

# How Will You Begin? Queering Space with Nora Larakı

## **Abstract**

**Founded in 2018, Queering Space (QS) is a critical and anti-racist collaborative initiative operating at the intersections of contemporary art, curation, and research, with a focus on gender, sexuality, migration, and decolonial feminisms. This paper is an expansion on a conversation that took place on February 4th, 2021 between the QS founder and Nora Larakı.**

## **Keywords**

**Queer, Decolonization, Radical Community**

HOW WILL YOU BEGIN?

how will you begin?  
**QUEERIN  
G SPACE**  
*with Nora Larakı*

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## HOW WILL YOU BEGIN?

This is an expansion on a conversation that took place on February 4th 2021 between myself (QS founder), and Nora Laraki (QS Producer). I will remain unnamed as both a mechanism of egalitarianism and a mitigation of unnecessary risk.

Nora is a German/Moroccan London based curator and PhD candidate. Her work combines political questions of ethics within curatorial practices. She has executed projects for the European Commission Representation in the UK, the German Historical Institute London & the Goethe Institute to produce an exhibition on the 30 year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

### **Where did QS come from, where has it arrived today?**

Queering Space was born out of a desire to facilitate connection and collaboration. It carves out space for radical community, collaboration and togetherness. It is in a constant state of reinvention, and it responds (quite rigorously and actively) to contemporary culture and activism.

In November 2018 we brought together artists, activists and academics over three days in East London. We shared works in progress privately and presented performance and discussion publicly.

In March 2020 we were on the cusp of hosting the April Late at Tate Britain; an after-hours curatorial takeover which featured performance, discussion, and video installation. Thus, we had been in a hyper-active space of connection: of reaching out, facilitating, and thinking quite actively about the act of gathering.

And simultaneously, COVID-19 began to occupy news channels and seep into conversation and words like quarantine and isolation became commonplace.

So began a stage of suspended animation. Followed by a series of landings that continue today. And as we reflect on where we were and where we want to go, we ask:

### **HOW DO WE COME BACK TOGETHER AFTER HAVING BEEN APART.**

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Figure 1. Video Still: Repeat Beat Poet performing For The Poets in Performance as Protest. Filmed by April Walker & Tierney Walker, 2020

(Words of Rob Major; founder of Imaginary Millions)

We begin with the summer of 2020 when QS produced *Performance as Protest*: a documentary style art film that features six queer black creatives. The work is in response to the Black Lives Matter protests that took place over the summer. Three poets and one dancer performed an intervention at the People's Protest in Newington Green, East London.

Two audio files were played on the sound system to hold space for the voices who were shielding, asking the question: what does it mean to protest for black lives while black in the midst of a global pandemic that disproportionately targets black communities?

The two poems that follow are the words of The Repeat Beat Poet aka Peter deGraft-Johnson and PJ Samuels, both of whom feature in *Performance as Protest*.

The Repeat Beat Poet is a host, he holds space. He is an artists artist. He believes in the importance of recognizing the intersections of struggles and standing with all people. His mind

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is expansive, his words: the rhythm of liberation. “Because we’re here, in London in the West. We need to realize the privilege of that and be like: we only can be free so that we can help free other people” — The Repeat Beat Poet in Performance as Protest. (2020)

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**FOR  
THE  
POETS**

**The Repeat Beat Poet**

**2016**

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### **This is For The Poets**

This is for those fleeting moment capturers that enrapture us.

This is for the rhyme flingers and wordslingers.

For pens and microphones gripped between fingers

For the barrier breakers who showed everyone and anyone, it could be done.

