

The Future Is Now!



by Afro Rainbow Austria - ARA

A work of art by
Petja Dimitrova and
Afro Rainbow Austria - ARA
In the frame of *Archipelago*
Island of Unpredictable Thinking
Wiener Festwochen /
Into the City 2018



Thanks to: Asea, Abu, Celestine, Felix, Flo, Janet, Jeff, Yasmina, Henrie, Larry, Khalid, Ray, Samuel, Sophia, Nick and all members and friends of ARA. Engl. translation and proofreading of interviews: Lina Dokuzovic.
AfroRainbowAustria – ARA – is the first organization established by and for African LGBTIQ+ in Austria with the sole aim of creating a communicative and interactive platform. We aim to create awareness on the lives and plights of LGBTIQ+ Africans in the Diaspora and on the continent as well. <https://afrorainbow.at>, office@afrorainbow.at, facebook.com/afrorainbow.

I left my country because I wanted freedom ... for my life ... because I'm a gay man.

I left because, I identify as a lesbian, and in Nigeria it's criminalized. So, when you are caught in an act or you identify as a lesbian, you are lucky to escape from the mob, because they will beat you to death and burn you alive. If you escape the mob, you will be taken to the police station and finally to the court where you are charged with imprisonment.



I left my home country, because I'm a unique person, compared to the people and the girls in Somalia.

Because I'm homosexual. An LGBTQI person. Because I'm a lesbian, and because I didn't like life there. I simply felt alien in my home country. I always wanted to do what men did. I wanted to look like a man. I wanted to play football. I wanted to do everything.



I'm a gay, and if you are gay in Nigeria, you are in danger, because you don't know what is going to happen in the next days. That's the reason why I left my country to come to Europe. I ran out. First I ran away to the church I was going to, to the pastor there... he said "It's ok, I will protect you." And only because my pastor protected me... he kept me in the church. They were looking for me and they burned down our house.



I left my country, Cameroon, because I've had problems with my sexuality. As a gay, as a homosexual, it's really risky. By law, by the people around you, by the people you are living with. You know, they look at it like... witchcraft, occultism... They don't believe it's something normal.



I expected things in Austria to be more similar as I have known them. That would be a melting pot like it is in London or in France, or like in Senegal – because I'm half Senegalese, half French – where people are just mixed together, which wasn't the case. And also everybody would have the same job opportunities, but yes... it's a different story in Austria.



I was young. I was always AHEAD. I was always online, researching, looking for reasons – why I felt alien as a girl in my home country. Then I found out that there's a whole world full of people like me. So I wanted to leave some day. I didn't plan to come to Europe, but I wanted to go somewhere where I could lead a better life.

I must say, when I came to Austria, I embraced freedom and liberty. I can live my life as a gay person. But there are also people here that are not ok with homosexuality, with gays. So, I can say there are places where I can get harmed. Even the authorities could get involved. About authorities...

I'm still scared, because I experienced harsh and poor treatment by my own authorities back home.



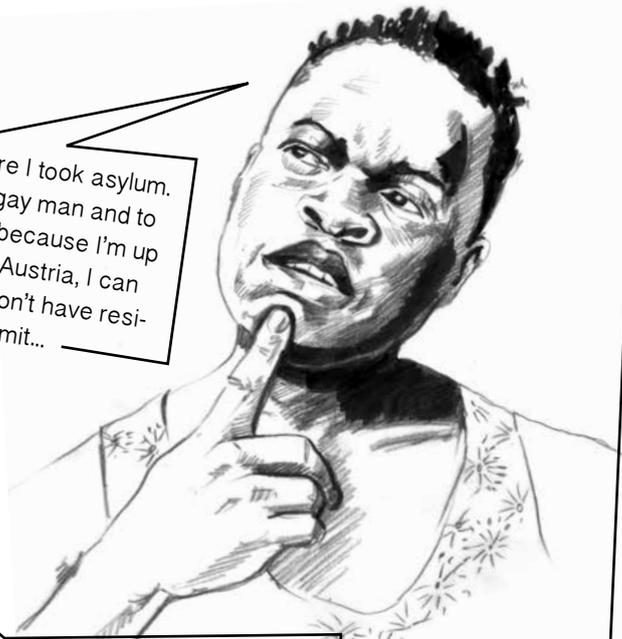
So my dream is to get finally to a place where I'm safe and can live out my sexuality freely, and to love.

