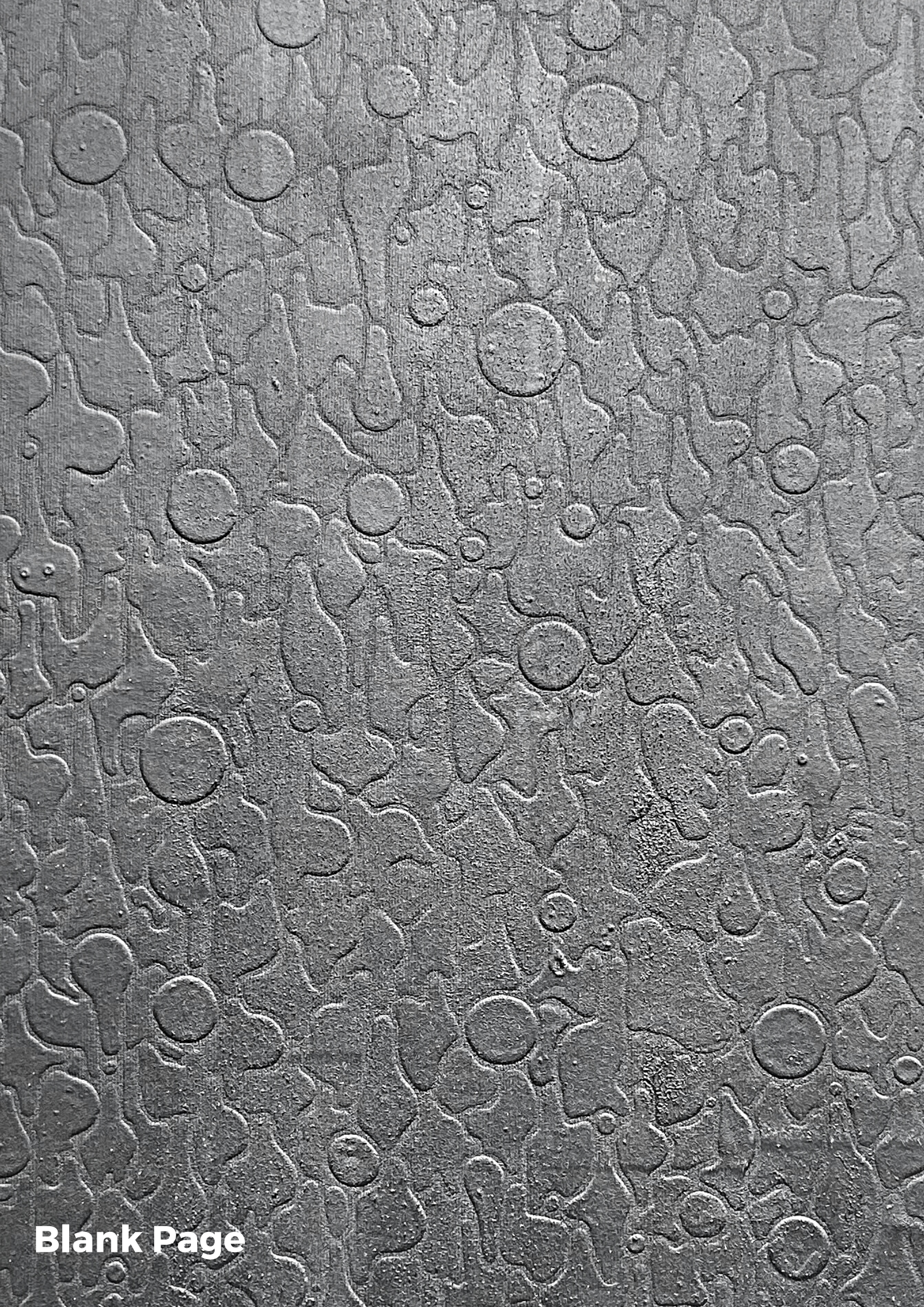
**Reframed**



**During the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, while grappling with a sense of losing my freedom again, I wondered how painful this situation must feel for those who had lost a loved one, young or old. Soon, I started seeing the world as a big framed canvas of many loosely placed puzzle pieces. Some of the pieces appeared to be falling off from the frame. In my mind, I thought that no one dictated that these pieces must all stay within the frame for it to be whole or make sense. Soon after, I likened it to how I have coped with difficult times and survived, how I've been reframing my reality in ways that kept me going. I still have the ability to extend the frame beyond its original boundaries to capture the fallen pieces.**

