

a personal processing of surviving violence
from a non-binary and social
justice perspective



Mercy Thokozone Minah

UN-GENDERING VIOLENCE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This zine consists of thought processes and possibility models that are the subjective opinions and ideas of the artist. All paintings are abstract self-portraits meant to map out the emotional landscape of the artist's process of surviving violence. Definitions for particular concepts and terms are provided because the artist does not take for granted that their understandings are universal.

foreword

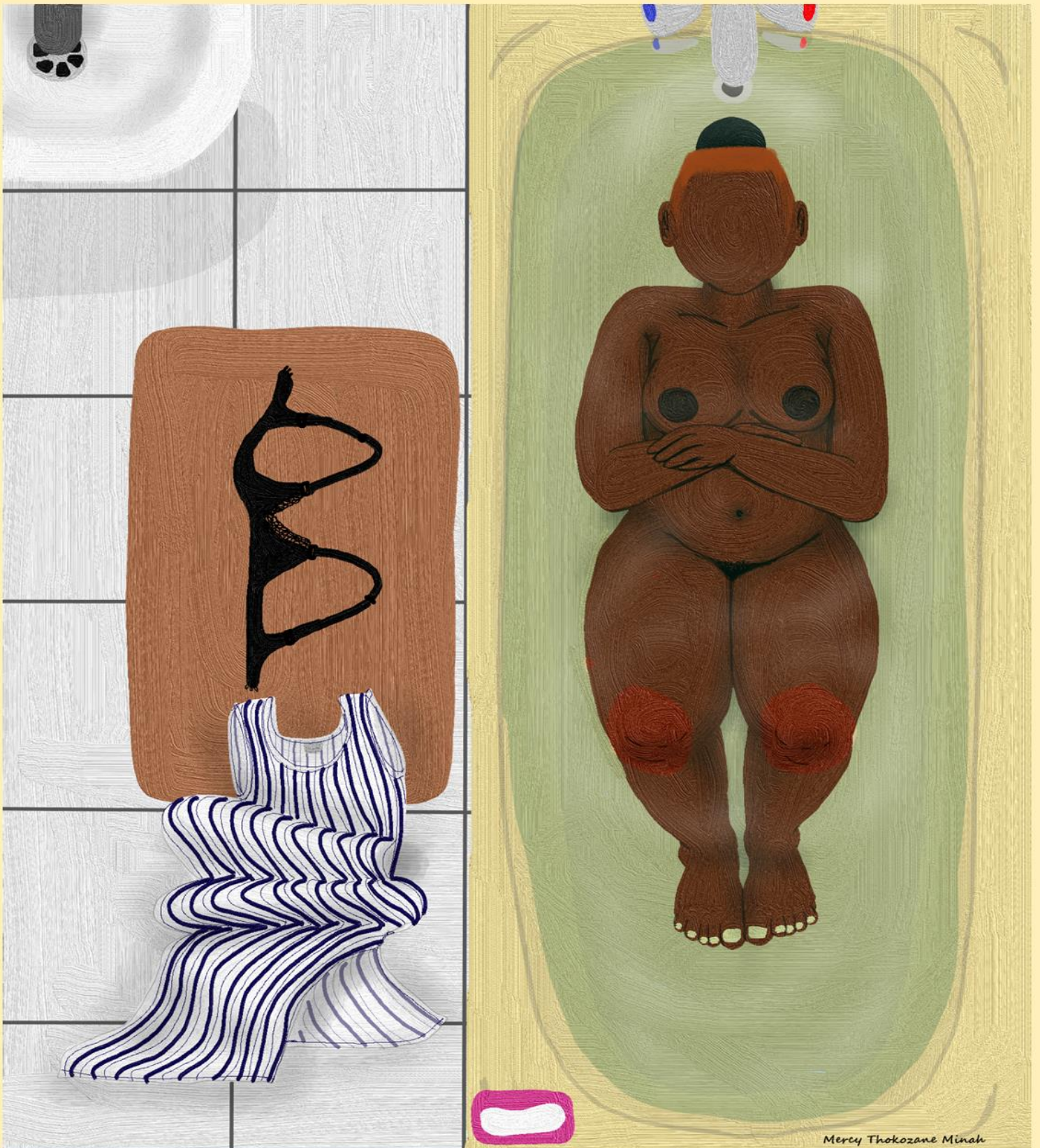
Trigger and content warning: the following is an account of survivorship that contains mention of sexual harassment, sexual assault, being held hostage, gaslighting and withheld empathy.

