



ZOM-FAM

Kama La Mackerel

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BY KAMA LA MACKEREL

"This work will sing in my body and imagination for a long time. Probably forever."

—Jenny Heijun Wills, author of *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related. A Memoir*

In their debut poetry collection, Kama La Mackerel mythologizes a queer/trans narrative of and for their home island, Mauritius. Composed of expansive lyric poems, *ZOM-FAM* (meaning “man-woman” or “transgender” in Mauritian Kreol) is a voyage into the coming of age of a gender-creative child growing up in the 80s and 90s on the plantation island, as they seek vocabularies for loving and honouring their queer/trans self amidst the legacy of colonial silences. Multiply voiced and imbued with complex storytelling, *ZOM-FAM* showcases a fluid narrative that summons ancestral voices, femme tongues, broken colonial languages, and a tender queer subjectivity, all of which grapple with the legacy of plantation servitude.

Striking, vivid, tender, intimate, and political, *ZOM-FAM* is a beautifully wrought journey that articulates a contemporary decolonial poetics and offers a roadmap for colonized and displaced queer and trans voices to (re)imagine themselves into being.

ZOM-FAM emerges from a creative process in spoken word and live performance. The book’s sister theatre performance by the same name was originally scheduled at the MAI in Montreal last April and is now set to premiere Oct 6 – 10, 2020.

KAMA LA MACKEREL is a Montreal-based Mauritian-Canadian multi-disciplinary artist, educator, community-arts facilitator, and literary translator who works within and across performance, photography, installations, textiles, digital art, and literature. They have exhibited and performed their work internationally and their writing in English, French, and Kreol has appeared in publications both online and in print. They have lived in far-flung places such as Pune, India and Peterborough, Ontario. *ZOM-FAM* is their first book.

Kama’s work has been published in the Lambda Literary Award-winning anthology *Glitter & Grit: Queer Performance from the Heels on Wheels Femme Galaxy* (2015) and *We Mark Your Memory: writings from descendants of indenture* (2018). Their translation of Kai Cheng Thom’s *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* was published in French by Éditions Dents de Lion in spring 2019 and their co-translation of Vivek Shraya’s *I’m Afraid of Men* was published in French by éditions du Remue-Ménage in winter 2020. They are presently translating Kai Cheng Thom’s novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, which is scheduled for publication in Fall 2021.

ZOM-FAM: Advance Praise

In *ZOM-FAM*, Kama La Mackerel spins wondrous, powerful stories into a poetry that fills. There is so much pleasure in these pages, and much contemplation too ... about the things that sometimes make us feel in flux: gender, race, colonialism, kinship. A feat in artistry, their poetic touch here is both light and knowing. This work will sing in my body and imagination for a long time. Probably forever.

—**Jenny Heijun Wills**, author of *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related. A Memoir*

Kama La Mackerel's *ZOM-FAM* is a historic and important book— and a triumph. *ZOM-FAM* reminded me of things I needed to remember, and taught me things I needed to know. La Mackerel's re-memory of indentured femme travels across the kala pani to make a home brick by brick, their invocations and re-imaginings of divine Mauritian femme intimacies, secrets, mysteries, their recounting of colonial scars and their telling of the alchemy of their reject are crucially and beautifully told. La Mackerel writes with the whisper and shout of a genius storyteller, words that you won't soon forget.

—**Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha**, author of *Tonguebreaker, Dirty River, Care Work*, co-editor of *Beyond Survival*

ZOM-FAM is uplifted by Kama La Mackerel's years of intimate stage performance. They are an interdisciplinary artist who unquestionably knows how to summon their audience's close and venerated attention. These long-form poems offer highly engaged and unique modes of storytelling. Even on the page, one can hear La Mackerel's arresting anaphora, breathy rhythms and varied lyrical tempo; one can see their abundance of sensory imagery and motifs of Mauritian place making. Both enchanting and exacting, these poems are, indeed, blessed with the femme divine.

—**Amber Dawn**, author of *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir*

Kama subverts the coming of age story into radiant poetry, brimming with ritual, ancestry and feminine power. *ZOM-FAM* is the book I've been eagerly waiting for.

—**Vivek Shraya**, author of *even this page is white and I'm Afraid of Men*

Kama La Mackerel's long-awaited debut collection bursts to life like an ancient goddess being reborn from the sea to sing songs that unmake and remake the world. La Mackerel's years of community-building, scholarship, performance art and ritual fairly leap from the page, skillfully weaving multilingualism, mythology, oral tradition and sheer exuberance into a shimmering reclamation of geography, history and body. *ZOM-FAM* covers territory both vast and deep in eight narrative poems, mapping the impacts of centuries of colonization, migration and resistance as they manifest in the body of one extraordinary storyteller whose life and work transcend colonial notions of race and gender. Read this book. You'll still hear that goddess singing long after you turn the final page.

—**Kai Cheng Thom**, author of *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*

Author Q&A

Tell us about the origins of this project.

This project first started as a series separate of spoken word pieces that I had written between 2013-16. Each of these pieces dealt with the legacies of colonization with regards to migration, race, gender and queerness.

