



# Queer Joy



March 2024  
Volume 04 Issue 01

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Nisnis - A quarterly magazine  
published by Queer Ethiopia  
focusing on LBQ issues


# QUEER ETHIOPIA

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“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

 [queerethiopia.com](http://queerethiopia.com)

 [ethioqueer](https://soundcloud.com/ethioqueer)

   [QueerEthiopia](https://www.facebook.com/QueerEthiopia)

 [etqueerfamily@gmail.com](mailto:etqueerfamily@gmail.com)

 [t.me/queeret](https://t.me/queeret)



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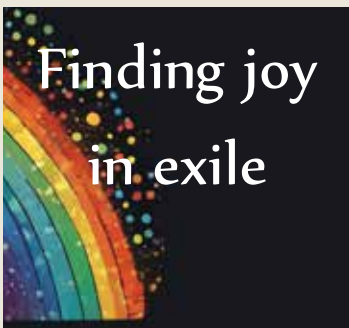
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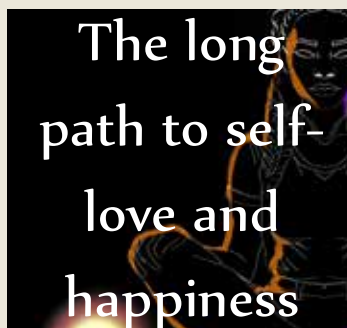
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# From the Editors

Welcome to the 11th issue of Nisnis, a celebration of queer joy. In this issue, we delve into the profound significance of joy and pleasure in the lives of queer individuals.

Queer joy, at its core, is more than just a feeling. Queer joy is an action. It is what creates resilience; it is what empowers us to create safe spaces for our communities; it is what drives us to create supportive communities; and it is what sustains us as we work for self- and social acceptance.

Queer joy is a universal concept that transcends sexuality and gender identity or expression. It is what helps us focus on the “positives” in our otherwise challenging queer lives. It is what drives us to look at the bright side in spite of living in a homophobic country where even accepting ourselves as we are is made challenging and difficult.

Veronica, a lesbian we interviewed, speaks about how she consulted a psychiatrist to “change” herself. Her joy was accepting herself and learning that she was OK as she was. Lexi, a long-time queer activist, speaks to us about the importance of activism and the joy that it brings her: “Knowing that someone may come across our content and feel seen, validated, and supported makes me happy”.

The arts also play a transformative role in our pursuit of queer joy and liberation, both for ourselves and our community. Betselot, a queer artist, finds joy in using her art to create representation and bring visibility to the queer community. She summarizes the role art plays when she says, “Queer art is like being hungry or thirsty and needing to eat or drink.” As one of our contributors writes, queer art is also the mirror that we use to define, understand, and simply enjoy our queer joy and community.

Queer joy extends beyond our politics or our art; love is also a powerful catalyst for queer joy. One contributor describes the tenderness and care between two women, finding solace and joy in comforting her lover after a difficult day. It is hard not to feel the care and love between the two women when reading “My love; my queer joy”.

Another contributor shares their experience of finding freedom and celebration of their love in Nairobi, away from the homophobia they faced in Ethiopia. She experiences the joy of freedom when she sees her love respected and celebrated by random strangers. As she writes, “... and when we walk down the street, people cheer us up and say we’re a cute couple.”

Queer joy is an action—an ongoing celebration of ourselves and our communities. It is a refusal to be consumed by sadness and a commitment to savoring life despite the obstacles we face on a daily basis.

This issue of Nisnis encapsulates the spirit of queer joy and proudly declares, “We are queer, and we are joyful.” We hope that our pages reflect your own joy or inspire you to reflect on your unique sources of happiness.

As always, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all our contributors and readers for their constant support, which enables us to continue publishing and sharing these stories.

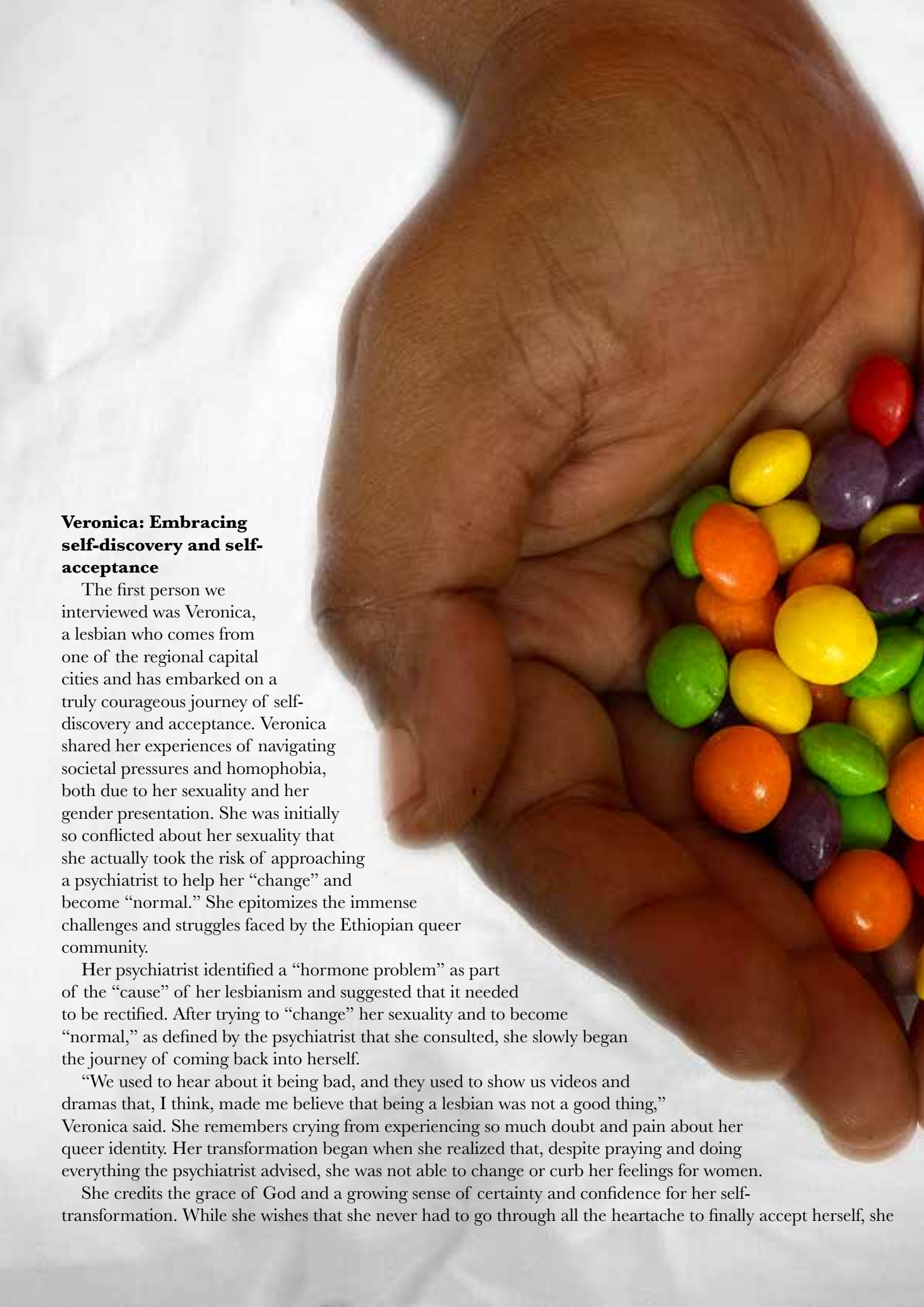
Enjoy this issue, and may it bring you a renewed sense of joy.



# Queer joy: Our beautiful, resilient community

*In the face of increased homophobia and transphobia, Ethiopia's queer community continues to find ways to embrace the power of joy. This article aims to inspire us and give us hope. It clearly demonstrates that queer joy thrives amidst the challenges of our homophobic country. Through interviews with three resilient individuals, we dig into their personal experiences, explore the spaces where queer joy prospers, and celebrate the spirit of a community that refuses to be silenced and always finds unique and brave ways of speaking*



A close-up photograph of a hand holding colorful candies. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with fingers slightly curled. The candies are small, round, and come in various colors including red, yellow, orange, green, and purple. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