In the early hours of the morning of December 24th, 2016, a queer bouncer at the Kitchener's Carvery Bar refused to let me leave with the rest of the patrons who were being ushered out as the bar closed. For the next four and a half hours, that bouncer alternated between sexually harassing and sexually assaulting me until the sun was up and the remaining staff had to go home. It took me about a month to muster the courage to tell someone else about what had happened. I was drunk. I said no throughout the encounter, in several different ways. But I questioned whether I had been too friendly, whether my "no's" were convincing enough.

The first person I told gaslit me about what happened. They were one of my closest friends at the time. Several other friends, who were all also associated with this bar — something of a safe haven for queer people in this city — claimed to believe me, but also behaved in ways that suggested they didn't think what I had been through was serious enough to warrant outrage or empathy. On June 10th, 2018, I tweeted about the assault, explicitly, for the first time since it had happened. A manager from the bar reached out to find out more about what had happened. At first, she claimed to believe me. But over time, it seemed as though she had no vested interest in facilitating the justice I sought. The only thing I wanted was for the bouncer in question to acknowledge that what she had done to me was wrong. And to apologize. Sincerely. It took over seven months for me to never receive the apology I was promised and be deemed everything from 'toxic' to 'cr*zy' by this manager as well as people I considered close friends.

This was not the first time I had experienced violence of that nature. It was also not the first time I had spoken out about it publicly. Nor was it the first time I was not believed or had what I had been through trivialized by people who should have supported and protected me.

This zine serves a place of reconciling some of the emotional and mental upheaval I experienced because of this particular instance of survivorship; as well as a place to reflect on the way our perceptions of identity impact how seriously we take intimate violence among people with non-normative identities and what community, and community-based justice could look like.



**‘Submerged—you cannot know the truth when
your head is underwater’**

I could not fully grasp that something bad had happened to me. It felt as though the memory, the entirety of it, was submerged under water.

GENDERING VIOLENCE [DEFINED]

‘Gendering violence’ in an explicitly binary and gender essentialist manner erases victims with non-normative identity narratives. Erasing victims from discourse about violence leaves them vulnerable to continued violence, violence without justice and targeted violence due to that vulnerability and lack of recourse.

Gendering violence is the practice of defining violence – what violence is, who likely victims and perpetrators are, who qualifies for legal recourse etc. – in ways that suggest that only people with certain kinds of gender experiences are likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence and further, creating recourse models that only explicitly mention said people to the exclusion of all others.

Because the world we live in mostly recognizes only binary (and almost exclusively cis) genders as legally valid; violence is usually gendered in a binary and cis-centric way. Violence is posited as being a dynamic that exists between only men and women – with women being most likely to be victims and men most likely to be perpetrators – and while patriarchy and misogyny work hand in hand to justify this understanding of violence; there are a myriad of demographics whose experiences and interpersonal dynamics are erased by this framework.

Queer, trans, intersex, and non-binary people, who partner and cultivate intimacy with one another, are unfortunately just as susceptible to interpersonal violence. Societal frameworks of what violence entails, that do not take this susceptibility into account leave queer, trans, intersex, and non-binary victims of violence vulnerable to more harm and the trauma of living through harm and having no recourse or justice. It is not possible to envisage justice for victims you do not believe or acknowledge exist. Similarly, it is not possible to envisage rehabilitation or accountability for perpetrators of violence you do not believe or acknowledge exist.

People with non-normative identities are just as likely to be victims of violence as those whose identities are legally and societally affirmed. Similarly; people with non-normative identities are just as likely to be perpetrators of violence as those whose identities are legally and societally affirmed.

who is erased?

