

**World-Making in Flux: Becoming Zahra Shahab's "Grief Eater"**

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In the summer of 2021, my friend, Zahra Shahab, a queer and mixed-race dance artist and choreographer, invited me to participate in a mentorship process and dance-on-film project titled *Grief Eater*. Incorporating elements of theatre, poetry, and costume & set design alongside contemporary dance, the film is a portrait of the fictional character of the Grief Eater, an embodied representation of living within and beyond the realm of depression. This multidisciplinary exploration of character building emerges from what Zahra named “body flux” - a practice that researches multiplicity, the fantastical, and “the prophetic power of coaxing our imaginations beyond the confines of white supremacy” (Shahab as cited in *Company 605*, 2021, para. 9). Through the embodiment of queering as an identity in flux, I argue that Zahra Shahab’s *Grief Eater* is an example of queer of colour world-making. In this paper, I will discuss and point to examples that specifically occurred within the research and development phases of the work, emphasizing how *Grief Eater* was a process, rather than product-focused project. In fact, the

footage of *Grief Eater* was never constructed into a finished film. Rather, the work lives on as an ever-emerging archive of raw explorations of embodied queer experimentation.

In the project, I undertook the role of the performer and writer, and was one of the three queer femmes of colour in the core artistic team alongside Zahra and her film mentor, Nancy Lee. In the beginning stages of the project, Zahra and I worked together in the dance studio to build movement sequences. Weaving in Zahra's dedication to spirituality, body flux was facilitated through meditations, which unfolded us into deep explorations of characters, producing movement that embodied and exaggerated their fantastical qualities. The practice of body flux and its application in *Grief Eater* recalls in certain aspects the art form of drag, and specifically, Vaginal Davis' work in using performance to "rehearse identities" (Lipsitz, 1994 as cited in Muñoz, 1997, p. 84) that are radically reimagined versions of non-normative figures in society. Although Zahra's work differentiates from Davis' by abstracting her characters to a point where they don't have distinguishable gender, race or sexual identifiers, I argue that she does engage with the way "Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by dominant culture" (Muñoz, 1997, p. 83). I suggest then, that queer of colour world-making can be defined as both the creative dreaming and actionable unfolding of taking space through multiplicity. It is a practice of recognizing and making space for all humans to live in their fullness by employing queering as an action that transcends identity. This definition emerges from the study of queer of colour critique as an "interstitial space" understood by Amy Villarejo as "making 'good on the understanding of normativity as variegated, striated, contradictory,' as the persistent tension 'between systematization and desire, between reason and affect, between the literal and the figurative...'" (Villarejo, 2005, p. 70 as cited in Eng, 2005, p. 6).

Zahra quite literally put world-making into practice by hand-crafting an elaborate costume and set design that created a world for the character of the Grief Eater to live within. As the performer in the work, wearing the costume and interacting with the set completely altered the way I danced the movement sequences we had created. In particular, I had to wear a black mesh mask that was adorned with metallic hanging zippers that drastically affected my ability to navigate the film set, which was further darkened through the use of lighting technology and pieces from the set design. From an external point of view, my usual identity that can be easily read as a young Chinese woman was hidden and replaced with the face of a dark and twisted monster. This character switch also changed my internal perception of myself, as it transported me to a place where I could let go of my socially constructed identity and instead, embody a darker side of me that had never previously been able to fully express itself. Body flux invoked a coexistence of contrasting qualities within my dancing body – the heightened tension of navigating and resisting an all-surrounding darkness, while taking pleasure in giving into a newfound agency to reconstruct myself. I argue that this felt multiplicity is an embodied expression of Villarejo (2005)’s articulation of normativity as “contradictory” and provides an example of the ways world-making can occur on both an intimate, personal plane and on a wider, external level.

*Grief Eater* was conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic – an event that has forced dance artists to come up with creative solutions in order to survive without the ability to perform in traditional venues. Addressing these needs, *Grief Eater* emerged out of Zahra’s desire to participate in a mentorship that would build new skills in documenting dance on film. I argue that this deliberate act of archiving embodied queer expression is an act of world-making. To document one’s body is to demand to be remembered and in this case, to forge a space for queer

expression within history. *Grief Eater*'s intention of specifically documenting one's trauma relates to how Elizabeth Freeman describes how "queer subjectivity and collectivity demand, and take as their reward, particularly inventive and time-traveling forms of grief and compensation" (Freeman, 2005, p. 58 as cited in Eng, 2005, p. 5). Freeman goes on to explain how the recognition of queer traumas can go hand in hand with the creation of queer utopias. Drawing from this argument, I contend that world-making can be thought of as an exercise in extending queerness across time and space, resisting against Western positivist notions that aim to measure and categorize existence through rigid, colonial systems. Queer of colour world-making is a process of living in boundless simultaneity - embracing the utopic and dystopic, the normative and the non-normative, and the past, present and future.

Zahra's archive of work feels particularly valuable, as this summer, almost a year after we wrapped up the process of *Grief Eater*, Zahra passed away. Her sudden passing opened a wound in the Vancouver dance community and struck many with the reality of life's fragility and the critical need to fortify structures of support and care in hopes to keep one another safe, especially those who experience marginalization. It seems rather contradictory to speak of futurity and world-making in the face of death, yet Zahra's practice seems to have created a framework to do exactly that. Her commitments to gathering community and creating safe spaces for queer dancers of colour to flourish have formed connections that are continuously weaving the very support systems we so desperately need.

I argue that *Grief Eater* in particular, speaks to how we can transform experiences of grief into pathways for healing by affirming the co-existence of one's multitudes. In the face of the unknown, Zahra encourages us to embody fluidity as we let ourselves be transported, holding the trust that we each already contain what we will need in our future journeys. I assert that this

encapsulates the core intentions of queer of colour world-making. As Zahra notes, “The only certainty is flux, a space somewhere between dissolution and emergence” (Shahab as cited in Springboard Performance, 2022, para. 2). It is in this described space and this process of healing that lies the seeds to birth alternative queer futures, grounded in Zahra’s values of embodiment, collaboration, and imagination. As Zahra’s spirit moves away from the physical world, she leaves behind a legacy of queer expression. I am honoured to have been a part of *Grief Eater* and to have experienced living in Zahra’s process of queer of colour world-making.



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