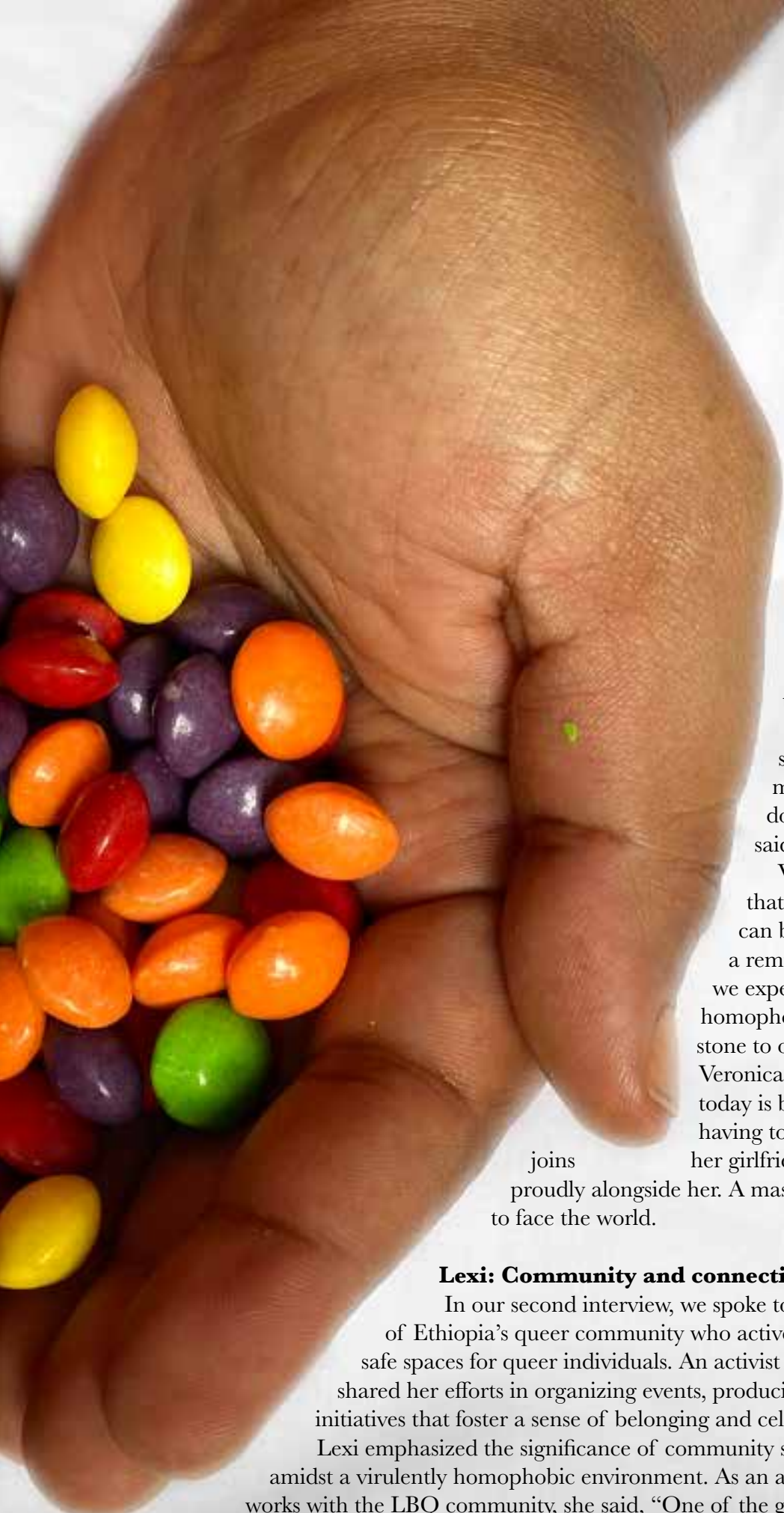
### **Veronica: Embracing self-discovery and self-acceptance**

The first person we interviewed was Veronica, a lesbian who comes from one of the regional capital cities and has embarked on a truly courageous journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Veronica shared her experiences of navigating societal pressures and homophobia, both due to her sexuality and her gender presentation. She was initially so conflicted about her sexuality that she actually took the risk of approaching a psychiatrist to help her “change” and become “normal.” She epitomizes the immense challenges and struggles faced by the Ethiopian queer community.

Her psychiatrist identified a “hormone problem” as part of the “cause” of her lesbianism and suggested that it needed to be rectified. After trying to “change” her sexuality and to become “normal,” as defined by the psychiatrist that she consulted, she slowly began the journey of coming back into herself.

“We used to hear about it being bad, and they used to show us videos and dramas that, I think, made me believe that being a lesbian was not a good thing,” Veronica said. She remembers crying from experiencing so much doubt and pain about her queer identity. Her transformation began when she realized that, despite praying and doing everything the psychiatrist advised, she was not able to change or curb her feelings for women.

She credits the grace of God and a growing sense of certainty and confidence for her self-transformation. While she wishes that she never had to go through all the heartache to finally accept herself, she



says that it was a necessary step to get to where she is today.

“The fact that I passed this step, even if it was very painful, means that I have no questions or doubts about myself today,” she said.

Veronica’s journey is a reminder that the road to self-acceptance can be challenging. Her story is also a reminder that the self-doubt that we experience by virtue of living in a homophobic country can be a stepping stone to our self-acceptance and joy.

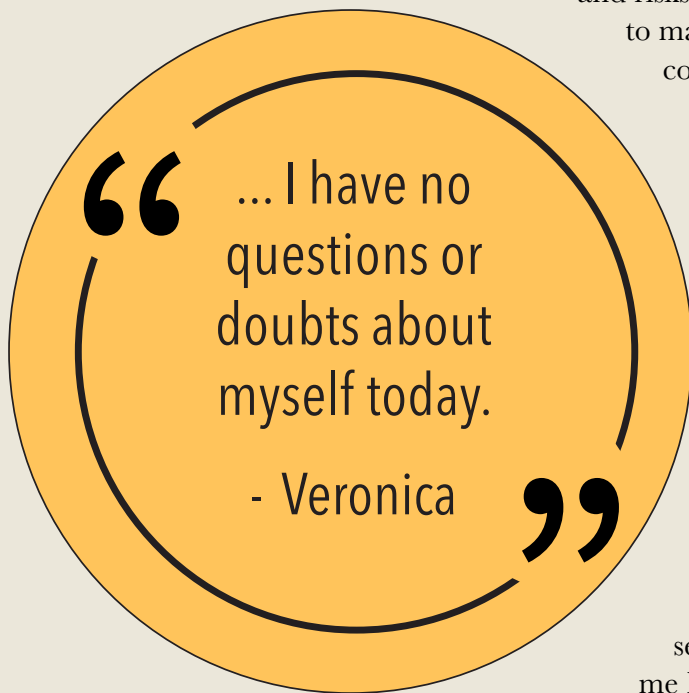
Veronica articulates how her queer joy today is being able to be herself and not having to doubt herself anymore. As she joins her girlfriend after our interview, she walks

proudly alongside her. A masculine-presenting lesbian ready to face the world.

### **Lexi: Community and connection**

In our second interview, we spoke to Lexi, a dedicated member of Ethiopia’s queer community who actively contributes to creating safe spaces for queer individuals. An activist for more than 10 years, Lexi shared her efforts in organizing events, producing content, support groups, and initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and celebration.

Lexi emphasized the significance of community support in cultivating queer joy amidst a virulently homophobic environment. As an activist who currently mostly works with the LBQ community, she said, “One of the greatest joys I experience is witnessing the power of representation. By creating content that highlights the stories, struggles, and triumphs of LBQ women, we can help amplify our voices and provide much-needed visibility and



counter-narratives”.

Of course, queer activism and organizing in a country like Ethiopia is not without its challenges and risks, Lexi articulates. But the ability to make a positive impact and foster community is a reminder that even in the face of adversity, love, acceptance, and resilience can prevail.

In a society where queer individuals face discrimination, rejection, and violence, providing a safe space where LBQ women can express themselves freely and authentically is rewarding.

These spaces allow us to build a sense of community and provide support for one another.

“Knowing that someone may come across our content and feel seen, validated, and supported makes me happy. It’s a reminder that we are not alone in our journey and that our experiences do matter,” she said when describing her queer joy as it relates to her activism.

### **Betselot: Artistic expression as liberation**

Our third and final interview was with Betselot, an artist who is queer and who uses her talent as a form of self-love and creative resistance. She shared her experiences of using art to challenge the conservative societal norms in Ethiopia, to show that we exist, to celebrate queer identities, and as a way of empowering the queer community. Betselot shares her artwork on Facebook and uses it as a form of activism to give Ethiopian queer people hope, joy, and representation. Through her drawings, Betselot aims to create acceptance for the Ethiopian LGBTQ+ community.

“Queer art provides us with a tool to say what we want. In our country and as queer people, we cannot say what we want publicly since it might lead to danger. Art also allows us to tell the larger society that we exist and that they must accept us,” she said.

Art by queer people and about queer people is also essential to empowering the queer community. She is a strong advocate for queer rights, and art provides another creative medium of conversation for the queer community. She uses her art to start conversations around love,

relationships, work, and empowerment. Betselot's artistic endeavors also serve as a powerful form of representation in a country where queer visibility and representation are limited.

"Queer art is not something you can show everyone, something that can be freely sold, or something that can be released publicly. It requires freedom. Queer art is like being hungry or thirsty and needing to eat or drink. When I draw, it is the same type of feeling. For instance, if I draw women being affectionate, it is because I am thinking of that kind of love," she said.

At its most basic, her art has empowered and inspired her to find joy and strength in her own authentic self. As she succinctly put it, "For me, queer art goes beyond just joy; it is my language. It is a tool I use to freely articulate who I am to a world that does not know who I am."

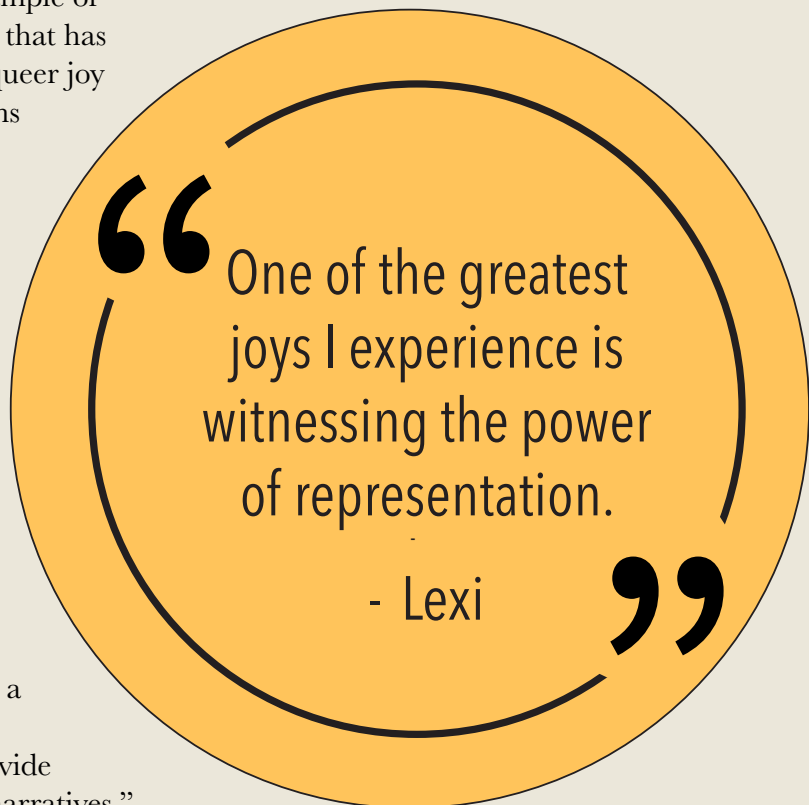
### **Celebrating queer joy**

Queer joy is that quintessential spirit of resilience and resistance. Despite the many challenges faced, the queer community continues to find strength, comfort, and unapologetic joy.

