

## CONSTELLATION CONVERSATION — VENUS

### Daniel Alexander Jones & Sue Jaye Johnson

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

"Hello, and welcome. I am very, very happy to be here with Sue Jaye Johnson, and for those folks listening, I would let you know that beyond my deep admiration for this artist and their work and their impact in the world, Sue Jaye Johnson and I have been doing something this year that's really been important for both of us, which is that we made a commitment to speak weekly from the beginning of the year just to make a space for deepening our inner journey by witnessing one another.

It has been a revelation, and we might say a little bit more about that during our conversation, but it is definitely part of the invitation of our meditation on this planet, which has to do with Venus as a symbol of different kinds of love and different kinds of openness and risk. So I welcome you. I'm so grateful we get to have a conversation that will have a public face to it. Thank you for being here and how are you?"

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Thank you. I love engaging in all of these questions with you and meandering around the solar system and our internal solar systems too.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Where are you right now?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I am in Wellfleet on Cape Cod. We came up here to celebrate our 20th anniversary because we got married here...

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Congratulations.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

... 20 years ago. Yes, and it's just been so, oh, my God, so delicious to swim in the same pond where we got married and just bike around and reflect on what two decades with one person can bring. Yeah, and what's been coming up this week is this idea like... *we get to swim in this pond. I get to be cold. I get to be shivering in this cold water. I get to be touching this tree. I get to be here.* It's like the passage of time feels very present.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative), and 20 years, so this means you were married in September of 2001, which, of course, you wrote very powerfully about in one of your *Pleasure Reports* and I'd love for you to say a little bit about what *The Pleasure Report* is in a moment, but for the audience, you were going to be married and 9/11 happened, and you had to contend with the impact of that. You write very powerfully about it, and right now you're saying, 20 years later, you get to have not only the experience of being in that place, not only the experience of being embodied in that place now 20 years into your marriage, but you get to have your memories, you get to have your ownership over that experience, and that was a very big part of what happened back then. Would you care to say a little bit about that?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Yeah, it's true. It felt like, at the time, so strange to be trying to wrap my head and my heart around what had happened in our city, in our country, in the world, and then, at the same time, being like, "Well, what about me? What about my wedding? What about this thing that ... this celebration that we had planned?" and going back and forth between the two, and I felt like I could never quite fully embrace either because I kept flipping back and forth. It was finally when ... Many of our family members couldn't come and my mom just like, flat out said, "This is no time to get married," and there's a way, I'm like, "Oh, my God. She's right. We can't celebrate right now. We're in grief. We need to be in grief and we need to attend to that," and then a few days later, Joe's mom called and she said, "I just found a Jewish teaching that I think is for you," and the teaching says that when a funeral procession and a wedding procession meet at a crossroads, the wedding procession has the right of way.

I felt like, "Ah, right." Like, "Thank you." We needed permission. We need permission for that to go ahead. We need permission to celebrate in the face of grief. I feel like, in so many ways, pleasure is always engaging with that question. Is it okay to feel really good, ecstatic even, is it okay to prioritize pleasure for myself when so many are suffering, when the world is spinning out of control, when climate change, when wildfires, when glaciers calving, is it okay to feel that? To me, that feels so radical to say yes to it.

To say, "Yes, life is for enjoying. We are supposed to feel good," and this week, this feeling of I get to has made me feel like a new understanding of like, "Yeah, I also get to grieve. I also get to feel the shock and the horror of the insane tragedy of 911." I also get to feel the little smallness of my own loss of like, "Oh, my God. My wedding wasn't ... My sister didn't get to be here with me." I get to feel that sorrow, and I'm really reflecting on the sweetness of all of that. Just the privilege and the pleasure of all of it.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

It so hits me in multiple areas. Much of the conversation that I've been having with my own arts community in the last several years has encompassed a question that is very particular within Black American culture around the notion of Black joy, right ...

