

SABINA MCKENNA

art workr.

Art Workr #2 Mystical Sweetie

July 23, 2018





Mystical Sweeties is the new 'closet run' podcast by writer and editor Tara Kenny, that explores all things witchy and 'woo-woo'.

Woo-woo is a term that she explains 'people often use to describe and dismiss anything that is spiritual and mystical, as irrational, naive and unfounded' and her interest in finding out why that is forms the basis of the themes and topics she explores with the guest speakers on the podcast; like [Intuitive healing with teacher and author Maryanne Sea](#).

Tara grew up in Melbourne, but is now based in New York where she works in advocacy for incarcerated youth, and as a staff writer at South Asian diaspora publication [Kajal](#). She has been published in The Guardian, Interview Magazine, Catalogue Magazine, Overland, Good Good Girl, and many more, and was the online editor for Melbourne women's collective and zine, Ladies of Leisure.

For ArtWorkr #2 we spoke about her grand plans for the Mystical Sweeties podcast, cleansing rituals, and the 'very New York' art of pitching yourself in the elevator.

SABINA — Hey Tara! What made you want to move to New York – apart from it obviously being an excellent place for a writer to live?

TARA — I originally came to New York back in 2013 to do a three month internship at Amnesty International and fell in love with the city. It was a very specific moment in time: I was 23, living with a member of a polyamorous love tribe, working my first meaningful job, and just felt this immense sense of openness and energy.

I convinced myself that I would never be happy anywhere else, then promptly went back home and kind of forgot about that dream, although properly building a life overseas was certainly in the back of my mind. Then last year my boyfriend decided to move here for grad school and I was kind of faced with an ultimatum. There was certainly a level of discomfort for me around the prospect of being a passenger on someone else's journey, but I also knew that this was an amazing opportunity for me, with or without the romantic relationship.

There are just endless potential realities to explore in New York (mine is still definitely a work in progress), which makes it a very entertaining place to pick up and move your life to.

SABINA —Definitely! So tell us about what you do for work and what you are passionate about?

TARA — People love to ask this question in New York, you really have to get good at elevator pitching the shit out of yourself!

I just started a new job as an advocate for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated young people in New York City. Currently these young people are predominantly held on the notorious Rikers Island prison, and the organisation I work for is concerned with getting them out of jail and assisting them to stay out and build meaningful lives. So far it's certainly been a lesson in the dark underbelly of the land of the free, but has also exposed to me many very smart and resilient people who have to navigate this system or are working to mitigate its damaging effects.

Creatively, I'm passionate about writing and storytelling that is playful and funny but also thoughtfully executed. At the moment I'm working on a podcast called **Mystical Sweeties** that explores spirituality through a self aware and humorous (but still woo-woo positive) lens, and also plan to develop the short satirical romance stories I've been working on this year into a more substantial work in the future. Using my writing to highlight the activism and art of people of colour by doing interviews is another passion, and it's also provided an avenue for me to connect with my internet heroes in this new land.

SABINA — Do you feel like writing gives you the tools to explore those things to the extent you'd like to (in terms of publications interested in publishing the work you want to write)?

TARA — At the moment I'm building a career in the nonprofit and social justice space, which means my writing is a true creative outlet and I don't need to be constantly pitching hot takes to big publications in the way I would be if I was a full time freelancer. It's been super exciting for me to have my writing published in outlets with large readerships like *Interview Magazine* and *The Guardian* in the last couple of years, but what I'm interested in writing at the moment is niche: smutty stories about love affairs between intuitive healers and bored office workers, and essays about my Sri Lankan grandma's superstitious ways... This kind of writing has led to me work with some very thoughtful and quirky smaller publications in the last year.

I'm currently a staff writer at South Asian diaspora publication *Kajal*, I've got a piece coming up in "new new age" publication *Muff Mag*'s body issue (their *Insta* gives me life), and I have some pieces I'm really excited about coming up on the *Sister Studios* blog.



SABINA — What prompted your interest in podcasting?

TARA — I've been writing for years and feel really comfortable with that medium, and wanted to extend myself to express ideas through a new platform. I've always considered myself bad at technical stuff – a very common misconception for women – and it's a confidence building exercise to realise how much I can do with patience and Youtube tutorials.

I have lots of experience doing interviews and then transcribing and writing them, but it's a whole different beast when you have to be aware of the way your voice sounds and keep the energy of a conversation up. I'm also super uncomfortable with my voice and think I have some kind of psychological blockage that affects my ability to express myself vocally, so podcasting forces me to practice articulating myself and literally speaking up.