For the public communicators of private struggles

For the lives reborn from rubble

For the poets writing their way out of trouble

For every poem written that aides a resurrection

Or sparks an insurrection

For every poet that challenges convention,

For every witty epithet doubling as reactionary couplet,

And for poets who've been surprised by what they've created,

And for poets who make this look uncomplicated,

For every secret journal kept hidden, every instrumental or internal beat ridden, For every writer reaching for knowledge forgotten or forbidden On every stage and page graced with a verse that needed to be written,

For every seasoned sage or first-timer faced with whatever it means to be a writer,

For every fabled poet telling fables,

For every identity shunning easy labels,

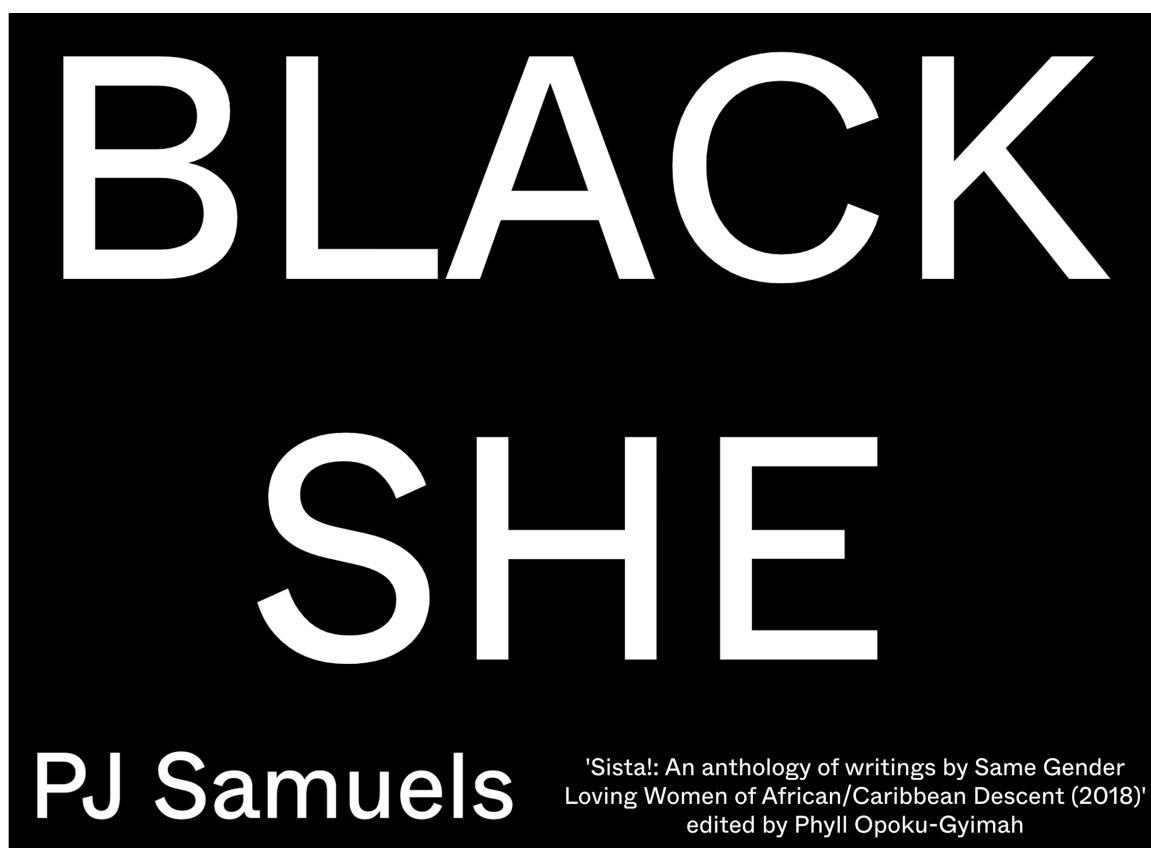
For every poem in every language under Babel!

For the poets who write for those unable.

For the poets who write to keep themselves stable. For the poets everywhere, and the poetry that got them there.

You know it, I know it, this is for the poets. (2016)