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

... and how important it has been. Particularly, I am seeing among the rising generation of artists to center joy and self-care and pleasure in everyday life, particularly for those who are involved in activism and deep engagement with grabbing a hold of the vast and lasting and deeply, deeply, deeply tragic contradictions of our nation to say that you must center joy, comes in so many ways as a kind of radical departure from the tone of so much of the activism grounded in, as powerful and as important as it has been, resistance, solely. One of the things that came up for me, I had an incredible conversation with Alexis Pauline Gumbs about joy for the ... we have made a book together (*Particle & Wave*, 53rd State Press) that is a companion to the book of plays and performances that I'm putting out, and in that conversation, we were discussing how, for so many people, joy, pleasure have been situated as things that are ancillary, as things that you get to have if you've done x, y or z, if you've achieved a certain measure of foundational support, and that it can be, not only naïve, but almost offensive to say, "We should be in our pleasure, we should be in our joy." But, I think this younger generation is getting what many of us have advocated about for a long time, which is if you don't have that at the center, a kind of loving core, then we may know what we're doing, we may know how we're doing it, but why are we doing it? *Why are we doing it?*

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Why are we doing it? Yeah, yeah. How do we separate pleasure and joy from this idea that it must be deserved?

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you have a story about that tension between the desired and the deserved? I love that framing.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Well, I don't know about a specific story, but I think everything about my upbringing, which is, as I say ...

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Okay, that's awesome. Would you tell us a little bit about that?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Which is ... Yeah.

(laughter)

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

You're like, "Here, let me give you 20 years. I'll raise you 20 years and I'll see you 20 years!"

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I am a white girl from the Midwest raised in this Catholic, Roman Catholic at that, and Germanic, Scandinavian tradition of this work ethic—work first and then you play. Then if there's any time or energy left, then you play, and this achievement that I got myself out of there and went straight to Harvard where success is all about production and achievement and accolades and these externally validated awards or how many achievements can you add to your list, and so in that, man, it's been a great undoing, a great unlearning of all of that to value the present moment, to value any and every exchange that I'm having

with another human being. To not be thinking about, "What am I getting out of this? What is this leading toward? What am I building?"

I think, even in our conversations that we've had over this year, it's been so many times this impulse to like, "Well, what are we creating? Well, what are we doing? Let's make something already," and I've had, I don't know about you, but I've had to check that impulse like 25 times. So like, "We could do this, dah, dah, dah, dah." Oh, no, the engagement is just ... Like we are just reveling in the *engagement*, and that's hard, and I really... raising two beautiful young women, I try not to pass it on to them, but I am also the task master and making sure that they are achieving and setting themselves up for success in this crazy way that we educate human beings in our culture and many cultures that we've now distributed this around the world of like, "You're not learning so much for what you're learning now, but for the opportunities it's going to open up for you later." That happens so early, and it just erases any opportunity for just the pleasure of *it is what it is* and engaging with the what is-ness and creating space for awe.

I talk a good game. I'm struggling along with this just like everybody else, and I feel like *The Pleasure Report* has been a chance for me to test this theory like, "Really? Really, it's really about feeling good? Can that possibly be true because nothing that I grew up hearing or believing underscores that or upholds that?"

Even in Christianity, you're doing good in this world so that you can get to the next world and get moved on up.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm (affirmative). I think about that in light of too, as you described, you are a mother to these two incredible young women and you are both witness to them, they are extensions of you and your partner, they are a continuance of life force, they are a continuance of lineage and legacy, and too, you are tasked with another inheritance, which is this Puritan work ethic meets post-Industrial Revolution world of mechanized thinking about our purpose, right?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Yeah.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

That we are to be cultivated to fit into the machine of industry, that our worth is attached to our work, our value is to be met, is to be gauged by measuring our output, the products of our work. And, in a sense, the content of the character, which I'm going back to that Kingian idea, is the content of the character is prelude to your capacity to be a good worker. It only matters if you are outputting what you need to output, and as you note the thrall and the thrill of unlocking and unfolding to pleasure, to desire, to joy, to its irreverence and its uncontainable flow, is, in many respects, the inverse, if we're putting it in a binder, to those values.