I think it's a good exercise to experiment and put things out in the world while you're still learning once in a while, instead of always enlisting other people to help or waiting until something is perfect to share it. It's a good ego-leveller.

SABINA — There has been a lot of material that I have been listening to about spirituality, as it pertains to things like astrology, mysticism and witchcraft. It is definitely being revisited at the moment in media, popular culture, and even by big corporations like Urban Outfitters who were recently stocking spell books. A lot of the discussion around it points to it being such a deeply feminist thing (kind of just by default because it involves women and power), but also because of the history. What do you like/think is important about it?

TARA — I've always been low key drawn to the idea of spirituality and astrology but never really bothered to go beyond magazine horoscopes, but in the last couple of years after spending time in Sri Lanka I've become specifically interested in Sri Lankan superstitious traditions and folklore as a way to understand my own heritage. This then led into deeper explorations of other spiritual and mystical traditions.

What I really want to explore through Mystical Sweeties and believe there is a space for, is contemporary manifestations of spiritual fulfilment. As in, maybe many of our generation feel disconnected from organised religions, and don't want to read The Secret like our mums, but still have this deep need for meaning and a connection to something greater than ourselves. Things like astrology memes and experiential sound baths are a contemporary answer to that age old need, and I find that very interesting. Of course it was inevitable that this recent wave of interest in witchcraft and spirituality would be co-opted by the likes of Urban Outfitters, but the nexus of spirituality and capitalism is also fascinating and nothing new.

SABINA — Do you have an ideal vision for the podcast, in terms of expanding it or who you'd like to feature?

TARA — For now I'm just going to focus on improving my recording, editing and interviewing skills over the next handful of episodes. I'm excited to explore South Asian folklore with poet **Manisha Anjali** in July, then I want to do episodes on accessing your subconscious through dreams and hallucinogens, and something on Internet and meme magic. Also I want you to come on and school me about cleaning rituals so I can keep my damn room clean.

If I'm still feeling it after that I will invest in getting it in front of a bigger audience by getting a logo designer and posting it someplace other than my humble Instagram. I had a hilarious conversation with my boyfriend about how I should do an episode where we cast a hypersigil to get more people to listen to the podcast, so maybe I'll do that and it'll go viral and I won't have to bother about the marketing!





 Sabina McKenna  Comment

 Mysticism, Astrology, Spirituality, Tara Kenny

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Art Workr #1 Content Warning by Jo Pugh

July 13, 2018

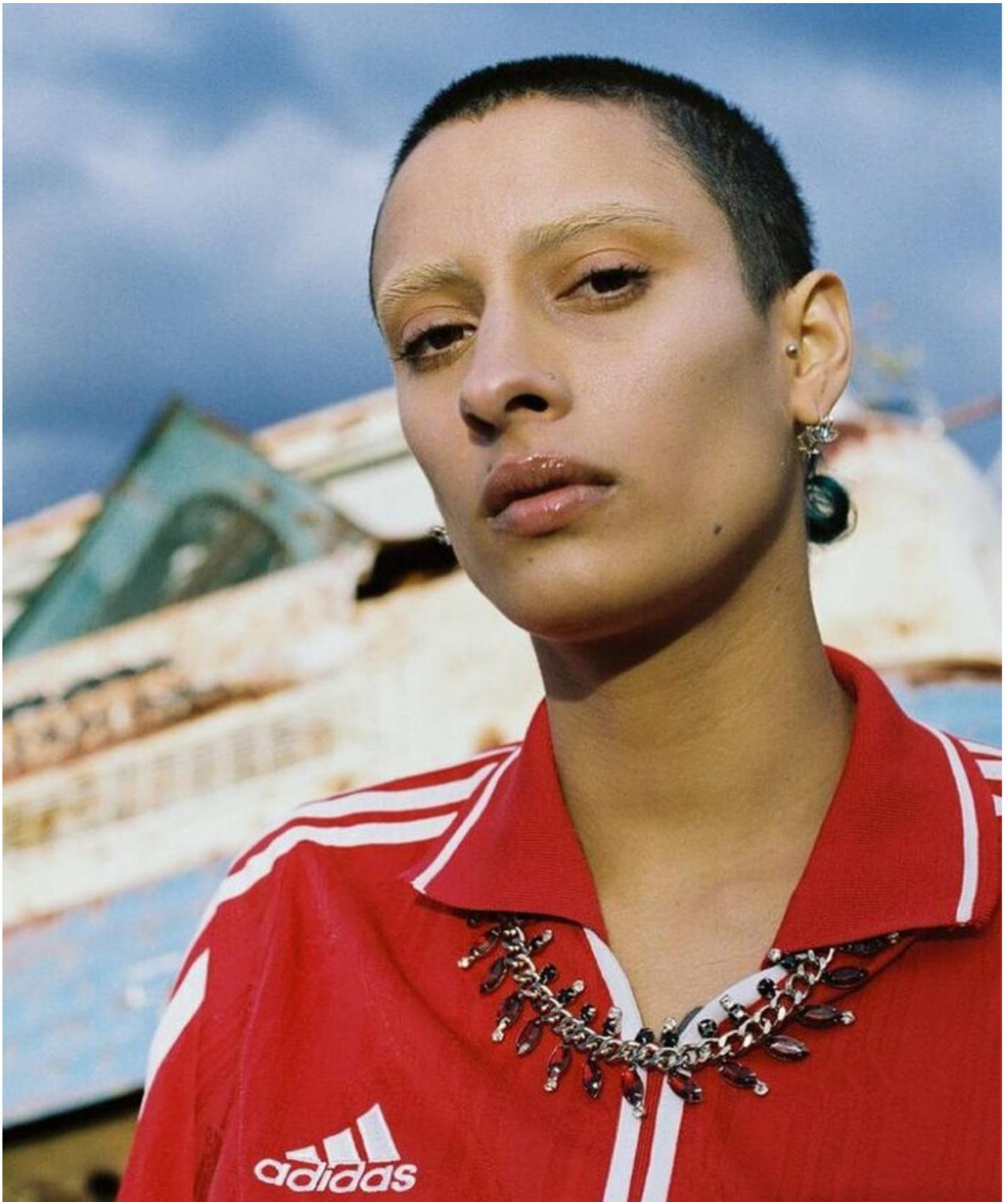
Gender and identity are at the centre of Naarm (Melbourne) based creative, Jo Pugh's, work.