Through Veronica, Lexi, and Betselot's stories, we witness the power of resilience, authenticity, and community. They are just an example of a strong Ethiopian queer community that has managed to carve out spaces where queer joy shines, challenging conservative norms and creating a sense of purpose and belonging.

The joy experienced by Ethiopia's queer community is not only a personal success but also a ray of hope for a more inclusive, accepting, and progressive society. Our joy serves as a gentle reminder that our love knows no bounds, that every individual deserves the right to express their gender in any way they choose, and that we can celebrate our authentic selves despite the fear and discrimination that we experience on a daily basis.

As we "amplify our voices and provide much-needed visibility and counter-narratives," to use Lexi's words, we will let our interviewees' stories inspire us to embrace ourselves, celebrate our identities, and contribute to the unending journey towards acceptance.





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Queer art is like  
being hungry or  
thirsty and needing  
to eat or drink.

- Betselot

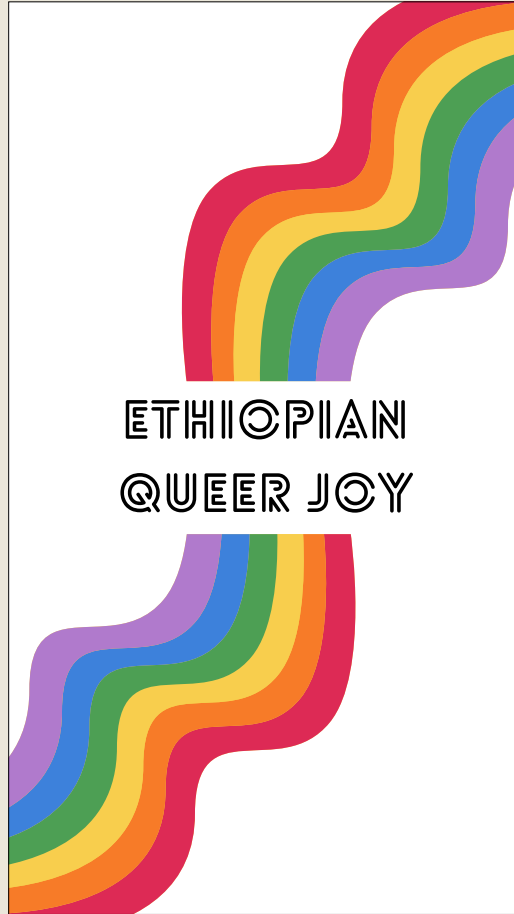
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Our community's resilience finds ways to shine through. Veronica's self-discovery and acceptance remind us of the transformative power of self-acceptance, even in the face of harmful advice by an expert. Lexi's dedication to creating safe spaces highlights the importance of community support in fostering queer joy and unity. Betselot's artistic resistance celebrates queer identities, inspiring herself and others to find representation, strength and joy.

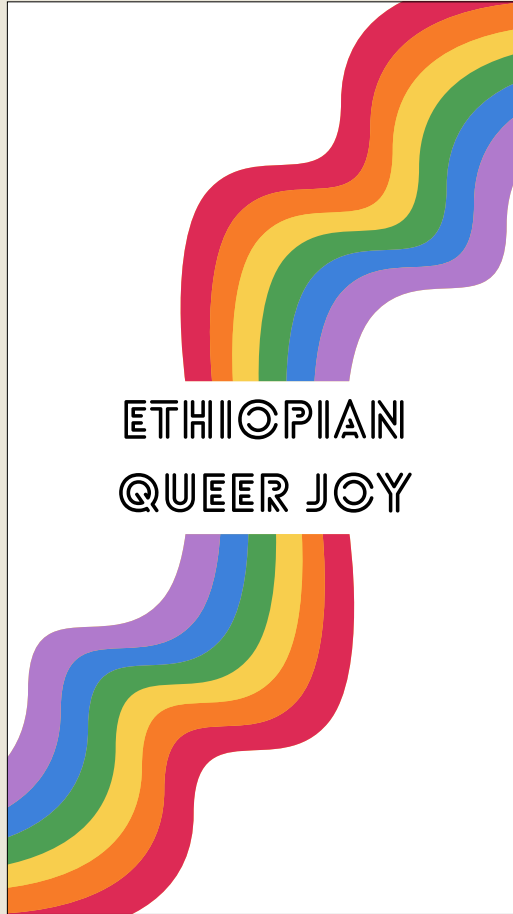
These stories of resilience, community, love, and celebration serve as a testament to the spirit of Ethiopia's queer community. They remind us that despite the challenges and hate we face, we continue to dig deep and find our joy, which no one can take away from us.

**Queer joy  
is that  
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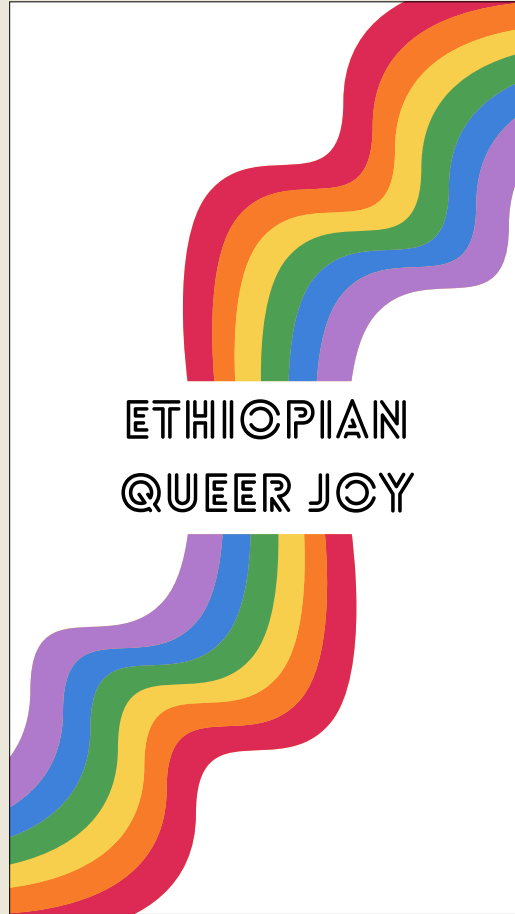
**- Alex -**

I love my queer identity because it allows me to deeply appreciate and cherish everything about women. Their gentle spirits, delicate skin, soft lips, and sweet scent captivate me. I value their unwavering kindness and generous nature. The emotional connection and understanding we share bring me immense joy. I get lost in our shared perception of the world and our drive to carve a place for ourselves in a world that takes us for granted. The beauty of the female form, with its unique contours and curves, fills me with awe. I am truly grateful for my ability to love women and be loved by them in return.



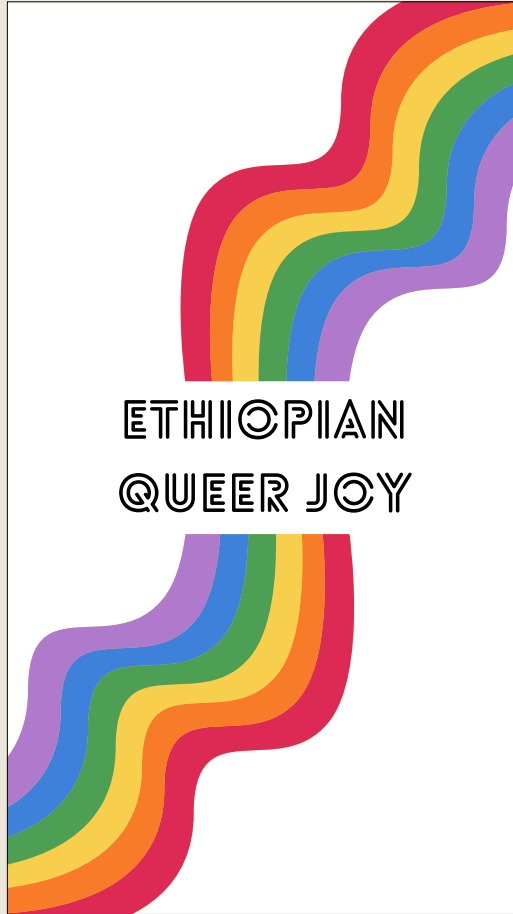
### **- Betselot -**

The current source of our happiness lies in encountering someone who resonates with us, whether they're a beloved partner or a passing stranger. When we learn to value and embrace ourselves, acknowledging that we're not alone, it becomes the wellspring of our joy. From this sentiment, I create my most significant artwork. Witnessing individuals, regardless of gender, openly expressing their love fills me with delight. Personally, crafting queer art is where I find my happiness.



