

AUNT CHLOE

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Nijla Mu'min

“Telling My Truth as a Form of Love and Preservation”

AC: Please talk briefly about your journey to filmmaking. You were already writing poems...was there something in what you were writing that moved you toward a visual medium? What interested you about that process? Has it become your preferred means of artistic expression?

NM: When I was a young girl growing up in the Bay Area [in California], I wrote poems as a way to make sense of my life and the things that were happening around me, and I read a lot of contemporary Black fiction. Reading novels opened me up to worlds and people I'd never known. When I was a teenager, writing and performing my poetry was my safe space, a cultivation of my voice. My poetry was always visual and dramatic in nature, which would eventually lend itself to screenwriting and filmmaking. I like to think of all my artistic pursuits as a continuum, leading to, and informing each other. I was always interested in telling stories—through poems, through photographs, through reading and writing fiction and essays, and finally through filmmaking. Though I work mostly in film and television currently, I wouldn't say it's my preferred means of expression. There are times where I want nothing more than to write poetry. Publishing a book of my poetry, prose, and essays is a life dream that I am working toward.

AC: You studied poetry in June Jordan's "Poetry for the People" program at the University of California at Berkeley...what was that experience like? Do you have any particularly memorable stories of that encounter with her legacy? Did her ethos influence you as a thinker, a creator?

NM: Studying and teaching poetry in June Jordan's Poetry for the People Program at UC Berkeley really changed my life. June Jordan passed away shortly before I entered the program, but her influence, her writing, and her worldview and human rights activism were strongly rooted in the program. I felt like I knew her because her former students shared so many beautiful stories and memories of her while I was in the program. I strengthened my voice as a writer, speaker, and performer in that class. As a student-teacher poet, I immersed myself in the

study of various cultural traditions of poetry from around the world, becoming fluent and knowledgeable of different poetic forms and techniques. We were taught that our lives, our voices, and communities mattered, as Black, Brown, immigrant, women, people of color poets. I was taught that the “personal is political,” and I began to connect my lived experiences to larger, systemic inequities and events.

I experienced a sense of community with my fellow poets in that program that I haven’t experienced since. We wrote, we cried, we told our truths, we supported one another with thoughtful feedback, and we studied poetry. It was a transformative experience, one that I wish I could recreate—that sense of community and support is so essential when you are creating art. I wish I had it in my industry. My writing style and voice was greatly strengthened and impacted by my immersion in this program. I am forever grateful to June Jordan and her legacy of preserving voice, expression, and truth.

AC: Coming-of-age is a recurring theme in your poetry and films. What do you think is so special about that time in a young person’s life?

NM: The newness. The new experiences, new sensations, new ways of thinking. During this time in our lives, our minds and bodies are changing. We are finding new ways to identify, to love, to see ourselves, and we make decisions that could impact the rest of our lives. I am interested in the transitions of this time, the feelings, the first times. I am interested in how we are changed by these experiences, how we learn to cope, how we hurt, how we heal, or how we don’t. I am interested in the wounds of this time, the triumphs, how some of us try to move past the trauma of this time, and how some remain in it. It is a time of so much change in our lives. I am fascinated by it.

AC: You wrote an opinion piece in *Shadow and Act* about why people should stop saying there are no coming-of-age films about black girls. You argue that these films have been made and will continue to be made, that many just don't know they exist. What are some of your favorite black girl coming-of-age films?

NM: Some of my favorite Black coming-of-age films are *Pariah*, directed by Dee Rees, *Love & Basketball*, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, *Eve’s Bayou*, directed by Kasi Lemmon, *Crooklyn*, directed by Spike Lee, and *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins. Some of my favorite coming-of-age films in general are *Ida*, directed by Paweł Pawlikowski, *Raising Victor Vargas*, directed by Peter Sollett, *Fish Tank*, directed by Andrea Arnold.

Each of these films says something about the complicated humanity of Black girls, and of young people in general. I relate to, and feel for, the characters in all these films and I remember distinct moments from these stories. Over time, I've returned to these films as a reminder that these stories do exist, and they serve as a foundation for us to continue digging deeper into the lives of Black girls, women, and young people.

AC: Why has black girlhood and womanhood become one of your central themes? Is there something in the current *zeitgeist* that elicits it? What do you want audiences to discover in this work?

NM: I think I make work about this because I am a Black woman, and I was a Black girl. I am very much connected to my inner child and my girlhood. I have an incredible memory and can recall experiences in vivid detail. I also know how it feels to be silenced, to be misunderstood, to be erased from narratives so I think it's important to write and preserve our voices. I believe there's so much projected onto Black women and girls—harmful, toxic imagery, tropes, violence and brutality, pain—but I am invested in the complicated core of us. The soft, sweet, sad, beautiful, light, and heavy layers of our being. And not just Black girls and women, but all people. I want to explore the parts of us that aren't seen. The parts that remain hidden, that we're told to keep to ourselves, to keep in dark rooms. Let's bring that to the light.

AC: A strong element of your work is how tender your voice is, no matter the subject or situation. You seem to really care for each character you create. Do you connect with some of your characters more than others? If so, which one (ones) and why?

NM: I do care very deeply for a lot of my characters, and for their internal lives and worlds. I never create “throw-away” characters or one-note villains who have no inner complication. I am interested in flawed, complex human beings and the choices that they make. I care about their wellbeing, but I am not afraid to show characters in some deep emotional turmoil and complication. I am not afraid to wade into uncomfortable territory with my writing or my characters. But it doesn't stop there for me. If I am going to bring my characters through a storm, I want to see them come out of the storm, however that looks or feels. I am not here to just depict trauma or pain in my art for the sake of entertainment or market value. I am interested in a human journey, human emotions, and life. My poetry is also this way. Each word and image in these poems carries deep care and attention to the moment, the experience, the person, or the emotion that birthed it. I am not writing to bash, to hurt, or malign anyone. I am focused on telling my truth as a form of love and preservation, and as a way of exploring and finding an answer to questions that I may or may not want to know.

AC: In the age of social media and stagnant pandemic life, your poem “I want to have a real conversation” resonates. The imagery offers nostalgia and optimism for a world beyond screens and four walls. It will likely make the reader want something “real” too. Have you found that real thing yet?

NM: I’m not sure. I am still exploring at this time in my life. I think I am getting closer. I think a lot of people yearn to go beyond the fleeting excitement of screens and social media, to a fuller, more holistic world of connection and love. This is the space I cultivate in my art.

Learn more about Nijla Mu’min: <https://www.nijlamumin.com>

(This interview was conducted via email with questions composed by Kennedy Dunning and Sharan Strange.)

Include with interview:

Video clip: *Black Prom:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOv5QMTyq1M&t=65s>

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