As a non-binary artist of colour the nuances of these themes pertain closely to their day-to-day experience, and they have explored that throughout their career using various mediums that include writing and public speaking.

This year they took their first venture into visual art, resulting in the creation of a mixed media work called *Content Warning*, which interrogates the everyday use of words that can function to harm. On display in a group show called Word Art, at Brunswick Street Gallery, until the 15th of July.

For Art Workr #1 we discussed the motivations behind *Content Warning* in detail, and it's relationship to their creative work thus far.

CW: mental health, abuse, rape, ableism, misgendering, racism, erasure



Sabina—Hey Jo, tell me a bit about what you do?

Jo—I am a writer and editor based in Naarm, where I study Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT.

I usually write narrative nonfiction, but over the past few years I begun to write fiction as well. My writing draws heavily from my experience as a queer brown non-binary person, in the context of my upbringing in a very white and heteronormative part of regional Victoria - prior to having independence from my conservative family.

A few months ago I was experiencing a debilitating relationship with writing and my capabilities, with what felt like minimal support. My poor confidence combined with the invisibility of writing meant that I became pretty jaded.

I had never explored writing in visual forms or mediums and a friend passed on details of a submissions callout for a text-based show to be called Word Art, that was curated by Brunswick Street Gallery in Fitzroy. I thought about it and I decided I would submit something. I had no idea how to make anything; print anything for visual forms of art; get anything framed, and it feels weird and strange to have this piece in the show, but I'm grateful for the support from my friends, and for my pursuit of the project.

Sabina—I'm grateful for it too, it's a great piece of work. Can you tell me what Content Warning is about?

Jo—Yeah so *Content Warning* responds to the use of everyday language and phrasing, and also the censorship thereof. The group show is running from June 29 until July 15.

~~anal~~ / pedantic

~~guys~~ / people

~~girl~~ / woman

~~dumb~~ / silly

~~person~~ / white person

~~he/she~~ / they

~~riot~~ / protest

~~prostitute~~ / sex worker

~~victim~~ / survivor

~~sexual assault~~ / rape

~~race~~ / identity

~~Australian~~ / coloniser

~~diverse~~ / inclusive



Sabina—So I've seen the piece, but for those who haven't can you please describe it?

Jo—Of course, language determines a large part of the way the world is perceived - through the lens in which it is represented. Conceptually, *Content Warning* was conceived very quickly. I'm constantly interrogating the language I use daily and over the past few years I have become far more inclusive and aware of how some language ingrained in us is derogatory - *Content Warning* is an extension of this.