It is important to be thorough and specific about who is erased by the practice of gendering violence. Who exactly are people with non-normative identities? What exactly is meant by queer, trans, intersex and non-binary people? And how exactly are these people erased through frameworks of violence and recourse that are gendered?

Queer people (a personal definition):

A queer person is any person whose sexual orientation falls outside of heterosexuality. This includes but is by no means limited (people are constantly uncovering newer and more specific ways of self-determining and defining their sexuality and sexual orientation) to the following; lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, aromantic, pansexual, queer (distinct from the umbrella term used throughout this zine) people. These labels refer to people of varying genders who partner and/or experience attraction toward other people of varying genders in ways that fall outside a strict woman-man partnership/attraction framework.

Transgender people (a personal definition):

A transgender person is someone who was assigned a particular gender at birth – usually one of the binary women and men genders – but finds that they are not affirmed by that erroneous assignment and self-determines as a different gender.

Intersex people (a personal definition):

An intersex person is a person whose genitalia and hormonal distribution is determined by medical practitioners to be ambiguous in varying degrees. Intersex people are often also assigned a gender at birth and may sometimes grow to be affirmed by that gender or self-determine as a different gender (thus being transgender in addition to being intersex.)

Non-binary people (a personal definition):

A non-binary person is a person whose gender exists outside of the normative man/woman binary genders. Most societies in the world do not recognize and thus do not assign non-binary gender identity to babies at birth, and as a result most non-binary people within said societies are also transgender. There are an infinite number of possible genders which fall under the 'non-binary' umbrella and just as many accompanying pronouns and nouns used to address people who form part of that demographic. Some non-binary people experience multiple genders (in a fluid, shifting manner or fixed, multi-layered manner); others experience a singular non-binary gender; while others yet experience no gender at all (and may use the term 'agender' to describe this experience).

Some non-binary people do experience one or both binary genders solely, or in addition to other genders (also in fluid or fixed manners) but should not be relegated to either of those genders despite this (as that erases their overall gender experience). **Enby** – an enby is a non-binary person (it is derived from the sound of saying the two letters in the term 'non-binary' but should not be used interchangeably with the term non-binary; it functions the same way 'man' or 'woman' would.)

Inclusivity—Un-gendering Violence

Inclusivity has to be thorough and specific. There can be no short-cuts in establishing a wholly inclusive and equitable society – and on the road towards that, more inclusive movements of resistance against violence. These are a few things I believe it is important to learn – on a personal, individual level – to attain inclusivity:

1. There are no innate distinctions (i.e., physical, psychological) between members of various genders. People are categorized based on their genitalia and socialized in certain ways but what we are affirmed by internally is more valuable than the arbitrary decisions society makes about how to treat us and how to perceive us.
2. There are more than two genders in the human species; and non-binary people exist as autonomous and separate from the binary genders.
3. Violence is so pervasive that any and everyone is a likely victim. And a likely perpetrator of violence. While statistics about predominant patterns of violence are valuable; it is important to be thorough and not leave any victims behind.
4. Gender-based violence must include an analysis of the way in which society targets and harms people for being transgender and intersex. Violence against transgender and intersex people is also a form of gender-based violence.
5. Analyses of violence must include acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of violence which occurs among people with non-normative identities, in ways that do not trivialize the severity of said harm simply because of who perpetrates it and who is impacted by it.



Mercy Thokozane Minah

‘Suppress—glass hiding places’

Unable to access the truth of what happened—but aware there was something to access—I numbed myself to the reality of what had happened with booze.



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‘Bottom—questions you should never ask’

At my lowest I wondered whether there was something I had done to cause myself to be harmed. If there was something I could have done differently to avoid being harmed.

community justice

One aspect of this specific instance in my experience(s) of survivorship, that differentiates it from many others, is that there were attempts at what many people – including myself – were calling “community justice.” Once I had spoken out about my experience, on a public social media platform, several groups of people, including staff and loyal patrons of Kitchener’s, members of organizations such as SCOPE and HOLAA became engaged in conversations about what kinds of recourse could be available to me. The only recourse I sought was an acknowledgment of harm and an apology. But because of the way violence is gendered, even within communities that predominantly consist of people with non-normative identities, the harm I suffered – as a non-binary person – at the hands of a queer woman, was trivialized, and as such, I never received the recourse I sought.