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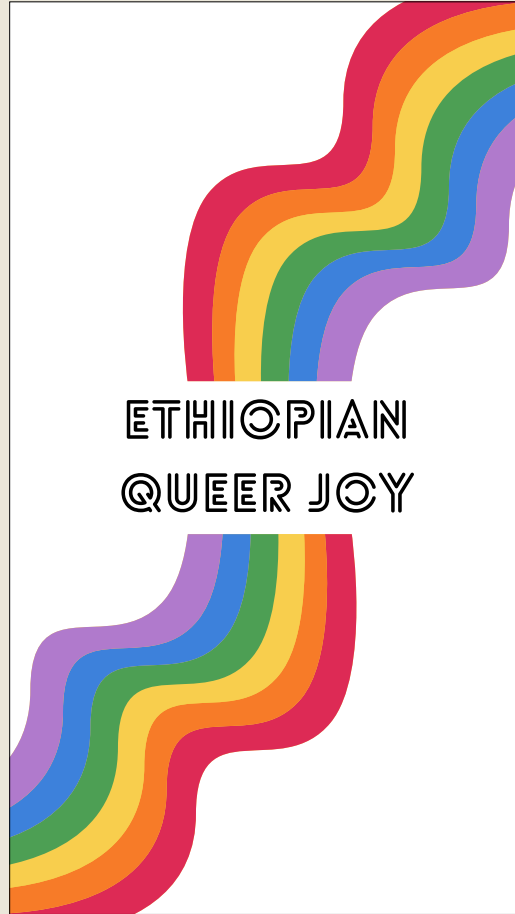
I love the fact that I can be me and I don't need to follow the traditional rules of the society. When we live in a conservative society like ours, they have rules we need to follow and roles they want us to play, like needing to get married and have children or dressing up feminine as a woman. They push us into what they are familiar with in order for us to be accepted. What I love about being queer is I can be me. I can dress the way I want and love who I want and my people will accept me for me. Even though most people think I'm a former football player or some athletic person for dressing masculine, with my close friends and family, the joy comes from the fact that I don't have to filter my thoughts and who I am. I am one of them without any judgment. I can talk and act how I truly feel and I'm not scared to just be.



**- Yohana -**

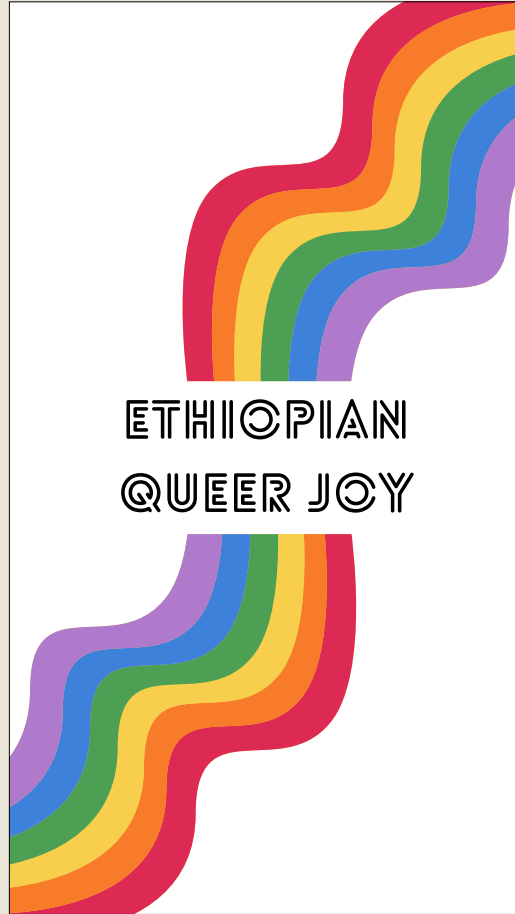
My queer joy is women. They are just such beautiful creatures.

They are sexy and beautiful, and they have this energy that makes me weak and powerful at the same time. There is so much beauty in them, and it excites me that I see that, feel that, and that I fell for them. And I am not sure if it is because I am queer, but I like it when women are in positions of power. People say women are not good to each other, that they are mean to each other, that they don't want to see women in power, or that they don't like female teachers, but I feel the other way. I love it when women are in positions of power.



**- Tsion -**

My queer joy is my resilience. I live in a society that tells me I am wrong. If I had listened to them, I would have long decided to change who I am and to suppress that deep part of me that makes me woman. I love that I have learned to be unapologetic and unafraid. My queer joy is staring death in the eye every day and choosing to live as I am. I am because we are a people who have always existed despite fear. My love for other women and my chosen family sustain me. My queer joy is my community. Because no matter what happens, I am who I am because I have a community of queer people who have my back. My community makes my resilience possible.



## **- Haben -**

My queer joy is when I choose to ignore gender roles and gender expectations and to live my life as authentically as possible. When I choose to wear what I want, when I tell people “I am a woman” when they assume I am a man, and when I walk with my head held high and even as people choose to make fun of me. No matter what others say about me and no matter how they try to make me “normal”, I choose to celebrate who I am. I laugh, I gather with other people who look like me, and I refuse to be anything less than I am. That is when I feel queer joy to my very core.

# Embracing Joy: A n



# night of queer freedom



The men were dancing, flirting, kissing, and closely holding each other. Amidst the sweat and the energy, I was perhaps the only person whose thoughts revolved around a mix of anticipation and anxiety. Would the floor swallow them whole? Would the bouncers and party goers insult or assault them? At the very least, I expected some form of citizen's arrest, a subdued form of mob action.

A friend had taken my girlfriend and I to the Alchemist Bar, a well known creative space in the heart of Nairobi. Considered as one of the most popular clubs in the city, it houses a diverse collective of wacky and determined entrepreneurs in food, fashion, music and more. While their website describes the place as home to people who love their craft, who believe success comes from taking creative risks, what struck a chord with me was that it appeared to be a sanctuary where gay men could openly express themselves. While the downstairs is for a very straight crowd, the upstairs seemed to have mostly gay men who, when we were there, were drinking and dancing the night away.

My girlfriend and our friend were dancing the night away as I watched from the sidelines. While my heart danced with them, my two left feet could only barely do the two steps from the edge of the makeshift dance floor. My girlfriend, an eternally hopeful person, was trying to show me how to dance or rather move in such a way that does not scare people. As two women dancing in public, leaving no doubt about our relationship by the way we interacted with each other, we continued to thoroughly enjoy ourselves.

I admit it took me a while to avert my gaze from the crowd. As someone who lives in Ethiopia, open dancing and flirting by queer people in public places is not something that comes naturally. I was mesmerized by the safe spaces that allowed these men the freedom to be human beings just enjoying a night out. I know that should be a given. But existing around homophobia for so long has a way of misaligning your normal. Watching the men dancing together felt as ordinary as being in a straight bar in Addis Ababa and I marveled at how the men were completely focused on having fun and nothing else seemed to matter.

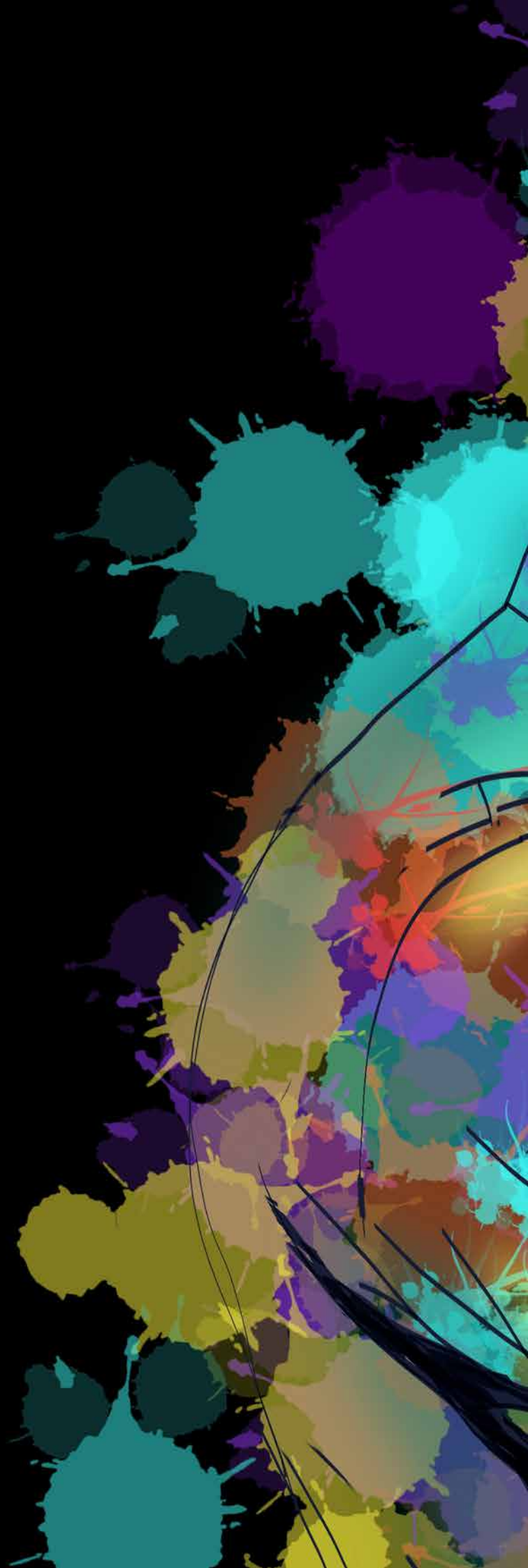
Our friend was a trans woman who knew half the gay men there and we were introduced to a few. Eventually, we mustered enough courage to ask the million-dollar question that burned within us. As queer women, we were desperate to find other queer women, so we playfully inquired with the men. Their responses, filled with humor and wit, conveyed their lack of interest in women. As we left, my girlfriend jokingly told one of them, "You suck," and he responded with a smile and a playful, "Yes, I do."