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BLACK SHE	I am tears on toilet	I am body for sex
Lather, rinse, repeat	I am anxiety	I am sex on legs
I am black baby girl born	I am body your fetish	I am sex in bed
I am nappy hair	I am body you sexualise	I am sex on the counter top
I am nigga pickney child	I am black girl dancing in	I am sex bent over a chair
I am head tough	white girl video I am body you	I am sex with boys
I am dark	commodify	I am sex with girls
I am old man's back pain	I am body too fat	I am sex with girls who fuck
I am water scratch	I am body occupy too much	like boys
I am isn't she beautiful though	space	I am sex with toys
I am salvation	I am body too dark	I am naked picture on your
I am prophesy	I am body cover it up I am	wall
I am chance	body take it off I am body take	I am notch on your bedpost
I am bootstrap you pull your-	it off now!	I am symbol
self up	I am body for your gaze	I am a lady wouldn't do that
by I am melanin daughter,	I am body for your hands	though
pretty for	I am body never my own	I am get on with it
a black girl I am pull and tug	I am body never right	I am dinner ready I am you're
I am war zone	I am body black	ugly
I am trauma	I am body black and blue	I am you're stupid
I am do as you're told	I am body beaten	I am no-one else will want you
I am sins and secrets	with your hands, your lips,	I am black eye at five I am
I am 4 a.m. broken	your lies, your whips I am	walk into doors
I am nervous tic	body contentious	I am fall down stairs
I am abdomen locked	I am body never simple	I am broken hand

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I am shattered femur	I am matriarch of black boys	I am put your back into it girl
I am missing teeth	dead	I am guilt and apologies
I am clumsy	I am coulda, woulda, shoulda	buried
I am accident	I am sorrow	I am elegy, platitudes
I am never again	I am bend and twist	I am too little too late
I am I love you	I am stretch	I am graveyard
I am you made me do this	I am fold in on myself	I am tomb
I am apology and regret	I am gripping belly pain	I am rest
I am take sleep and mark death	I am hymn at the funeral	I am woman
I am one hand wash the other	I am soliloquy	I am resurrection
I am dialogue interrupted	I am in bed for 6 days	I am woman
I am silence	I am mental health interven-	I am life
I am she asked for it	tion	I am woman
I am objectified	I am pathology	I am damn marvellous
I am water under your bridge	I am prescriptions	Lather rinse repeat
I am stereotype	I am self medicate I am the	I am black baby girl born
I am cliché	joke that hung around too	(Samuels, 2020)
I am childbirth	long, everyone had stopped	
I am messy things	laughing I am thank God I'm	
I am stretchmarks	not her	
I am happiness deferred	I am shame	
I am sleepless nights, terrified	I am carry the weight of the	
I am sing hallelujah and fin-	world	
gers crossed	I am meritocracy	
I am fervent prayers	I am token	

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Figure 2

PJ Samuels' piece was played on the loudspeaker as Niquelle LaTouche performed improvised movement to her words creating a powerful intergenerational dialogue on black womanhood. The first time these two women met was through their craft, their work carving space for their subjectivities—Niquelle physicalizing this notion by carving her way through the crowd as she began not on the stage but within the audience.

As lockdowns ease, we begin to visualize the world we carve space for with the words of poet and activist lisa luxx; who has since sat her letters down in an act of humility. Her name is newly uncapitalized as she is here for you, in service of you. Her piece, *I Want a Feminist Currency* imagines a radical new world of feminist self sufficiency. 'I Want a Feminist Currency' is featured in *Trust Your Outrage: a chapbook collection of poems by lisa luxx* about the body as a site of protest. Including pieces on the public lesbian experience, gender identity, mixedheritage inner conflict, and many issues of the womxn's movement, handled here with courage and faith.

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Figure 3. Video Still: Niquelle LaTouche performing to BLACK SHE at People's Protes. From Performance as Protest, Filmed by April Walker & Tierney Walker, August 2, 2020.

This chapbook was made in accordance with the 'economy of sisterhood', produced by Design, Print, Bind - a small, independent, and entirely women-powered print production studio. The aim of this chapbook is that those who benefit financially are feminists.' Description by lisa luxx.

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Figure 4. Artwork by Freya Rose.

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I WANT A  
FEMINIST  
CURRENCY