UNO ABOUT 'REFRAMED'





**Blank Page**



**There are lots of downsides to being traumatised or faced with a life threatening incident. Over time, I've come to appreciate one positive side to mine - the opportunity to start again.**

UNO ABOUT 'BLANK PAGE'

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# MENTAL ILLNESS: THE WAY WE SEE IT

AN ESSAY BY DAMI AJAYI

I wanted to become a psychiatrist as far back as I can remember. At the age of 10, the word 'psychiatry' was a chore to pronounce, but I took my linguistic predicament in good faith. In my teenage years, I could hardly differentiate a clinical psychologist from a psychiatrist; I did not realise that a psychiatrist was a medical doctor with experience in treating mental illness and a psychologist used psychological therapies in treating the same.

The average Lagosian who has used the hospital precinct as a thoroughfare from Montgomery Street to Tejuosho Market may not tell you about the imposing green buildings, manicured gardens or even the tarred roads, perhaps because this individual walks through anxiously, heart in mouth, mind laden with thoughts of encountering an aggressive or naked psychotic person with a devilish grin.



*Photo by Vazhnik*

Years of knowledge have washed out my ignorance. Today, I am a psychiatrist working in North London. Prior to this, I did my training at Yaba Neuro-Psychiatric hospital, a place called 'Yaba Left' in Lagos street parlance.

Ask the average Lagosian if he or she has seen the grounds of this hospital and watch their face contort in anger at the implication of your question. The mischievous person might tell you, straight-faced, of zombies in manacles or violent people in straitjackets, perpetuating a myth that the depiction of mental illness in popular culture has upheld.

If mental illness is shrouded in mystery, how can the place for its care be exempt? How can the people who work in it be exempt from this mystery? Even among doctors, psychiatrists are believed to be 'of a different ilk'. Psychiatry is a specialised specialty. Nobody wants to touch our patients. When mentally disturbed people suffer from other health conditions, they suffer stigma from their first contact with the healthcare official (presumably record officers) all the way to the doctor who hurriedly scribbles a referral letter addressed to Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Yaba.



Back in the late 1900s, when Yaba was an outskirts town of Lagos, an outpost far-flung enough to situate a hospital or a prison, or both, I don't imagine things were any different. Before the then asylum was established, mentally ill Nigerians were taken as far away as the only asylum in Sierra Leone for treatment. As can be expected, this place was overcrowded. To make matters worse, there were no empirical treatments available, besides custodial care and restriction of movement.

### **A Brief History of Modern Psychiatry**

Psychiatry moved away from the harmful practices of trephination and blood-letting to seemingly effective physical therapies like insulin coma therapy in the 1920s and 1930s. Asylums within colonial Nigeria also moved with the time, from bogus therapies used with a dint of hope to the first antipsychotic, Chlorpromazine, which was delivered in the 1950s, leading to a dramatic revolution that emptied asylums, the place of custodial care.

Suddenly and excitingly, mentally disturbed people had a drug that could 'calm their nerves'. In the years that followed, psychotropic medications were discovered in quick succession to cater for a collection of mental disorders and this only helped the West to further divorce itself from religious beliefs about mental illness being a consequence of sin or demonic afflictions.

Mental healthcare, over the years, has been divided into the traditional, custodial and therapeutic phases.