In 2016 I realized that there was a deeper storyline about Mauritius and my childhood on the plantation island. This was when I started to develop the narrative arc of *ZOM-FAM* as a whole, and not a series of separate pieces.

Between 2016-19, I developed the manuscript for the stage first. From this stage manuscript came the poetry manuscript as it now exists on the page in the form of a book.

Can you speak to how you have re-envisioned your tour in light of the current pandemic?

I had initially envisioned a 6-week book tour. In light of the current pandemic, the tour will be moving online whenever possible. I intend to do a series of online events with bookstores, universities and literary festivals over the next few months.

I am also presently developing a series of poetry video capsules, a project funded by the Canada Arts Council Digital Originals, inspired by the book which will be hosted online.

Mythology is interwoven in this work. Can you share how mythology, folklore and intergenerational storytelling have inspired your work?

The traditions of magic realism from postcolonial writers of the global south were very much influential in my creative practice—the novels of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez, for example, remain some of my favourite pieces of fiction even now. Audre Lorde’s development of biomythography as an act of rewriting of the self through history, mythology and biography was also very influential in my practice.

As somebody who came from a history of colonization where the past is fragmented and the present is imbued with silences and taboos, writing the spiritual outside of colonial frameworks of time, space and narrative seemed the only way for me to write the self, to write the histories of my family while honouring the multiple truths that lie at the core of them.

You’re an interdisciplinary, multimedia artist. Can you tell us how you decided to explore this art form, and the relationship between the form and your other artistic expressions?

Although I am an interdisciplinary artist, poetry has always been my first love. I always integrate an element of writing within all of my multimedia projects.

With *ZOM-FAM*, the theatrical piece, I was particularly concerned with what poetry in motion would feel and look like in the body and across space. When it came to turning the manuscript into a book, I wanted to explore how the body of the text could also perform on the page. I wanted this collection of poetry to embody all my practices on the page: for it to be at once storytelling, performative, visual and tactile. I wanted the poetry to leap

Author Q&A (cont.)

beyond the literary confines of the page.

How has the intersection of these different artistic expressions affected your work as an artist?

I am fundamentally interested in hybridity and inter-spaces. Working against disciplines and categories is at once a decolonial and queer practice that allows us to work against western frameworks and offer us new ways of narrating and relating in the world.

As a multilingual person, can you describe how you choose which language to use for different phrases and ideas? Does this come entirely organically, or do you plan this multilingual approach carefully?

I have lived between and across 2 colonial languages (English and French) and 3 ancestral languages (Kreol, Tamil and Hindi), all of which are honoured in this book.

In the early stages of writing this book, I kept asking myself: how do I write a decolonial poetics while writing in an imperial language? I had learnt post-colonial British English in school in Mauritius, I spent my early-20s in India where I learnt and spoke Indian English and then moved to Canada and further hybridized my English with Canadian English, all the while being primarily a francophone and creolophone.

The deeper I delved into the writing of *ZOM-FAM*, the stronger my conviction grew to step into my own linguistic quirks, honouring all the cultural idiosyncrasies of my narrative voice. This multilingual voice allowed me to write Mauritius in ways that felt authentic and that honours the complex, hybrid and cosmopolitan composition of the island nation.

Colonialism, and curtailing notions of race and gender, are inextricably connected. Can you speak to how you construct writing about such interlinked themes?

I decided to explore all these themes, these “-isms” through the first-person narrative. Being the first person in my family to have finished high school and to have gone to university, I had learnt about colonial history and gender theory as discourse.

In university, I was taken aback by how these discourses were far removed from the lived experiences and narratives of my family. So with *ZOM-FAM*, I wanted to delve into the personal, to map the political history of the island onto the intimacy of the family home. Ultimately, my family experienced colonial violence (and resistance) in everydayness. In many ways, I see *ZOM-FAM* (and all my artistic projects) as the space where the personal meets the political.

Reviewers and endorsers have often used the word “reclamation” when describing your work. What does this mean to you?

I see reclamation as a form of re-writing oneself into being, as creating a counter-narrative for the past, the present and the future. Reclamation to me means birthing one's narrative anew and offering that as a legacy that

Author Q&A (cont.)

can be passed on to other generations.

How would you describe *ZOM-FAM* to those unfamiliar with your work?

ZOM-FAM is a collection of long-form lyric poems that chronicles the coming-of-age of a gender-creative child growing up in the 80s and 90s on the plantations of Mauritius. Through these 8 poems, the narrative voice searches for languages of love amidst the legacy of colonial silences that surrounds them and their family in order to find the words to birth their queer femme self into being.

Tell us about your inspirations.

I am deeply influenced by the works of postcolonial authors such as Arundathi Roy, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Gabriel García Márquez, to name just a few.

Within a Canadian context, M. NourbeSe Philip is probably the poet who has inspired and influenced my work the most. Her work on writing silences (particularly ocean silences) was deeply influential in my own thinking and creative practice.

I am also very inspired by contemporary queer and trans racialized and Indigenous writers whose emerging voices in the Canadian literary spaces inspired me to write and honour my own stories: Divya Victor, Joshua Whitehead, Kai Cheng Thom, Amber Dawn, amongst many others.