*lisa luxx*

2020

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I want my quid to go to Cherry down at the bakery working every Sunday to pay for therapy. I want my quid to go to the dyke with her white van and trowel, catering the young trans kid moving house again on the weekend. I want my quid to go to the Syrian mother making halloumi from an ice cream vat after finally getting leave to remain in a country that blames her. I want my quid to go to the soap-maker sis, brewing potions in an old mill after quitting her job in management because of harassment. I want my notes crushing into the palm of aunties selling Sari's on their Saturday market stall. I want my pounds in the pockets of barmaid babes, who's degrees got them nowhere since the spelling of their name gave ethnicity away. When I spend money I've earned working twice as hard as my male counterpart, I want it to be passed on to another grown adult woman with acne as her sin for trying to survive the stress of this pressure cooker we're in. I want these pennies I get passing on next to the Nigerian daughter giving half her wage to her single mum. If we have to spend, let it end up with the wife still working tirelessly at 71 while her retired husband watches golf. I want our own currency for survivors, self-healers, for the ones who live and learn. I want our own currency that can't be spent on brands unless they're women-owned, hiring women staff on fair wage & all that. I want the drop-out carrying a pack of cards to build the bones of our own economic system. After forking out on expensive taxi rides by night (life and death a daily bet), after long WhatsApp group chat days (text me when you get home safe), all while hustling to score a small wage—we need a currency that stays within the sisterhood. A local quid for the trafficked, for the Magdalene's, for the dinner lady who put me in isolation after I nipped Harry until he bled. I want to know why my grind lands like another grain of sand on private beaches of the Bezos and the Epsteins, the Charles and the Harveys. And why I was always taught astrology and never economy. Always magic, and never power. (Luxx, 2020)

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**Y'ALL BETTER  
QUIET DOWN**

*Sylvia Rivera, 1973*



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We now return to the beginning with a text and a person who inspired the creation of QS: Y'all Better Quiet Down, by Sylvia Rivera.

We thought about Sylvia Rivera when dreaming up Queering Space. As a seminal figure in queer liberation, Rivera is the epitome of a person who carves space in the face of violent institutional structures intended to oppress the intersectional body. A brief history:

52 years ago the police would raid the Stonewall Inn (Greenwich Village, New York, USA) night after night. The inn was a gay bar and safe haven for the community at a time when queerness was illegal. Until one day two trans women had enough. Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera fought back, and so began the Stonewall Riots. Queers from all over the city flooded in to join the fight for queer liberation.

The first Pride Parade followed, and was a protest. At this protest organizers attempted to stop Rivera from taking the stage. When she fought her way on, the crowd boo'd. The subsequent speech she gave is a seminal speech in Queer History and is titled Y'all Better Quiet Down.

Sylvia Rivera was unwavering in her work for her community; we thought of this when founding QS. We thought of the hits she took; of how she was evicted from her home for being trans. Of how she could not find a job because she was trans. Of how she faced transphobia from within the community she fought for. Of how she was swept from the piers in NYC as a result of gentrification.

We thought about STAR, an organization founded by Rivera and Marsha P Johnson that provided shelter and food to LGBT youth. We thought about queer houses and the act of gathering, nurturing, and elevating. And we imagined: What would a radical carving of space look like?

BLACK SHE

I've been trying to get up

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here all day, for write I have lost my apartment.  
your gay brothers and your STAR, not the women's For gay liberation.  
gay sisters in group. They do And you all, treat me this  
jail. They write me every not write women. They do not way?  
motherfuckin' write men. What the fuck's wrong with  
week, and ask for your help, They write to STAR because you all? Think  
and you all we're trying about that!  
don't do a god-damned thing to do something for them. I do not believe in a revolution, but you all  
for them. I have been to jail. I have been do. I believe in the Gay Power.  
Have you ever been beaten up, raped and I believe in  
and raped, beaten many times by men, us getting our rights, or else I  
and jailed? heterosexual would not be  
Now think about it. men that do not belong in the out there fighting for our  
They've been beaten up and homosexual rights.  
raped. And shelter. But do you do any- That's all I wanted to say to  
they have had to spend much thing for them? y'all people.  
of their No! You all tell me, go and  
money in jail to get their self hide my tail  
home and try between my legs. If you all want to know about  
to get their sex change. I will no longer put up with the people  
The women have tried to fight this shit. that are in jail - and do not  
forget  
for their sex I have been beaten. Bambi l'Amour, Andorra  
changes, or to become women I have had my nose broken. Marks, Kenny  
of the I have been thrown in jail. Messner, and the other gay  
Women's Liberation, and they I have lost my job. people that are

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in jail - come and see the people at STAR

House on 12th Street, on 640 East 12th

Street between B and C, apartment 14.