Clearly, the West is in the therapeutic phase of mental health care and the scientific revolution is still ongoing. Psychotherapy, pioneered by Freud, has also evolved beyond the couch to specialised techniques that help people surmount their difficulties by dialogue.

In Lagos, these treatments are also available: antipsychotic medications as recent as Aripiprazole, and therapies as sophisticated as dialectical behavioural therapy. However, relevance is our problem. The asylum which began as a disused railway building began its transformation into a hospital in the 1950s and has continued to stay within the ambit of acceptable modern practices. With close to 600 bed spaces and Doctors' Residency training dating back to 1994, this state-of-the-art hospital is easily one of the biggest health facilities in Nigeria.

Interestingly, these almost 600 bed spaces are always fully occupied, even if a significant number of these beds are perennially occupied by patients designated as 'paupers'.

Paupers are patients who have been abandoned by relatives who can no longer be traced. Such patients become the hospital's responsibility till death. Sadly, they have been institutionalised for life, becoming 'fauna' in the mental hospital's ecosystem.

# **One in every four humans?**

DAMI AJAYI

## **One in Every Four Humans?**

Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Yaba is accessed by close to 25 new patients on a daily basis. Of course, this statistic dwarfs the epidemiological maxim that one out of every four people are said to have mental illness. There are reasons for this.

The first is that the mental health specialists and the community have yet to agree on what mental illness is.

While mental health workers opine that symptoms of mental illness are sometimes pragmatic emotional experiences seen in normal individuals, they also assert that these symptoms, if they persist long enough to be durable, distressing to sufferers and carers alike, and disabling enough to deter normal activities, they qualify to be christened illness.

For example, if 50 people are laid off from a firm without severance pay, on account of the ongoing economic recession in Nigeria, they are expected to be unhappy and withdrawn from daily activities. How then do we explain the individual whose sadness is so extreme that he has niggling thoughts to end his life by hanging from the branch of a strong tree behind his house? Or the individual who consistently hears the voices of his former colleagues discussing his actions when he is alone in his home and they are supposedly at the office? To our community, to their families, many times, this is not mental illness.

They may call it names like 'severe stress' or 'profound frustration'. Some may say it is over-thinking and demonstrate the temperamental defects of the individual. It is everything but mental illness, because, in our community, to be mentally ill is to be stark raving mad. You must lose full control of your faculties, you must be rendered homeless or clothes-less by your illness. You must brandish a weapon, be a danger to yourself or to your family. This is what our society sees as mental illness.

## **Mental Illness in African Writing**

On the other hand, those who know better are constantly bemused by the fluidity of the phenomenon that is mental illness. Mental illness is on a continuum with mental health and, many times, the diagnosis of traversing normalcy is retrospective. Interestingly, this same close relationship mental disorder shares with normalcy, it also shares with genius and creativity.

The likes of Fela Kuti and Dambudzo Marechera, in retrospect, would not pass through a psychiatric interview without a tentative diagnosis. James Joyce's daughter was known to have suffered from schizophrenia, ditto for Kurt Vonnegut's siblings. Within three generations of Hemingways, there have been five suicides, including that of Ernest Hemingway. In the 1960s, Sylvia Plath, who suffered from a depressive illness which she thinly disguised in her only novel *The Bell Jar*, committed suicide. David Foster Wallace, author of the acclaimed tome of a novel *Infinite Jest*, hung himself in 2008.



Yet in African writing, like in African societies, one can confidently say that art imitates life. Think Jadum, the village lunatic from the poetry of the late poet Christopher Okigbo, or Abulu, the prophetic madman in *The Fishermen*, the Booker Prize-shortlisted novel of Chigozie Obioma – sufferers of mental disorders have been shrouded in mystery.

In retrospect, the Delta Award winning novel by Hansen Ayoola, *She Died Yesterday*, published in the 1980s, also comes to mind. The protagonist's friend's mother, an agile trader, was said to have gone to the marketplace, affirming that she was a witch and confessing to all sorts of heinous crimes. Prior to this, she had suffered a series of misfortunes. In fiction, as in reality, an army of people gather around these individuals, who may be suffering from a depressive illness, with stones or other paraphernalia of the mob, to deliver jungle justice.