Despite the lighthearted banter, their answers didn't provide us with any useful leads. Perhaps our inability to locate the gathering place of queer women stemmed from our own shortcomings. We didn't yet know Nairobi well enough and we didn't know enough queer women in Nairobi to find the queer gathering places. However, despite the absence of a venue that catered to queer women in large numbers, we thoroughly enjoyed our time at the Alchemist. While recognizing that the bar and party scene might not suit everyone, and acknowledging the problematic nature of solely focusing on these spaces as the primary meeting places for queer individuals, I found solace in participating.

We danced, even if my own two left feet limited my moves. We conversed, mingled, and simply existed. We felt no fear, no concern for our safety, and no need to monitor how we portrayed ourselves as a couple. We were just us.

In that setting, I rediscovered the pure joy of queerness expressed without inhibition. Witnessing gay men grind, dance, and flirt the night away in Nairobi offered me a taste of normalcy.

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# Queer joy: A journey of self-acceptance





I know that my journey is not unique. Countless others navigate similar challenges and obstacles in their quest for authenticity and belonging. But here is my story:

Growing up, I never felt like a truly happy person. As I approached college, the weight of my secrets burdened me, isolating me from potential friendships. I struggled with accepting myself, torn between the dictates of religion and culture and the reality of my own identity. It was a constant battle, one filled with denial, prayer, and an overwhelming desire to suppress my queerness.

Living in Ethiopia, a country where societal and religious pressures can be particularly stifling for people like us, only compounded my internal struggle. I yearned to rid myself of my gayness, believing it to be a flaw that needed to be corrected because the religious leaders said so. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't change who I was at my core.

It took years of inner turmoil and soul-searching, but eventually, I reached a pivotal moment of self-realization: I was born this way, and no amount of denial or suppression could alter that fundamental truth. Accepting myself was the first step toward finding genuine happiness and fulfillment.

The journey to self-acceptance was not easy. It required confronting deeply ingrained beliefs and societal expectations. But with each step, I felt a newfound sense of liberation and empowerment. I embraced my queerness not as a burden to bear but



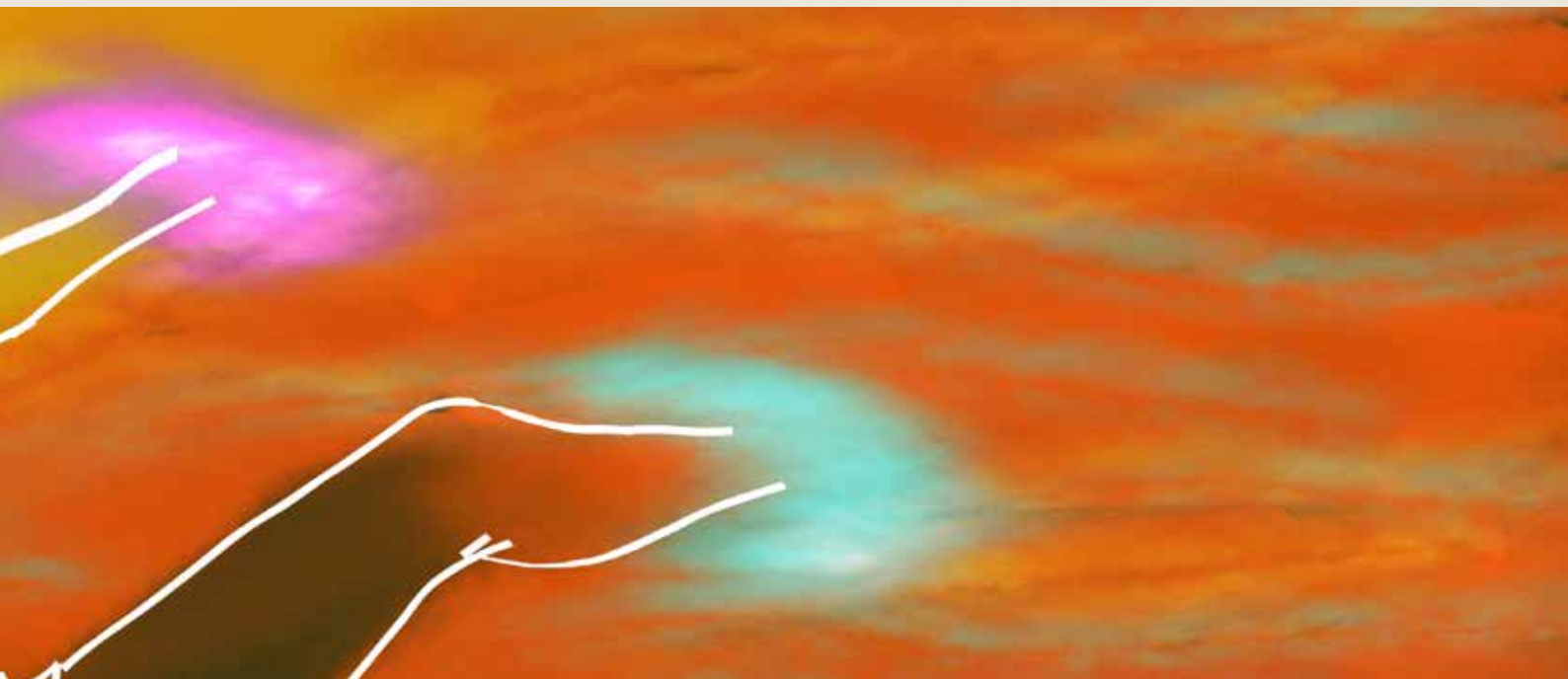
as an integral part of my identity that deserved love and celebration.

Finding joy in self-acceptance was a transformative experience for me. Despite the cultural barriers and societal taboos that you already know, I discovered a profound sense of liberation in embracing my authentic self. No longer shackled by fear or shame, I began to carve out a space where I could thrive as a proud, joyful queer individual.

Today, I am surrounded by friends who accept and celebrate me for who I am. I have found a small but vibrant community where I feel seen and understood. Each day, I remind myself of the courage it took to embrace my identity fully, and I celebrate this milestone with gratitude and pride.

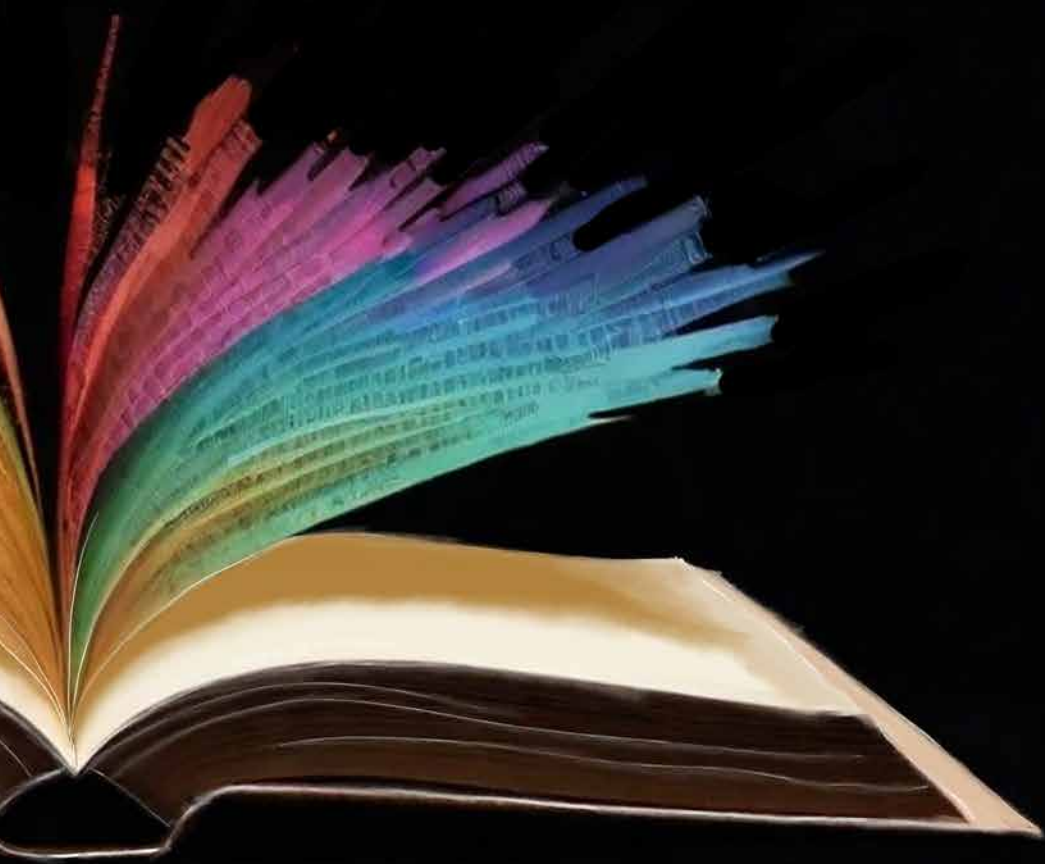
In embracing my queerness, I have discovered a profound sense of freedom and fulfillment that transcends any societal constraints. And as I continue on this journey, I carry with me the knowledge that I am enough, just as I am.

Finding  
joy in self-  
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# Art: A path to queer joy





I believe that one of the most powerful and important contributions that art can make to the LGBTQ+ community is to instill joy. This thinking arises from the acknowledgement that recognition, education, material wealth, or health cannot fully fulfill all our needs. The answer to how art has the potential to make us happy is easy. As people, especially in this queer community, the main reasons we become unhappy are due to our inability to live as ourselves and the rejection that we experience from others. I believe that the arts are a special gift that facilitates a way in which our suppressed emotions can come to life. This is important as we cannot live authentically due to various obstacles imposed by the society we live in. The arts serve as tools that enable us to have hope and that allow us to breathe in fresh, liberating air.