And for now... as I'm always alive and keep dreaming... so I keep dreaming. I'd actually like, in the future, to fall in love again with a woman and to get married... and here it was recently approved legally to get married. I could marry a woman here. And yeah, living in a home...

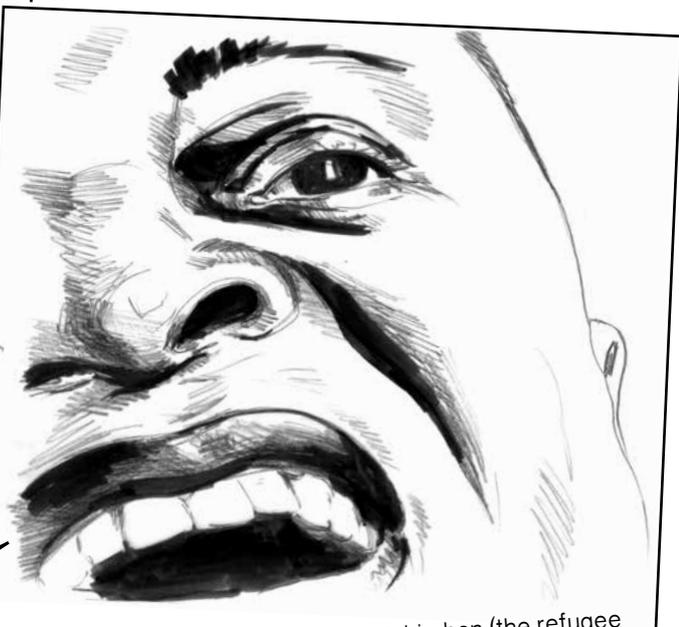


I hoped this place would be a nice place to secure me. My life, really, my life is the most important to me, and I don't care, because I know I'm gay, and God created me that way. God is going to set it for me, because I'm living in Austria.





It's the place where I took asylum. To live free as a gay man and to live in peace. And because I'm up to 9 years now in Austria, I can move freely, but I don't have residence permit...



It's stressful, really stressful, because I was coming to Europe to live my life. I wish to finish my BA degree and make a life. But for almost 3 years now, my status has tied me down. I cannot do anything. I can't even go to school. The whole situation is somehow traumatizing me. It's because of the asylum. For more than a year, since I had my last interview, I'm still waiting for the result, but there is no result.

Years ago I was seeking asylum. But the time I went to Traiskirchen (the refugee camp), I was afraid, because many Blacks were there. Nobody knows who is who, and going to do... Then I got a problem with my asylum, and I went back to tell the authorities I'm a gay. But they didn't accept it, because I didn't tell them initially. If you look at me and see my appearance, you will know I'm gay, but... I got negative.

Actually, when I came here, I was afraid of coming out... I mean, saying I was a lesbian in front of the translator. I only received subsidiary protection... that's only for one year. Afterwards, when I turned 18, I fortunately met a family through "connecting people," and they took care of me. We filed a second request for asylum with a lawyer and had a second interview in Traiskirchen. Then I received a positive asylum response. Convention Pass.



Yeah, you know queerness is a fight.

A fight, because you are struggling to have your rights. It's not a issue of bread and butter. It's always a challenge and being challenged. Always a fight. To be in an asylum process is not easy, because you have to answer a lot of questions. And you don't know your fate... your destiny. Will they believe my story? How long will it take? And after your story is believed, and you're free to live in this land, then you think back about your first love. You would say "had my country accepted me, I would be together with my first love."