The people who are trying to do something

for all of us and not men and women that

belong to a white, middle-class, white club.

And that;s what y'all belong to.

## REVOLUTION NOW!

Give me a G!

Give me an A!

Give me a Y!

Give me a P!

Give me an O! Give me a W!

Give me an E!

Give me an R!

GAY POWER!

Louder!

GAY POWER!

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(Rivera, *Y'all better quiet down -Issuu*, 2019)

In the Spirit of a return to our beginnings, we return to a transcript from the final performance of the first Queering Space: We The Enemy.

We The Enemy is a call to action—it's a confrontation and an invitation; it asks of us to remember and never to repeat. Atabey's performance in an intimate room on the final day of the first Queering Space gathering silenced us. It simultaneously placed us deeply within our own bodies and our queer histories. We The Enemy... is one part of the SPIT! Manifesto Reader, a selection of historical and contemporary queer manifestos created for Frieze Projects 2017 by Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero aka Atabey.

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Figure 5. Atabey performing *We The Enemy*. From The London Summit, Hackney Wick, November 2018. Photo by: Bex Wade.

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We the sodomites, the perverts, the inverters, the faggots, the deviants, the queers, the keepers of spoiled identities, the tibadists, the promiscuous, the popper sniffing fist fuckers, the bottoms and the tops, the vers, the queens and the fairies, the nellies, the nancies and the fannies, the lady boys, the butch lesbians, the leather angles, the dykes, the daddies and the bulldaggers, the crossdressers and the drab queens, the auntie men, the Kikis, the trannies, the celesbians, the clones, the dykes on bikes, the sissies, the bone smugglers, the muscle marys, the jocks, the twinks, the bears and the otters, the sex pigs, the handballers, the gym queens, the hung, the carpet munchers, the pussy punchers, the fudge packers, the fruits, those who are light in the loafers, those who have sugar in the tank, the cocksuckders, the daffies, the friends of Dorothy, the bent, the poofs, the poofers, the buggers, the Uranians, the pillow biters, the sisters of Sappho, the silver foxes, temperamental, the homophiles, the masters and the slaves, the tatted and pierced queens, the tightly bound, the lavender menace, the pansies, the go-go boys, the hustlers, the trades, the chapstick lesbians, the lucky Perries, the rough trades, the lacies, those who are queer as a three dollar bill, the mother superiors, the ring snatchers, the kissing fish, the tinkerbelles, the Ursulas, the vampires, the punks, the agfays, the ass bandits, and the butt pirates, the beefcakes, the yard boys, the Zanies, the muff divers, the golden boys, the ten percenters, the sperm burpers, the boys in the band, the disordered, the dysfunctional, the diseased and the destructive, the bitches, those on the down low and the low down, the drag kings, the Tammies, the he-shes, the fishy girls, the cunts, the cut and the uncut, the bum bandits, the lipstick lesbians, the hard and the soft butches, the flammers, the gender benders, the butt huggers, the chicken hawks, the femme, the fuck boys, the gaylords, the masc for mascs, the no pic no chats, the tranny chasers, the homos, the baby dykes, the gold stars, the gender queers, the pillow princesses, the studs, the bug chasers, the barebackers, those who PnP, the campy queens, the sword swallows, the confirmed bachelors, the members of a Boston marriage, the shims, those who read Playboy for the articles, the Rosies, the people

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who are battling for the other team, the AIDS carriers, the undetectables, the pozzies, those on PrEP, the weak and morally sick wretches, the deplorables, the sinners, the hedonists, those with the aristocratic vice, those who enjoy the bourgeois decadence, the Catamites and the Calamites, the cake eaters, the chubby chasers, the midnight cowboys, the daffodils, the feys, the Ganymedes, the limp-wristed, the salad tossers, the ponces, those who are swishy, those of the reprobate mind, the hermaphrodites, the chicks with dicks, the chemsexers, the bearded ladies, the serodiscordants, the heartthrobs, the theatrical types, the admirers, those who aren't 'clean', the freaks, the cum guzzlers, the cumdumps, the tea dancers, the momma's boys, the hot messes, the batty bois, the degenerates...are and always will be the enemy. (Atabey, 2019)

## Where do we go from here?

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