### **Psychiatry vs. Religion**

Our civilization often defines mental illness as caused by evil affliction or as punishment for wrongdoing. These dated beliefs still hold sway today and are consequently followed with practices as alarming as manacling the mentally ill and whipping them to confess their sins so that they may be forgiven.

In a panel discussion at a symposium called 'Mental Illness and Religion' held recently at Yaba Neuropsychiatric Hospital, an Ifa priest of the Ijo Orunmila, Pastor Agbato, affirmed that 80 percent of mental illness of today is caused by the conduct of religious leaders, often in a bid to get rich quick.

Enter the Pentecostal pastors in bespoke, colourful suits, Bible-wielding, tongues speaking—the types who conduct miracles in which part of their well-worn script is to ask the mentally disturbed to bring medical reports from certified mental hospitals as a prelude to their miracles. Or those who ask hapless patients to bring their medication to the scene of the miracle, where it is poured onto the ground for dramatic effect and they are sent away with the euphoria of having been purged of their affliction.

As can be expected, these patients often return to the hospital without an appointment card or any recollection of their erstwhile medications. Sometimes they visit other mental hospitals as far away from Yaba as possible. Sometimes, when symptoms begin to nudge their minds, they wear a coat of denial. They insist on the healing that has been meted upon them by their pastors. They find scriptural markings and make a mantra of it. They push farther and farther into their illnesses, beyond the boundaries of reality into that abyss that is called psychosis.

Usually, when their relatives eventually seek help, they set off from spiritual homes and walk their languorous journey, from charismatic churches of all kinds, where religious paraphernalia as mundane as anointed handkerchiefs are offered, till they eventually find their way back to the psychiatric hospital.

**Dami Ajayi is a Nigerian psychiatrist and poet of Yoruba descent.**

**A version of this essay was previously published on ThisIsAfrica.**

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## INTERVIEW

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# INTERVIEW

NATALIE SILVA

**First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview with us. You are the mayor of Larochette, the town to host the 'X-Ray' exhibition, which hopes to spark conversations about the importance of mental health and the role of art when it comes to dealing with trauma and pain.**

**To begin, could you please introduce yourself - who you are, how long you have been mayor for, what you are passionate about, and anything else you'd like to share.**

My name is Natalie Silva, I am 40 years old and I'm currently serving as the mayor of the commune of Larochette, where the Larochette castle is located and where the 'X-Ray' exhibition will take place. I was born in Luxembourg to immigrant parents who came to this country from Cape Verde in the 1970s.

I spent my entire childhood in Ettelbrück and since 2007 I have been living in the wonderful commune of Larochette. In 2011, I was elected for the first time in the local council elections for Larochette. From 2011 to 2017 I served as alderwoman, and then in the 2017 elections, I was elected again and became mayor.

**You are the first African and female person to be elected into office in Luxembourg and the first African mayor of Larochette. Would you say that this label of 'being the first' has impacted you and your work in some ways - positively and / or negatively?**

Yes, I am the first woman to be mayor of Larochette and I am also the first mayor of African origin in Luxembourg as a whole.



I think that this has influenced the way I work in the commune, as I am aware of the responsibility that comes with my position - especially in combination with my origins. The fact that I am in an official position, in conjunction with the fact that I am of African origin makes me hyper-visible, which means that if I make the slightest mistake, I am less likely to get away with it and I will be criticised all the more because I am 'different'. So, I often seek reassurance from several people before I make a decision. In another way, however, I think that because of my background, I have been able to relate with the large Portuguese-speaking population of Larochette, as I speak a little myself and especially because I understand Portuguese, which in turn can make communication easier.

**What was it like growing up as the daughter of black African parents in Luxembourg, and how has this experience impacted you mentally and emotionally?**

As a child I often felt 'different'. I was not like the others. So for me it was always very important not to stand out negatively. This has influenced my behaviour and my state of mind for a long time.