In the aftermath of a gruelling process of transparency, frustration, and disappointment, I was left wondering what exactly is meant by terms such as “community” and further, “justice” (outside of a legal framework). I began to map out a working possibility model of what each of these terms could entail and what factors could be considered to determine that.

The Individual – questions to consider (while seeking out/cultivating/being a part of community)

Healing and recovery – what areas of my life require care that may facilitate the kind of healing and recovery that would mitigate my propensity to recreate violence?

Values (societal; self/community-cultivated) – what values do I hold? What values have I been socialized to hold? What values have I cultivated on my own? Are my values in the best interests of not only myself but of other people as well?

Capacity – how do my experiences (including areas that require healing and recovery) and values inform the ways in which I engage with other people? What – in taking my experiences and values into account – is my capacity to build and sustain community with other people? (Capacity can also include areas of professional and vocational expertise which may be of service to the community; but should not be considered in isolation from one’s values in relation to others).

The Community – questions to consider

1. Who are you in community with?
2. What are your individual and collective values?
3. What type of community are you?
4. What are the objectives of your community?

community?

5. What responsibilities do you have towards members of your community and them towards you?

Values about vulnerability – questions to consider

In order to cultivate models of community justice and care; it is important to establish the kinds of values we have about vulnerability; our own, that of others and how our empathy moves.

1. How do I feel about vulnerable people?
2. Do I perceive vulnerability as a punishable weakness?
3. Do I believe that vulnerable people deserve empathy and support?
4. How do I feel about violence?
5. Do I believe violence to be an inevitable and unavoidable part of being human?
6. How then do I deal with instances of violence?
7. How much empathy do I have towards people I don’t know or benefit from personally?
9. Who do I consider to be a valuable part of my community?
10. Who do I feel I have interpersonal responsibilities towards/who do I feel carries interpersonal responsibilities towards me?

Identifying and Mitigating Harm

The following are examples of harm that are pervasive in both the dominant social order and amongst vulnerable people. It is a non-exhaustive list, but a good place to start in interrogating what your values are around violence and its potential perpetrators and victims.

Bigotry: hateful ideas about certain people that manifest as hateful treatment of those people.

Predation: predatory thoughts about other people that manifest as entitled behavior towards them.

Harassment: engaging in a prolonged interaction with someone that has already expressed that they no longer wish to be a part of that interaction.

Assault: touching someone in a non-consensual way.

Rape: performing sexual activity with someone without their active, enthusiastic consent.

Abuse: a prolonged cycle of deliberate behavior which strips someone of their:

- Self esteem

- Confidence
- Sense of worth
- Self-reliance (as far as their capacity to establish, set and enforce boundaries between themselves and other people)
- Sense of self
- Agency
- Trust in their perception of their reality

Cycles of abuse typically involve **manipulation** and **escalation** which contribute to the erosion of the above.

Kidnapping/holding someone hostage: removing someone from the safety of their home or inhibiting their ability to return to the safety of their home and keeping them in a place they no longer want to be in or haven't consented to being in.

Theft

Murder

Peripheral/Secondary Harm

Trivialization of harm – as in making harm out to be less severe than it is – is another form of harm. It causes victims to lose their sense of the severity of what they have gone through. And this is a form of reality-altering

known as gaslighting. Differential treatment for how certain instances of violence are dealt with can be a form of trivialization of harm. Denying or questioning the sincerity of claims of harm is also a form of gaslighting.

Enabling harm is another form of harm in and of itself. It does not mean merely knowing or having a connection with a harmful person; but rather using your proximity to them to defend, deny or justify their harmful behavior. It can look like not addressing or condemning their harmful behavior when you learn of it; or silencing victims (as in trying to get them to stop talking about the harm perpetrated against them or discrediting their character so that they don't receive support for the harm they have suffered).

cultivating solutions

Solutions for how harm should be dealt with, within communities need to be cultivated by the collective. This would require extensive dialogue around the ethos, values, and objectives of those communities in order to map out procedures towards justice that reflect the community's values and ensure that vulnerable members of the community are protected and supported.