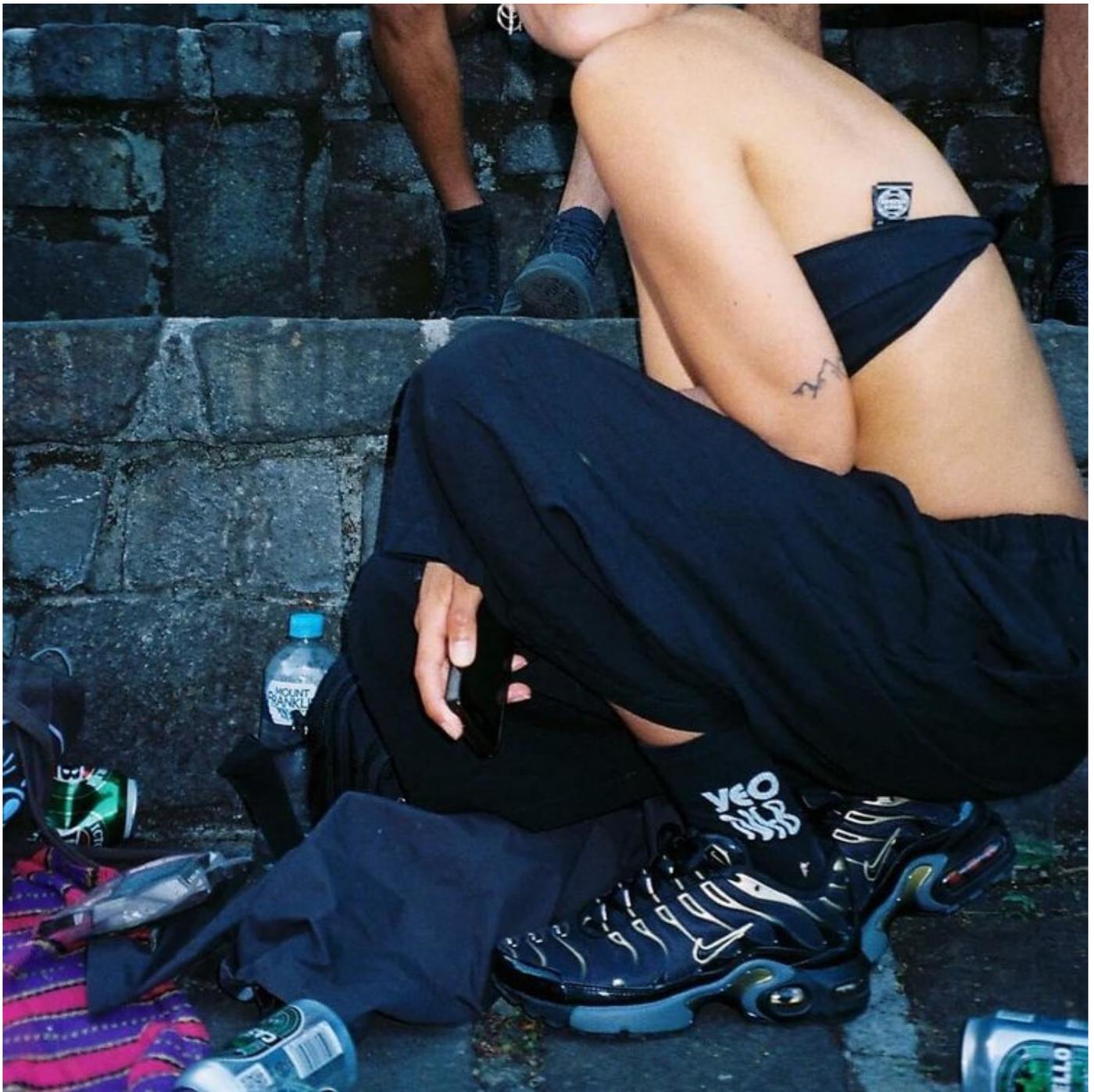
The language in the piece is the stuff that is so normalised; that is most difficult to break from. It requires effort, awareness and self-criticism. *Content Warning* can be seen as having two parts: the front, which acts as a cover or a curtain, and the inner that makes it interactive for the viewer. The cover of the work, which also includes the title - *Content Warning* - reflects my belief in the use of content warnings, whereby, the content or words are potential triggers for negative emotional responses, which exist as a result of trauma.

With a content warning people only engage with the piece if they wish to, if in that moment they don't the words will not trigger; viewers can be passive or active at their discretion. Due the Perspex material used they can literally see themselves reflected in the work, which can transcend to their relationship to the words included. Censoring takes power and autonomy away from the viewer by forcing them not to engage.

The piece takes the form of editorial notes to an author, on a kind of manuscript under assessment. The editor's words are the printed ones - presented in font that suggests authority, power and an institutionalised voice, which I have then corrected using copy editing markup - presented in red.