As a way of articulating the high place art has in my life, let me give you a quick introduction. For our queer families, art is more than entertainment; it is a tool for self-discovery, hope, learning, and teaching! When I say that we can learn from it, I mean that we can answer questions such as “How does the new queer generation understand who and what they are?” It is also a way to raise awareness about the LGBTQ+ community for “straight” people by capturing people’s minds and informing them of the truth in a non-threatening manner and in a way that they can understand easily.

For those who refuse to accept the existence of queer people, who say that they are under the control of Satan, or because they lack knowledge, the arts have a way of gently guiding us to the truth. This truth lies in the fact that, like every human being on this planet, LGBTQ+ people have been serving with humility within religious institutions, that they are among the most brilliant minds who have positively changed the world, and that they possess sound minds capable of loving and being loved. Through the arts, these undeniable truths can be effectively communicated to educate people.

Take movies or books, for instance. Many believe that the characters in these artistic mediums are reflections of the real world. As such, queer individuals can take solace in the way their stories are told, drawing inspiration and learning to develop self-acceptance. For those who do not have enough knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community, the arts offer a way to help people understand the naturalness of being an LGBTQ+ person, and it also gives them an opportunity to further deepen their knowledge. In essence, the arts serve as a powerful voice for those who are repressed, denied recognition, and silenced, and they give them an opportunity to have their stories and their struggles shared.

Allow me to share with you some productions that I have personally enjoyed and believe you will find both

entertaining and enlightening. Particularly in Ethiopia, where the concept of true love feels scarce, it seems as though we see “love” as a contractual agreement with an expiration date, often ending with the couple in question becoming enemies and seeking revenge against each other. The films or shows I have selected have the potential to teach us healthier ways of loving and navigating relationships, especially within a community that can be toxic at times.

The series *Locked Up* and *Orange Is the New Black*, while somewhat dated, are worth considering. I know both revolve around prison settings; please don't mock my choices based on the theme. I suggest them because I believe love can be tested in uncomfortable and stressful situations. For those who see love as a mere commodity or game, these productions have the potential to make them realize that love demands sacrifice. Yes, it may be hard, but embracing the power of love and the price that self-acceptance requires will eventually give us the peace of mind we need, despite the costs and the losses involved.

Every country has a method of oppression that it uses against minority groups within its society. The minority groups, however, have their own expressions of culture and the values that help them maintain their community. If we consider art as a representation of the real world and our lived experience, then I think it is mandatory — even though that does not seem probable right now — that our stories are told in ways that reflect our own unique cultural expressions and in ways that utilize our environment. Although I understand the limitations, it would have added to my happiness if the people from my own country were the authors and actors who were telling our stories.

I long for films that, while telling queer stories, accurately reflect the landscape of my reality and my country. The reason for this is that a movie made by Bollywood or Hollywood does not reflect the life that I could live, the challenges that I might face, society's perception of me, the risks that I face, or the favorable conditions that might make it easy to be who I am. However, a movie made by my fellow citizens will show me films made here in Megenagna, Adama, or Gonder, which would resonate more with me.

I hope you understand that I am not suggesting that the art made in other countries or places has no use or is somehow less. I am just saying that if I had a choice, I would love to see works that are made in ways that reflect my culture, values, and lived realities.

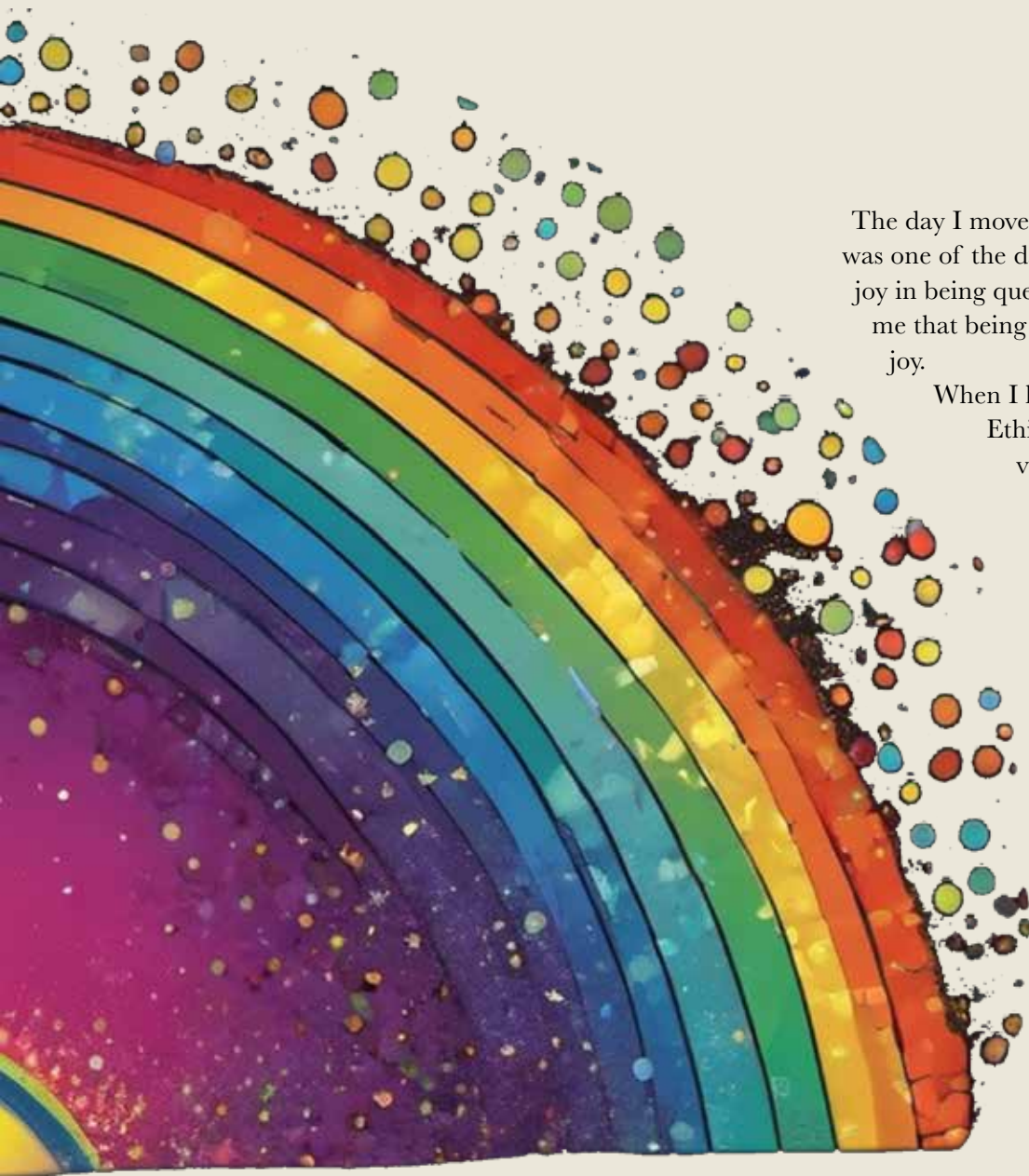
**For our queer families, art is more than entertainment; it is a tool for self-discovery, hope, learning, and teaching!**



# Finding joy in exile



... there is no greater  
happiness than being able to  
be oneself without fear.



The day I moved to Kenya from Ethiopia was one of the days that gave me the greatest joy in being queer. It was a day that showed me that being queer can be a source of joy.

When I look back on my life in Ethiopia, the contrast feels as vast as the expanse between heaven and earth. In Ethiopia, it was very difficult and dangerous to talk about myself, that is, to claim to be a lesbian. However, I am lucky that here in Kenya, I now have the freedom to openly express my queerness and speak about my identity wherever and whenever I choose.

In Ethiopia, I felt like I was a prisoner

because, even though I could move around as much as I wanted, I couldn't openly talk about myself. In fact, the intense homophobia around July and August, put the queer community in even more danger. As a masculine-presenting woman, I got to the point where I couldn't even move around the city. As I walked down the street, I was scared and terrified. I was afraid that they would come after me, that they would hit me or kill me. Here in Kenya, no one cares about who you are; you can wear what you like and do whatever you want. This also brought me great joy because, in my opinion, there is no greater happiness than being able to be oneself without fear of consequences.

It was dangerous to hang out with my girlfriend in Ethiopia. I sometimes couldn't even sit in a café with her without fear. My girlfriend and I don't do anything outlandish even here. We walk holding hands and people greet us and say we're a cute couple. We live together and the people who have rented us the place know we are a couple, but they don't say anything. No one insults or threatens you.

In Ethiopia, I spent the majority of my time confined at home and alone. I was always in a state of distress, filled with fear. I encountered various unpleasant incidents, such as hate speech, insults, and people questioning my masculine attire and appearance. In Kenya, there is no scrutiny regarding someone's attire even if it has rainbows. This shows a higher level of acceptance as compared to Ethiopia and this explains why I haven't experienced anything bad since coming to Kenya. We live in a place that embraces and treats queer people on equal terms with everyone else, and that is very joyful. Unlike in Ethiopia, here in Kenya, there is nothing that restricts me from fully expressing myself or from being who I truly am.

Before coming here, I used to attribute my anxiety and mental stress to my queer identity. During my time in Ethiopia, I was always worried. It was not obvious to me that this distress came from being unable to be myself. I lived in constant fear of judgment and the opinions others would hold about me.