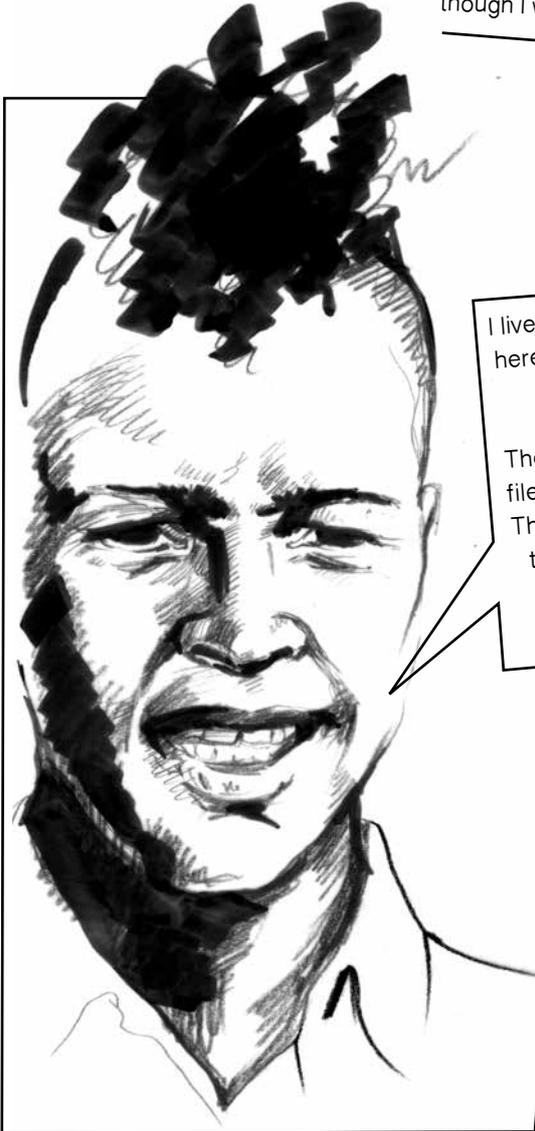


Well, I cannot say I'm free, because I'm not free. For 9 years, I'm still fighting for asylum. All the time, I'm so scared for my life. I feel depressed, because I was fighting for my freedom, but I cannot decide for it. There are other people who decide about my freedom. I think I'm really really hoping for a future... that they will decide for my freedom ... to be a gay man here in Austria. After many years I came to realize... well, I think I have to come out. This is what I want. This is a country where there is freedom for me to be out, to date people, to go out with them, to go to clubs with friends... Well, I don't really know why for all these 9 years... because when I came, the first year I didn't let them know about being gay, because I was afraid. And because after the first and second negative (decisions) that happened within a year, I collapsed. Later I re-applied for asylum again. I went with my boyfriend to Traiskirchen. They gave me a negative (reply) and a paper that I have to go to the police every 5 days to get a signature. I showed every proof to them to make them know who I am. They should believe me. This is who I am. Until now, until today, I showed them every proof, but for 9 years now we are still pushing with proofs... I don't know. I'm really, really hoping (for a positive reply), because for these 9 years, I got 4 or 5 negative replies... or 6? I have forgotten.



What I need for a good life is to have a job and to have a community, which there is with ARA and other people as well. Just the basics. Just a place to live, where I feel safe. Well, because of the elections last year, I could feel in the streets... the way some people were looking at me, which didn't make me feel very safe. I think the political situation here doesn't make me feel very safe... I think the most important is when it comes to the Black identity, after then the LGBTQI+ ... I think this is secondary, although it is very important to me, which is one of the reasons I cannot live in Senegal, though I want to, but in Europe.

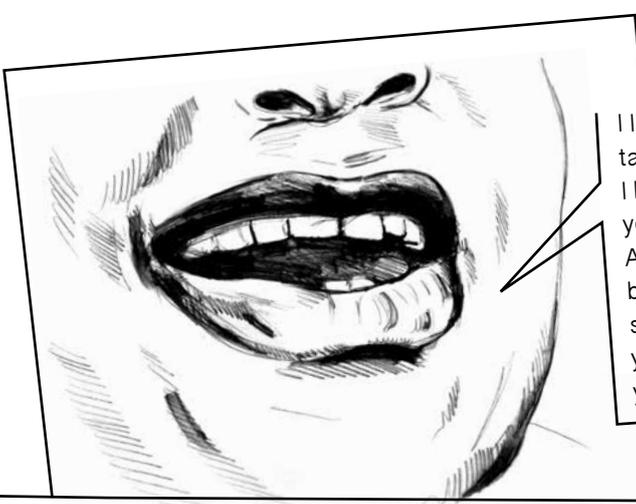
The most important is my Black identity, because everybody can see that I'm Black, but not everybody can see I'm a lesbian.



I live well here. At the same time, I don't live so well, because there is pressure from my people here. Somalian people... they can't accept at all that I'm gay. They talk about the Muslim religion, but it's not the religion at all. It's rather the culture, tradition, and family values. They say one cannot be lesbian or gay. It's a "sin." There are millions of problems, constant threats – on the phone, on Facebook, in person. I've filed a lot of complaints, but it hasn't helped... I live the way I want. I won't hide. I am what I am. They attack me and say I should be nearer to them... ok, I love my community, my home country, my people, but unfortunately there's one thing they want from me that I can't give them. I want to be ME. Of course we're very afraid. Two of my friends were injured. I've also been attacked and injured. But together we are strong, and we hope that we'll win one day... that they'll accept us one day.