The discourse represented by the words varies in significance. Some of the words are not actually incorrect, rather they erase a full and complex identity through the word acting as the label. With the copy editing corrections, *Content Warning* acts in protest to censoring of language and to common phrasing that is reductive, assumptive, erasing and ostracising or that softens and makes experiences more palatable for those who are not a minority. The interventions are a workshopping of mainstream values. By combining authoritarian copy editing markup and the use of graffiti pen, I am acting both in vandalism and in assessment, creating new words in protest that are validating, non-derogatory and inclusive.





Sabina—I found that aspect of *vandal vs. assessor* in the work so powerful, because of the way ‘vandal’ associated with the red ink, it assumes that something inflammatory has occurred; people often perceive the interaction of being called out as inflammatory. It serves as a really important example of the ways in which aggressions can inadvertently (or blatantly) occur because of problematic language. Is there a time you can remember this kind of thing affecting you the most and how you responded to it?

Jo—Some of the words that are included in *Content Warning* are not necessarily words that I have a personal connection to - they are words that mainstream and institutionalised voices use - so inherently I reject them. I have attempted to be as inclusive as possible, however I acknowledge that *Content Warning* is a non-exhaustive list. Having an intersectional mindset, I am always thinking about people who experience ostracism

and judgment due to being a minority group. My personal experiences as a person of colour who has experienced sexual trauma, and as a non-binary person link me directly to the words representing these experiences. Because of my experiences my body and mind are political - I am forced to be. A good example is the way in sexual violence is referred to. The media often refers to 'sexual assault' with terms like 'sexual abuse' when really the appropriate term is 'rape'.

What constitutes rape is controlled by institutions and is not easily inclusive of experiences of rape that are outside of the definitions of that defined by cisgendered males and females, so the experiences of rape and other sexual violence to queer and non-binary people, or those that occur in a non-heteronormative context are reduced.

Another example of one that comes up very regularly is the use of gendered pronouns. My preferred pronouns are they/them, but it is difficult to enforce these due to the ignorant nature of historical and institutionalised vocabulary - which excludes the experiences of queer people and those who exists outside of cisgender paradigms. For *Content Warning* I presented in the authoritarian text (in red): 'her/him' - which is not incorrect, but is loaded with assumption - with the intervention: 'them' which has no assumptions. When applied in everyday discourse and interaction 'them' can be corrected if necessary by or on behalf of the person in question depending on their preference, without harm.

It is my belief and practice that we should not assume anyone's gender and I do this myself by always using non-gendered pronouns. When I hear someone misgendering another person whose preferred pronouns I am aware of, I will always interject with the correct pronoun and the conversation continues as it was before. Sometimes I lack the confidence to correct people when I am misgendered and it can be really difficult to navigate, because it renders my relationship with my own gender invalid.





Sabina—Yeah I agree that everyone should use ‘they’ and never assume. Do you think it is important for it to be called out, both via our creative mediums - like your artwork - but also just generally in everyday interactions?

Jo—I think the idea of ‘calling out’ is triggering for some people and has negative connotations because of the way it can occur. Sometimes it’s very public and aggressive and other times it is subtle and private - I think both have their purpose.

On a very basic level, calling out is just showing someone another perspective in the hope that it encourages empathy. It is for self-reflection, for growth - both personal and on a larger scale - and for accountability. These are very big and vague ideas but for me, but they are the broad principles. One can call themselves out too and discuss with friends - I do this a lot. We could all do with being a bit more inclusive and sensitive with our our language.

Jo Pugh is a Fijian-Indian writer, public speaker and visual artist working in text-based mediums and based in Naarm (Melbourne). They are currently undertaking RMIT's Professional Writing and Editing course, they have been published in Visible Ink and spoke with at the Where Are You From? storyboard launch and exhibition, held at Blak Dot Gallery in March this year. They are a featured artist in the Word Art exhibition at Brunswick Street Gallery - which runs until July 15 - and recipient of Seventh Gallery's 2018 Emerging Writer's Program.

 Sabina McKenna

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An Interview with designer Jess McKie, the designer of Sködia from her studio in Brooklyn.

March 25, 2017



The Melbourne born designer of unisex basics label Sködia recalls a lifetime of being dressed like her twin brother as how it all began. Her very first collection, 'Yes', released in the fall of 2014, was an original blend of stylized sports and lounge wear offered in the "quintessential shades of Melbourne": black, gray and white. The line also featured quirkier basics, such as mohair beanies and handmade scarves. knit by Jess's Mum at home in Australia. This year's Fall Winter 15 collection 'Maybe' stays true to Sködia's trademark minimal aesthetic, but with added seasonal refinements, like draped silhouettes and asymmetrical hemlines, for layering and maximum warmth in NYC's coming colder months...

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