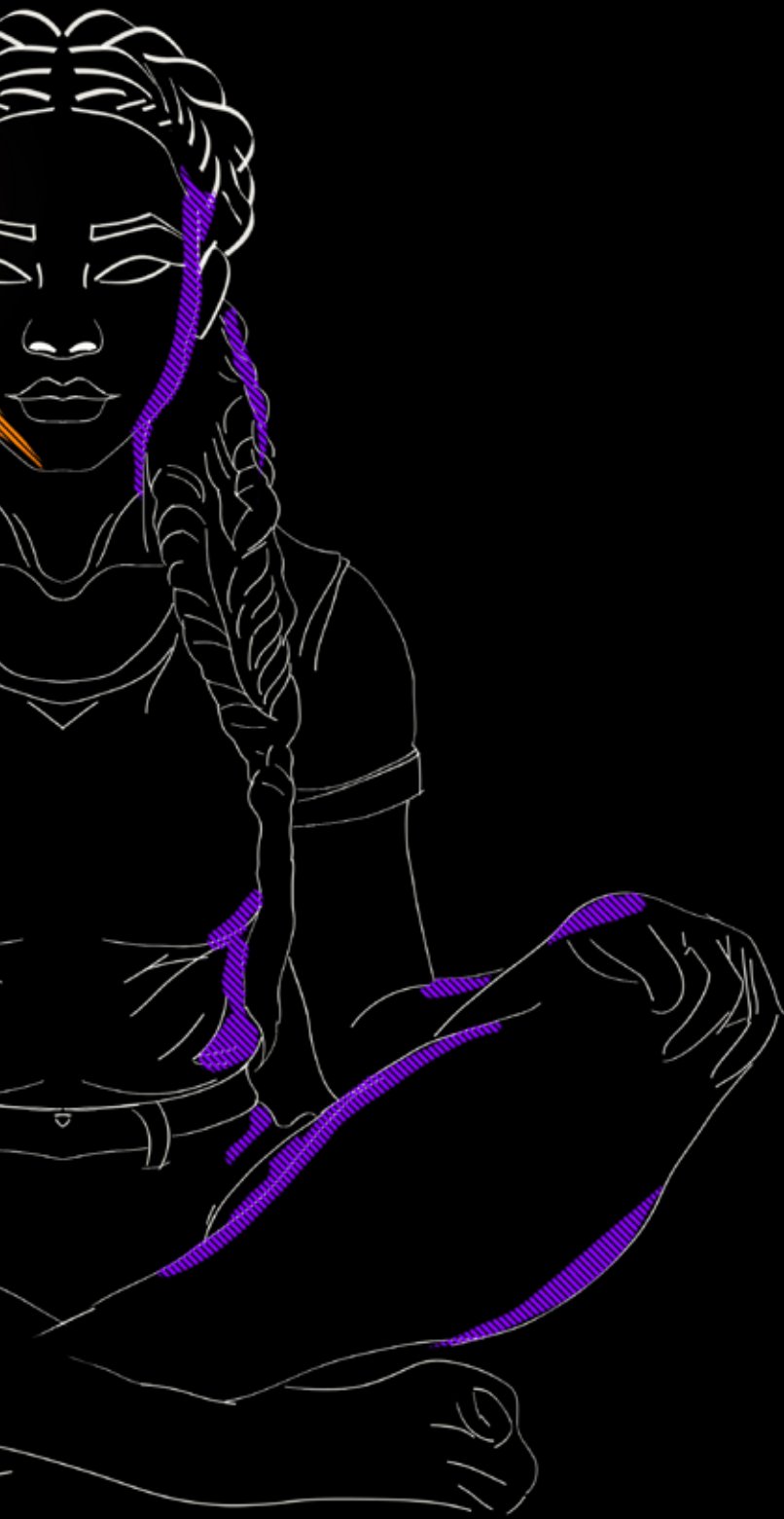
Upon my arrival here, I discovered the joy of embracing my queerness. I realized that my previous unhappiness was not an inherent consequence of being queer but rather a direct result of the harmful environment that I had been in. The contrast in acceptance and love for queer individuals between Kenya and Ethiopia became clear. It was a huge relief to find joy and peace in Kenya, realizing that my stress and anxiety were completely unrelated to my queerness.

My journey to Kenya allowed me to gain this perspective. It became clear that it wasn't a matter of me being the wrong person, but rather being in the wrong place. Through this experience, I have come to recognize that queerness is peace and joy. This realization has been affirming.

**It was a huge relief to find joy and peace in Kenya, realizing that my stress and anxiety were completely unrelated to my queerness.**

# The long path to self-love and happiness





Tears flowed  
when I finally  
embraced my  
identity as a  
lesbian. I felt a  
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of becoming  
truly myself.

I made peace  
with myself  
because I  
realized that self-  
acceptance was  
paramount.

It is very difficult to accept oneself as a queer person. As a kid, around the age of 10 or 11, I thought that I was simply appreciating the same sex, it wasn't really love. But as I got older, I came to realize that wasn't the case. By the time I reached the 8th grade, I was convinced. I liked one of our classmates, and a lot of guys hovered over her, but for me, she was my best friend. We were in class together, and when we went home, we took the long route, talking so much that it made the journey home longer. We felt a connection, but neither of us dared to talk about it or take it any further.

Until the 10th grade, no one even tried to say anything. Everyone made comments about how the two of us were always together, sometimes with anger. I wanted her to be mine, but I couldn't speak or ask for it because I didn't admit it was right for me in the first place. Rather, my struggle was to deny what I was feeling, to let go and forget, to say, "I'm not that kind of person at all." What I didn't realize at the time was that I couldn't see a boy in that kind of way. Initially, no one was talking about same-sex love as normal; everyone was focused on opposite-sex love. We occasionally heard about men who liked men, but even then, it was condemned. We also heard that it was not something they willingly practiced, but rather, it was considered a curse or something they had been forced to do. We had no other information.

So where would I learn to accept myself?

That's also what continued to happen when I went to college. As time went on and I waited for what I felt to disappear, I decided to stop thinking about this and focus on my studies. Although there were a few women who caught my attention, I decided to just admire them from afar. I joined the workforce with this principle intact. Sometime after I joined the workforce, something turned everything on its head. Unexpectedly, a love affair with a girl began. The confusion! We loved each other to the point of forgetting everything. It was a powerful love that couldn't be hidden from the larger society, and we were constantly targeted in multiple ways. I tried not to give up, but at some point, we both couldn't handle it. We parted ways. When this relationship that we couldn't quite name ended, the coldness that I felt made me shudder, and worst of all, I couldn't talk about it or explain it to anyone. I was sick at the time, but I took advantage of the opportunity that I had to get out.

Our society doesn't allow you to be who you are, yet they have the audacity to pressure you into marriage and having children. Families will question,

“Why aren’t you married?” as if they will raise your kids themselves. But forget about marriage; would they accept me if I said, “I love someone who is the same gender as I am”? No way! It’s astonishing to witness their hatred surface when the topic of same-sex love is broached.

As much as my family and friends claim to love and support me, I know the hate and contempt they would direct at me if they were to discover my love for someone of the same sex. Fear fills my heart when I think about the animosity they would harbor towards me. “How long?” I ask myself. I know their hurt would run deep because I know who I am. Witnessing their disdain pains me deeply, especially considering they’ve always been a priority in my life. I don’t want them to suffer, and I know they don’t wish this for me either. However, it saddens me that those closest to me fail to comprehend the toll I pay for not being true to myself. I am not my authentic self because I fear offending them, yet it pains me not to be granted the freedom to be who I am in a world where they are allowed to be themselves.

At times, I suspect they have inklings about my true identity. Sometimes, you defend those you love even when you know they are in the wrong, and I believe this applies to them. Even if they were to discover who I am, they would attempt to erase my true self by insisting, “She is not like that; she would never do this.”

What kind of love is this? What can we call it? Should we refer to it as protecting you by causing you irreversible harm?

It’s unthinkable to confide in my family about my true self; the risk is immense. I don’t have anyone I can trust with my secret; some are eager to spread gossip, while others would mock me and exploit it to their advantage. I doubt anyone would keep it confidential. Perhaps some may eventually learn, whether willingly or unwillingly. But until then, my awareness of who I am will have to suffice. Even if I were to disclose it, it would amount to mere words because, although I understand my identity, I lack a partner who has embraced her own. Whom could I mention as the object of my affection to broach the subject?

Along with this, I don’t tolerate anyone who tries to dictate what I wear. If it’s comfortable and doesn’t bother me, then it’s enough. I refuse to dress to please others. There was an argument in the past about me needing to conform to traditional feminine attire at work. But when you excel at your job, those concerns tend to fade away. I’ve received numerous comments on my outfit and hairstyle, but I assert my freedom

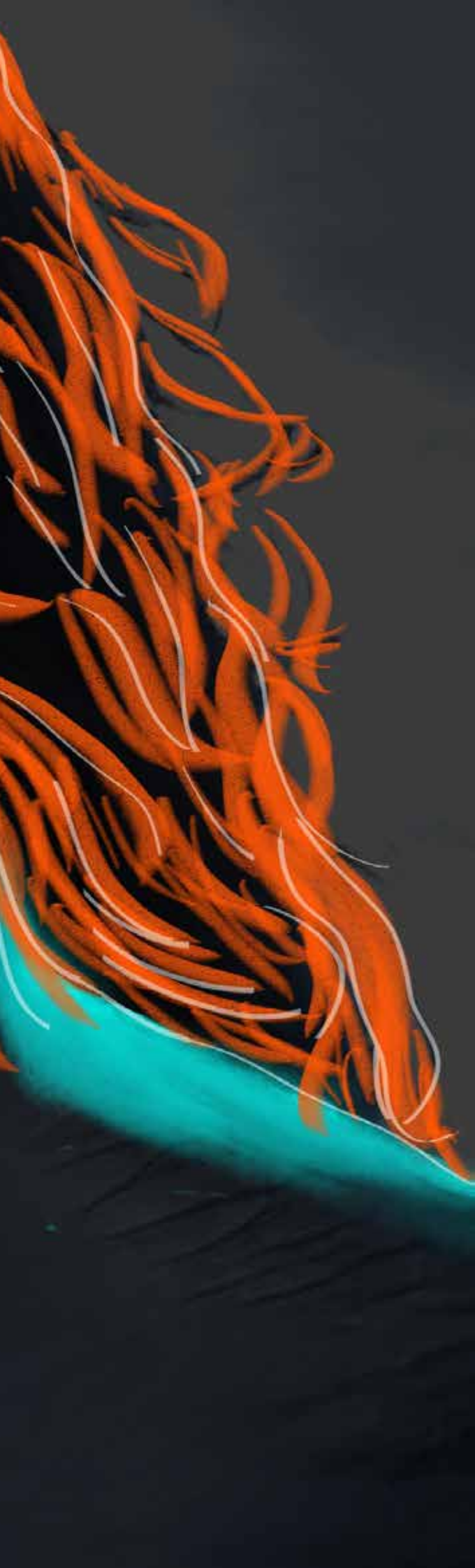
## There’s nothing greater than embracing oneself.

by dressing in a manner that feels comfortable to me. I understand that regardless of how I present myself, people will comment. Even if they don’t approve of me, they’ve been compelled to accept me. However, disclosing my queer identity to them still feels like a daunting prospect.