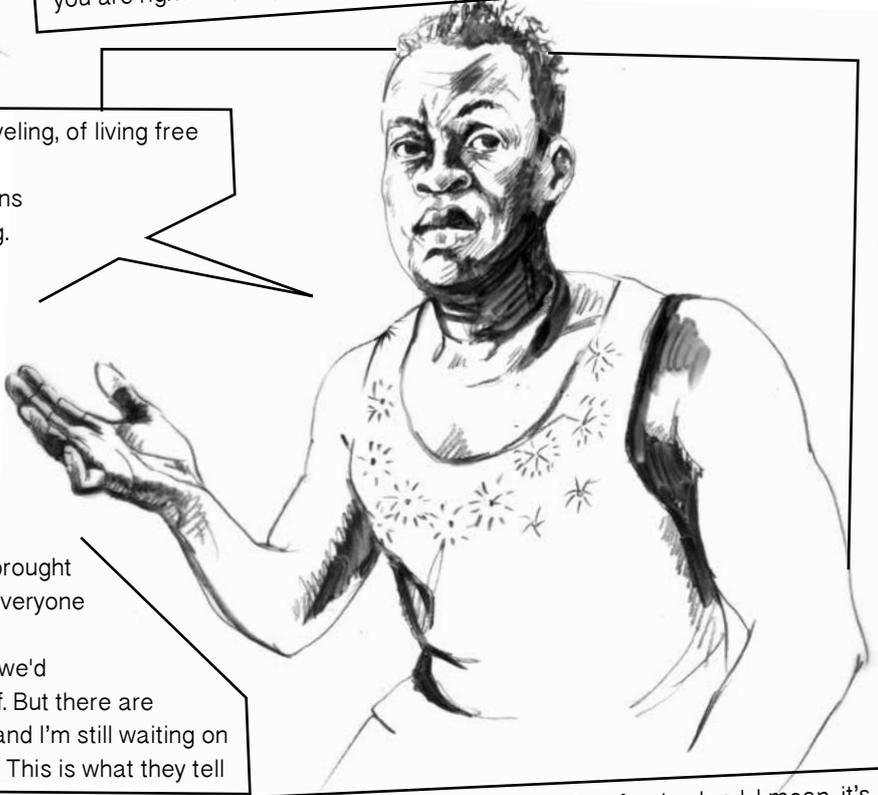
So far I'm just stuck in the situation. I just have to wait as long as they want to take. And it means a lot. If I'm looking to it, I was coming to Europe, or where I am here, for safety, and to move on with my life. I was not coming to get stuck in a particular place and situation. I can say I don't have the focus. I don't have the zeal. I'm really really stressed with the whole situation, and also scared, because... Like deportation, if they say "we'll deport you"... if they want to deport me now, it is like they are sending me to a deadly zone.