Defining Justice

My personal understanding of justice is that it is the process of ensuring that equity, fairness, and restoration are granted to victims of injustice and that perpetrators of injustice are rehabilitated of their impulses to be harmful.

Equity – this would entail providing a victim with the resources and support necessary for them to reintegrate back into community with the reassurance that their harm is taken seriously and will not be repeated.

Fairness – fairness would entail treating the victim as an equally valuable and empathy-deserving member of the community they form a part of.

Restoration – when victims are harmed, that harm translates to a loss of something or several things they needed in order to function wholesomely within the world (and within their commu-

nities). Restoration would look like finding out what was lost as a result of the harm and then taking the necessary steps towards returning it or at the very least returning the victim to a state of safety and security.

Rehabilitation – rehabilitation is the process by which someone learns how to stop and never again repeat undesired behavior. (It can also be the process by which someone recovers from undesired outcomes such as physical or psychological injury).

The Process

When – Justice – as in equity, fairness, restoration, and rehabilitation – should not just be something we think about *after* instances of harm have already occurred and been exposed. We should move with a lot more proactive and preemptive responsibility than that.

How – Accountability – I break down accountability into 3 key steps:

1. Taking responsibility for your actions
2. Apologizing
 - explicitly acknowledging and admitting the impact of actions
 - expressing sincere remorse and/or regret about creating said impact
 - implementing changed behavior with intentionality that takes the explicit nature of the harm and remorse into account
3. Restitution (or doing something to or for the victim that repays or heals their injury)

cultivating solutions

Rehabilitation

Noun

1. The action of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy after imprisonment, addiction, or illness.
2. The action of restoring someone to former privileges or reputation after a period of disfavor.
3. The action of restoring something that has been damaged to its former condition. – Wiki

The common factor in each of these definitions of rehabilitation is restoration.

Harm is an interruption of health and normal life; it results in a period of disfavor towards the perpetrator of harm and the victim of the harm incurring injury or damage.

These three iterations of rehabilitation are particularly important because they can be applied to different types of necessary rehabilitation for a community in which harm has occurred and been exposed.

Who

The Victim

The victim requires restoration to health and a normal life following harm, because harm is an injury with lasting effects. The victim also incurs damage from which they will require restoration of the wholeness, self-esteem, sense of worth and confidence they may have lost as a result of the harm.

The Community

The community requires restoration too. The definition provided by Wiki above, suggests restoring someone to former privileges or reputation after a period of disfavor. This process, if applied literally, might negatively affect the community in question. It is highly likely that a perpetrator of harm who held a prestigious position within a community used that position for predation (preying on and finding potential victims) as well as shielding themselves from discovery and accountability. That is to say their position would make their community either not believe or not notice that they are enacting harm against people. And that lack of belief in their capacity to be harmful would result in their being enabled to continue being harmful.

It is perhaps advisable for communities to consider other avenues of reintegration that do not directly translate to people reverting to the previous circumstances that allowed them to be harmful with impunity.