**What have your experiences been like when it comes to discussions and dialogues about mental health in the Cape Verdean community? And how about in your commune in Larochette in general?**

I never really thought about it in that way, to be honest. You know, at that time, people came to Luxembourg to work and have a better life.

My parents left Cape Verde before I was born. My mother worked for a few years in Italy before joining my father in Portugal and then they landed in Luxembourg. My father worked in a factory. He rarely missed a day of work because he didn't want to attract negative attention. I'm sure that in those days, people also suffered from mental illnesses but they didn't talk about them. Many people have suffered and probably still are suffering in 'secret'. Fortunately, today it is no longer as much of a taboo as it used to be, although caring for people with mental illnesses still seems to be a big problem here in Luxembourg. The lack of specialised personnel is currently a big issue. I hope that this situation will not continue in this way for much longer, for the sake of everyone affected by it.

**What has the experience of living through a pandemic been like for you and your family? And how have you coped with the situation?**

We are lucky to live in a house with a garden close to the forest and a cycling path, which has allowed us to be outside in nature and walk or cycle around the neighbourhood and beyond. In fact, at the beginning of the pandemic especially, we took advantage of this almost every day. It did our mental balance a lot of good.

We stuck to the measures in place and restricted all our contacts. It wasn't easy. I love having people over and cooking for family and friends. Unfortunately this was suddenly no longer possible. For my son, who was 14 at the time, the pandemic totally disrupted his life.

He could no longer see his friends, he could no longer play basketball in the Larochette club and, above all, the closure of the schools was a great disturbance for him. Only two days after the closure he was already telling me that he preferred to be at school than at home (according to him his mother was stricter than his teachers).

**In a recent conversation, you told me that you enjoy going to concerts, listening to music, and reading books. What role would you say art has played in your life when it comes to looking after your own mental health?**

I love going out and being around people. We go to concerts regularly. We have a subscription to the big orchestras at the Philharmonie, and sometimes we also go to jazz or what they call 'world music' concerts. The atmosphere and the conviviality around the concerts make me very happy and do me a lot of good. Of course, during the pandemic this was not possible. Since the beginning of the pandemic we have only been to one concert. I miss it. I also love listening to old Cape Verdean music. It reminds me of my childhood and especially allows me to move my body and dance. I often dance alone to the African rhythms, and it's an invaluable moment of relaxation for me. I also love reading, which, unfortunately, often falls short because of time and tiredness. During my holidays or weekends I sometimes slip away to read. I won't tell you what kind of reading, though, because you'd be disappointed. But I really read to relax, so it's unpretentious. But once I start reading I often can't stop. So as my time is quite limited during the week I have to limit myself to weekends.

**As the mother of a teenage son, what do you wish institutions like schools or sports teams could do better in terms of raising awareness about and abolishing stigma around mental health issues in young people?**

Yes, of course. Children and teenagers are under a lot of pressure these days. Not only from an education point of view but also from a social point of view. Everyone wants to have the latest mobile phone, designer clothes, video games etc. But not everyone can afford it.

Also, nowadays, many parents live apart and families no longer offer the stable framework as maybe some used to in the past. Oftentimes, the children are the ones who suffer the most in those situations. That is why I think it is vital to talk about your mental state, your feelings, your fears and anxieties. Talking about it can help a lot. Simply talking about it in class from a very young age, and especially explaining to children that there is no shame in sharing your feelings, can not just make people feel better, but it can save lives.

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NATALIE SILVA

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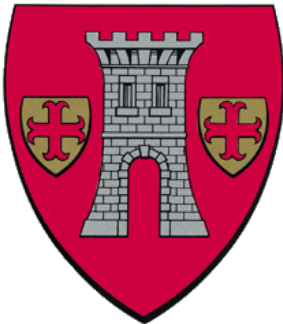
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