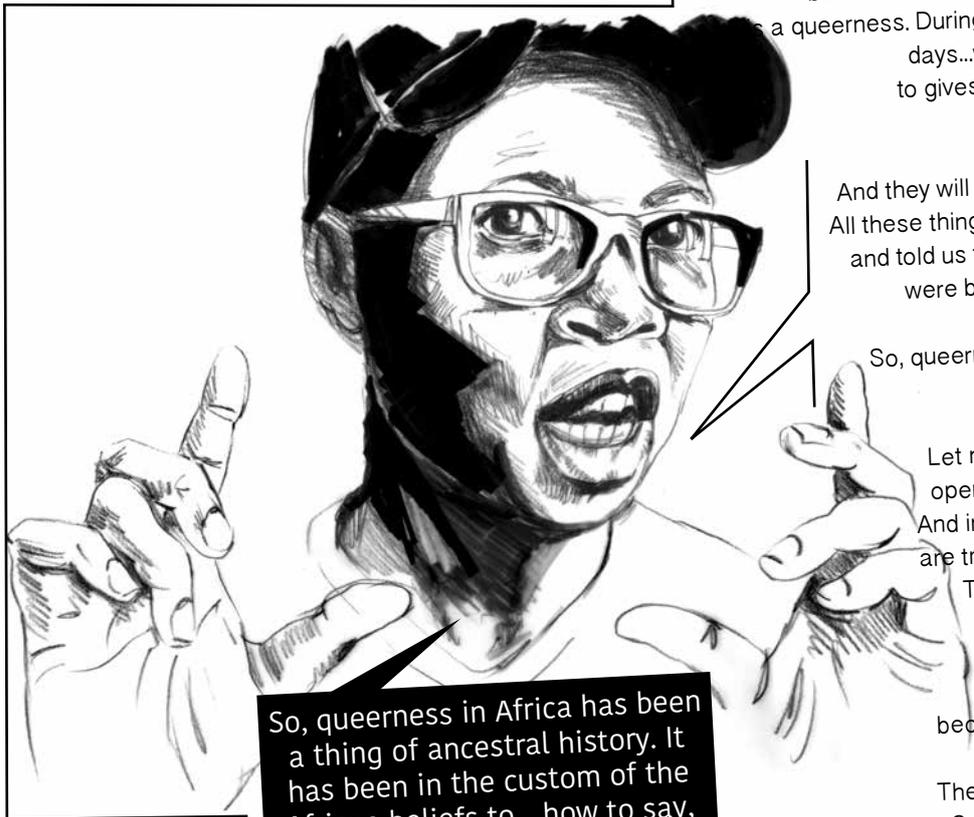


I live good here, because I'm working... with my documents, and I'm taking care of myself. So I'm living good in Austria, but the only problem I have is when you see the other Black people that are not gay... It's like, you are not part of this world, because you are a gay. Yes, they insult you. And my dream maybe in the future is to have a baby. Yes I'll have my own baby. A lady asked me a question if I have children. I said "no," and she said: "It doesn't matter if you are gay or not. If you want to have children, you can have children." Those words are in the back of my head. Yes, you are right. OK, I'll plan it, because I don't know tomorrow.

My dream is just – to visit friends. The freedom of traveling, of living free and having a 100% life to live.
 Most of my friends in Germany are also gay – Nigerians living in Germany, they come here to Vienna for visiting. Even from Italy, Sweden, Belgium, some are from Cameroon... But whenever they come, they ask me "Ray, for how long are you in this country?" "I'm getting to 9 years here." "And you cannot travel?" "You haven't traveled in all these years out of Austria?" "No, I cannot." They didn't understand this. I have to explain to them "I'm an asylum (seeker)... for so many years". Some don't know what is asylum. "I'm a refugee here." So I brought my white card (asylum document) to show them. Oh, everyone was shocked. They said: "Oh really? Ray, tut mir Leid, we are really sorry. If we had the strength to help you, we'd help you." Yes, if I had the strength, I could help myself. But there are people who have the strength and power to help me, and I'm still waiting on them... Yes, and so many Africans are also facing this. This is what they tell me, why they cannot come out.



A Black LGBTQI? Well, it's not easy to be Black in a foreign land. I mean, it's a struggle. Being African, and being queer. You know, when you think about back home in Africa, you will see that already in the system there is a queerness. During the time of my mother, my grandmother in those days...when a man marries a wife, and the wife is unable to give him a child, later, in order not to say that the man is marrying another wife,... the woman goes out and marries another woman of her choice. And they will not call it "the man's wife," but the "woman's wife." All these things stopped when they brought Christianity to Africa and told us that African religion is paganism, and a sin. People were brainwashed and gradually all these things became taboo and became seen as a sin. So, queerness in Africa has been a thing of ancestral history. It has been in the custom of the African beliefs to... how to say, to be queer.



So, queerness in Africa has been a thing of ancestral history. It has been in the custom of the African beliefs to... how to say, to be queer.

Let me put it this way... What is queer? It's an openness, open-mindedness, an acceptance, and all these things. And in a contemporary concept? We, the new age queer, are trying to bring to life the queerness that was blocked. They blocked us with Christianity and their doctrines, so we are breaking through and coming out to be who you are and having our lives. But the problem now is we are no longer free, because they brought the Christian and Islamic religion. The majority of politicians are into those religions. They make the laws, and these are against being queer. So, most of us who want to be free... we flee. If you are accepted (here) and they grant you asylum, you will survive and continue to live your life, and live and be in love. Who doesn't want to love and not be in love? That's what queerness is about.

I think queer... is just being who you are, whatever the skin color, wherever the origins, and yeah, being able to come together with people that have the same idea of life.



My concept of life is being alive. What is being alive? It means that you are existing. But to exist, you have to be present. To be present, you have to participate. For me the concept of life is to participate. And to participate is something that is contributive, something that is progressive... that constructs... organizes and brings something to life as a contribution.