Things were tumultuous when I first joined social media. Despite the uncertainties and lack of trust among people, I’ve witnessed others offering support in times of fear. I’ve also discovered that there are many people like me, and I am not alone. Birds of a feather flock together, and it’s comforting to know that others share similar experiences.

I realized too late that I couldn’t change any of this. There’s nothing greater than embracing oneself. I struggled for too long and even debated with God to avoid accepting myself, but I couldn’t resist any longer. Tears flowed when I finally embraced my identity as a lesbian. I felt a sense of peace, of becoming truly myself. Today, I no longer ask, “Who am I? How? Why?” There’s a tranquility within me because I’ve embraced who I am. I made peace with myself because I realized that self-acceptance was paramount. Knowing that there are others like me has prevented me from feeling alone. I want to express my gratitude to my queer family for their invaluable contributions: those who shared their stories, those who helped me see my own story in theirs, those whose contributions touched me deeply, and those who offered support in various ways.





## My love; my queer joy

She turns  
the lights off,  
illuminating  
the room with  
the glow of a  
scented candle,  
aptly named  
Spice Gold,  
and chooses a  
soothing playlist  
whose gentle  
guitar melodies  
fill the air.

It all begins with a simple neck massage intended to comfort her from her long, frustrating day.

She is wearing just her underwear and is sitting on the floor, on a bright yellow sofa cushion that is placed on a large white pillow, between my spread legs. I start rubbing her neck, teasing the tight spots as she gently moans with pleasure. I move to the nape of her neck since I have learned her level of relaxation reaches the stratosphere when I play with that part of her body. She continues moaning.

But we find ourselves without any hair oil and decide wetting her hair is the next best thing. Together we enter the tiny bathroom, and I suggest she take a shower, and soon upgrade my suggestion to a shared bath. She turns the lights off, illuminating the room with the glow of a scented candle, aptly named Spice Gold, and chooses a soothing playlist whose gentle guitar melodies fill the air. The bathroom is small, and the bathtub is even smaller. Perfect for both our bodies. I lean against her. She empties the repurposed tin can we use for our toothbrushes and pours water on my chest. The hot water cascades down my skin, tracing a path to my most intimate regions as she silently watches. Her hands delicately explore my back, and teasingly caresses my chest. I ask her to switch places so I can be behind her. Giving up my prime real estate is no easy task, but tonight is all about her.

She reclines upon my chest, and I wrap my legs around her because the small bathtub simply does not have enough room for both of us to relax our bodies. With tender care, I massage her chest, reveling in the beauty of her glorious breasts. I move them closer to each other and create a tunnel that allows the water to cascade over her belly. Her laughter fills the air. I know she thinks it is a silly game, but she indulges me. I lovingly glide my fingers through her beautiful, curly hair, offering her a gentle scalp massage. The water gradually loses its warmth. We refill the tub. We go slow. We have the whole night.

We finally step out of the bathtub. We notice the water has spilled all over the bathroom floor, creating a mess and she insists on cleaning it up. I am disappointed that her relaxation has to be interrupted, but I know she won't be able to relax with a messy bathroom on her mind. I volunteer to mop as she returns our toothbrushes to their designated place.

Our scented candles and our soothing music have moved into our bedroom. We soon go back to her, sitting on the floor in between my legs. Exactly where I have wanted her all evening, I massage her neck. Her scalp. Her shoulders. And then we move to the bed. So that I can massage her back. And her fine ass. She moans. And moans. I am just getting started.

I turn her body so she lies back on her back, with her head resting on my naked thighs. I start massaging her face. Slow. Her eyes are closed. I see her letting go, relaxing her face muscles, and abandoning all control. Her eyes remain closed for





what feels like eternity. I watch her intently as I keep caressing her beautiful face. What makes her moan the most? I do that again and again.

The music softly fades away, and she gently opens her eyes and with a serene smile on her face says, “I don’t think I have ever been as relaxed as this.” I tenderly kiss her forehead and then her lips.

I then suggestively point to one body part that I have yet to massage. I gently move my hands to it. I spread. I rub. I play. She says, “I don’t know how, but you are making playing with pussy relaxing.” I am intentional. Sensuality is the name of the game. I play with her lips. At first just holding them. And then I head to her opening. Just at the edges. I play. Until I feel her yielding, I then lie next to her. We kiss. I suck on her lips. Our tongues take turns. Her moans are my guide, and tonight is all about slowing time. My fingers inch further into her. I gently start moving them in and out. Until she finally asks for the vibrator. Then there is no going back. She places the vibrator on her clit as I speed up my fingers. She moans. And moans before finally crying out and trembling. She struggles to turn off the vibrator. I swear, the button has not changed places since she last turned it on. But her trembling hands think otherwise. She collapses against me and I help her turn off the vibrator.

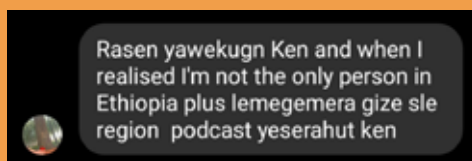
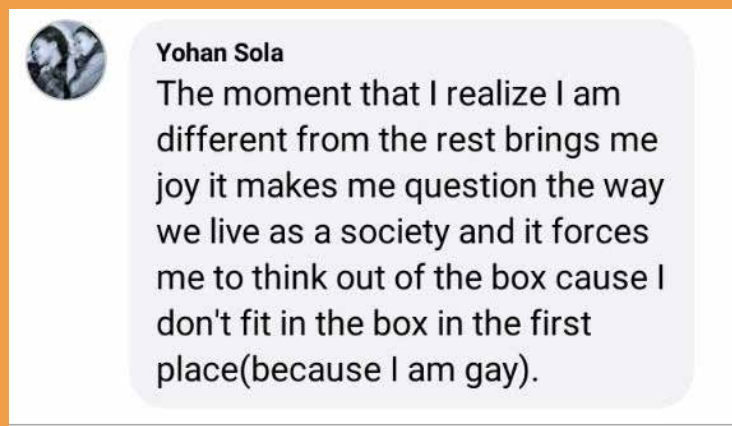
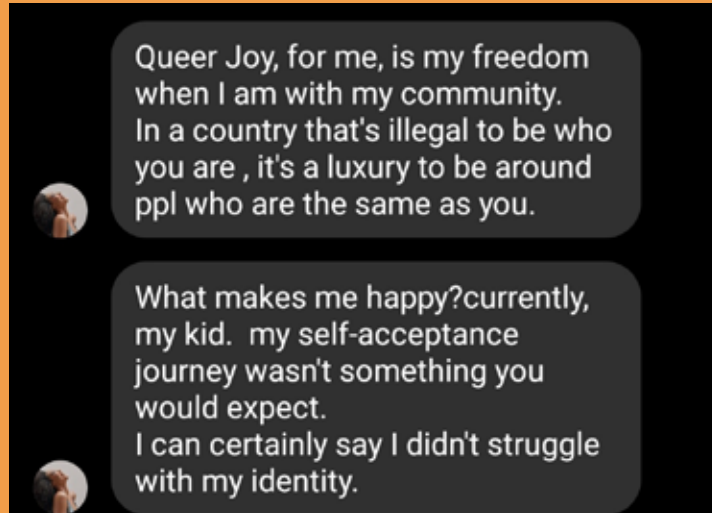
She curls up against me. I caress her hair to get her to sleep.

I watch her as she sleeps. Grateful that she chose me. Thankful that I was able to bring her solace after a hard day. She is my love. My queer joy.

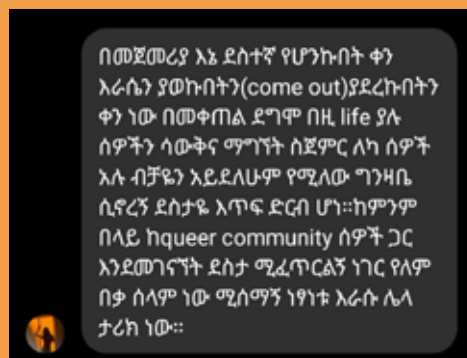
**Her moans are  
my guide, and  
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time.**

# What has been your greatest joy as a queer person in Ethiopia?

These are selected responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...



The day I learned about myself and when I realized I am not the only [queer] person in Ethiopia. And the day I did a podcast about queer people in the regions.



The first is the day that I came out. And then when I started finding people who are part of this community, I realized that I was not the only person and that gave me a lot of joy. Above all, there is nothing that compares to the joy I feel when I meet with queer people. I feel at peace. The freedom I feel is unparalleled.