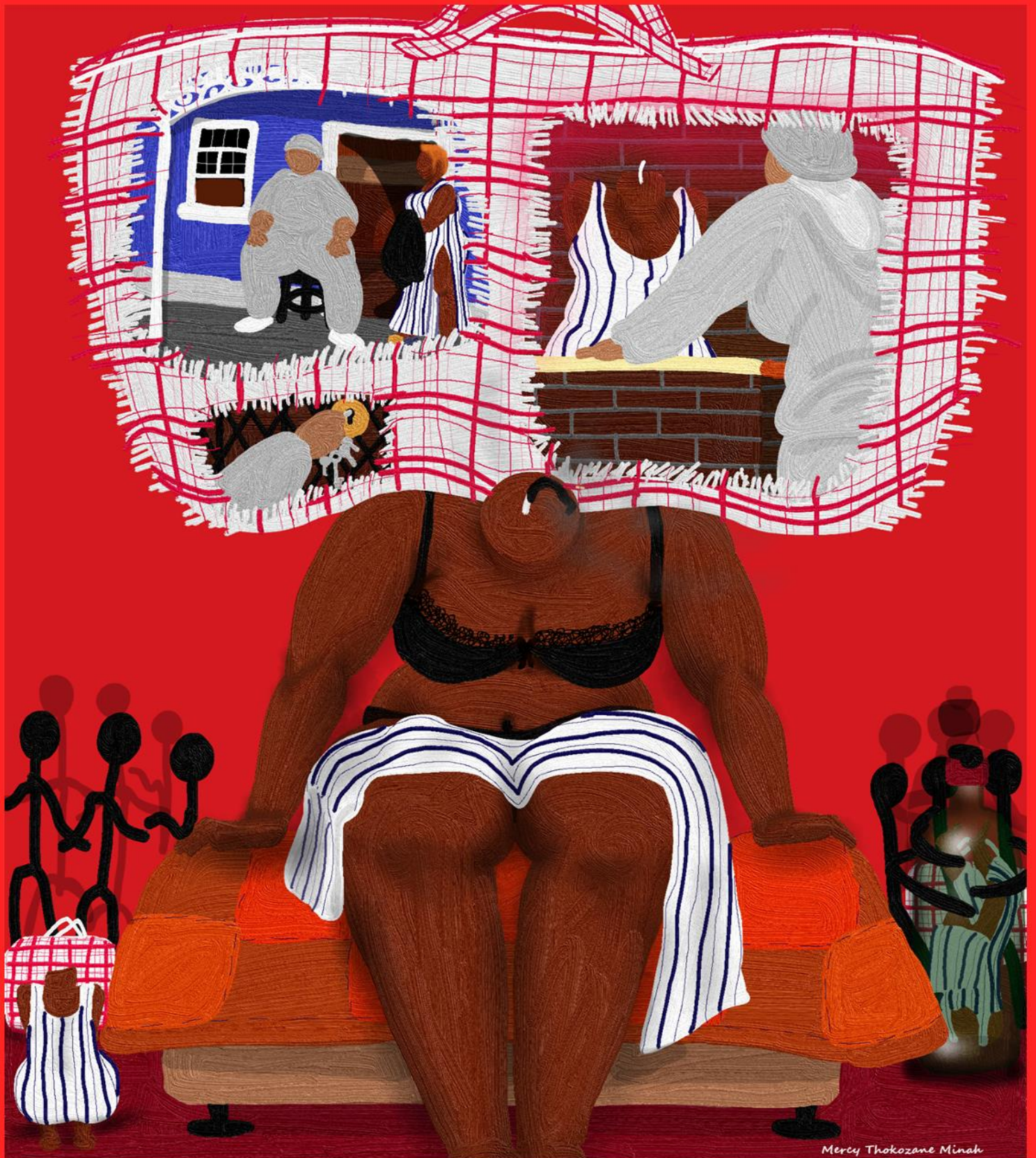
The Perpetrator

The impulse that compels the perpetrator of harm to be harmful is a form of damage of the perpetrator's empathy and capacity to harmoniously coexist with other members of their species. Rehabilitation would entail mending these fractures in their empathy and restoring them to a state of no longer experiencing or acting on those impulses to be harmful.



‘Emerged—the truth sets itself free’

There was a moment when the full truth of what I had been through came to me with absolute—albeit shattering—clarity.



‘Crushed—the weight of remembering’

At some point, I decided to stop drinking—because I wanted to remember—so I could access my memories about what had happened. I tried to share the weight of remembering, but many people tried to suppress my truth.



‘Cleansing Fire—revenge is a sweet fantasy’

The perfect victim does not exist. Some of us dream of cleansing fires.

acknowledgments

This zine would not have been possible without the work and teachings of folks such as Adrienne Brown Gravish, Jamian Wetlaufer, William Maria Rain, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Vanessa Rochelle Lewis. I would also like to thank the friends and organizers who believed me and continue to believe me. Many thanks as well to the WE AS OURSELVES team, Times Up and #MeToo for providing immeasurable support in helping me create this work.