What stops me from being a mother? Biologically I was born as a female. I came into this world with a female body. And then after giving a birth to a child I still feel that I'm not complete, I'm still not who I am. I can bring a child into the world, but I don't feel I'm a woman. I feel that I am a man. So I said: "No, this cannot stop me... you know, the stereotype of a woman who gives birth... but I feel... I go on, I'm living, I'll live my life to the fullest." I go and I'm starting my transition. I'll transition and become who I am, a trans man. My transitioning is not a hindrance to being a mother. So that's how I see it.



Yes, a queer African life is a "struggle".

I have to fight, because I'm a lesbian girl... because Somalia doesn't accept me for who I am. The Somalian community here too. It's not just like that for me, but many of the people who come from African countries... They just fight. But we always have the hope that other places accept us. That we all receive marriage equality... that makes us happy. Living here and feeling like a Somalian lesbian. But a lot of Somalian gays come, too. I'm not alone. That makes me very happy.

Queer is a battle cry. I think it's wonderful. Queer is... society. Struggle... and queerness. My dream is to have a woman I love, a child, or two, a good job, and to be able to help other migrants. That's my dream.

Well, my dream is also to achieve freedom from the government, to achieve traveling to other European countries, to know how queer people live there, how they live in London, Germany, Italy... I'm for 9 years in Austria, and I only know here in Vienna - no other place. I want to know queer lives in other places.



I'm a gay. So what? I cannot kill myself only because I am a gay. Yeah, I'm enjoying myself, but the people that are around... front and back, they are against me. I'm enjoying my life as a gay. If I want to have sex, I get it. This is the thing. I'm a free person.



Why I engage in ARA? Nobody is living as an individual. Nobody is an island. ARA is a collective. Four years ago, there was no ARA. Three years ago, there was no ARA. But today there is ARA. My motto was "never stop daring." Dare everything! Dare it! Because stopping daring, you will die.



The main goal of ARA is coming out for Black homosexuals. Some other Africans, even though the country and the laws here accept homosexuality, but others who are not homosexual, find it difficult to accept... In ARA, I'm associating with people of my kind, people who understand me, who know what being gay is and how it goes. I'm still a member of Queer Base and Rosa Lila Villa. First, we met in the Villa with some friends like Henrie. So we came up with the idea: Let's make a particular organization precisely for the Black homosexuals from Africa... for coming out... To make the system here understand that there are African homosexuals, because the system doesn't believe this.

I'm part of ARA, because, you know, it's a Black community. When I feel sad, maybe I'll be there to call someone to talk to me. When I'm with ARA we discuss, we laugh, we enjoy ourselves, we are free... We make fun, like "Oh, look at these homosexuals... see yourself..." We joke to get joy in our lives. We just make fun... "Sister, brother, how are you? ... Oh, single sisters..." like so. As part of ARA I want to stand strong, to bring people that are gay together. I know maybe you are afraid, or you have a problem. No, forget it. Come here. When you are here, you will get happy... in anything you are doing. I know ARA through the Villa. I'm there and they are the ones that stand for me in everything. I love the Villa. I love ARA.



So we just get together with people of african descent. And now it is becoming much more. It becomes a community. It's just the time to be together and be African. We all come from different countries in Africa, speak different languages, we have different religions but none of these things have been an issue. That's what's I found beautiful about it I mean, everybody has a different agenda when coming in. I'm trying to organize a mental health workshop. That's important for me, and also to make a short film about ARA. I was surprised to meet Henrie, because I thought "oh my god, I'm the only Black lesbian in Vienna," and that's how we started talking. And it's great, within six years of having the feeling of being the only Black African LGBTQ person, to move to a community.



The important thing of being part of ARA is that it makes me strong, because for 9 years here... something has to make me strong. If I see anyone from ARA, they support me: "You have to be strong." Then I get strong, and this is the important part for me. ARA, is to bring Africans out. To let them know: don't put yourself into a depression.

We're the first association of LGBTQ people from Africa. ARA is like my apartment. I feel safe. The people are my people, my family, friends. We organize events, parties, demonstrations, invite people to meet us and get together, so many people can get in touch. We get together, because if all LGBTQ people stick together, then we are strong. And so ARA is not only for Africans... the purpose is for LGBTQ people.



Oh, yes, about the tattoo...

it's also very... it's a kind of crime in our "religion." That's also why I was attacked... and in two weeks I had a new one. My next one will be an avocado. It's my favorite... hahaha... It means something among us lesbians...

Actually, Muslim queers tell me that it's haram, so it's forbidden. Why did I do it? Hellooo, I'll do anything for beauty... what I want... I want to tattoo my whole body... before summer comes... To have them everywhere...