I think about, and I've mentioned this incredible writer and theorist before, but Andreas Weber who writes about the ecology and philosophy, and he made the distinction in one of his early books talking about the history of ideas about life and evolution and the ecology, referencing Darwin and the theory of evolution, and in particular, the way that it mirrored or connected with the Industrial Revolution, and therefore the idea of, quote unquote, survival of the fittest of evolving to be a leaner, meaner, higher functioning predator or survivor took hold of the popular imagination. What he reminded readers of is that there were other readings of the idea of evolution, other philosophies, including the core idea that, what if we consider, instead of survival of the fittest, we consider the idea of evolution as a kind of improvisatory response by a living being to its circumstances; as a will toward life? That you're drawn toward living, toward expressing, and that decenters the idea of competition and engenders the idea of a kind of heterogeneity... or an ecosystem where there can be multiple experiences commingling.

Another thing that this brings up for me is also the notion of time. That time feels different when you're working and grinding than it does when you are giving over to some pleasurable experience of self or ... Uh-oh, I got a little glitchy there. Pleasurable experience of self or of a circumstance. Would you, and feel free to respond to anything I've said there, but would you also share a little bit with us about what *The Pleasure Report* is and what it means to you? What are you doing every week? What is this thing you do?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

So I did this long, multi-year series of documentaries about women boxers, and in particular, followed Claressa Shields who, when I met her, was 16 years old from Flint, Michigan, and had this audacious dream to become the world's greatest boxer, and followed her with a film crew as she traveled to London at the Olympics and got the gold medal. She's since gone on to get a *second* gold medal and has now turned pro and hasn't been defeated. And then when she just ate up everybody in boxing, (she) has just

recently switched to MMA. She has been such a teacher for me, and I started to think about what allows her to do what she does, and I started researching resilience. Went around to all these resilience experts and like, "Yeah, yeah. She's doing all the things that highly resilient people do." She has a strong faith, she's got a mental practice, she has an emotional practice, she's got a community. And I'm like, "But there's something else that she has in her life that wasn't being represented in this conversation around resilience," and, to me, what about *joy*, what about *pleasure*? Like the way that she would just take ... like as soon as she could, as soon as she could alchemize whatever terrible thing had just happened, and there were a million terrible things that happened in her life. For a young, black girl from Flint, she has experienced a lot, and she was just seeking joy and the light, and I'm like, "What? Maybe that's its own thing," and I wanted to understand that more, and so I threw myself into this question of what is pleasure and where does it fit in our culture and why don't we have more of it?

That led me to some really incredible people and some really phenomenal places, including this one teacher, Regena Thomashauer, who wrote a book called *Pussy: A Reclamation*, and she teaches women how to get into our pleasure, and she does it hundreds of women at a time in a room where we're learning how to swamp, which is screaming and raging to the hardest, headbanging music you can imagine. We're thrashing around, and then you turn from that rage, and once that rage has been expressed, you express grief. I'm in this room full of thousands of women who are wailing, and it just feels, oh, my God, *it's so beautiful*. It feels historic and epic, like all of that grief that's been carried and held and for generations and forever since the beginning of time. Then, from there, the way back home to oneself is to turn on. So then the music shifts to some sultry, sexy music and we're all touching our hair and our necks and moving our hips and finding the sensuality in these emotions that are feared, but turn out to be so absolutely gorgeous when they're expressed.

So her work really opened me up to understanding ... and I think this is where the conversation with Venus comes in, understanding how vital ... I think, vitality itself, it comes with this erotic energy life force, it is the erotic, and opening up space for the erotic to flow, to exist, to be expressed, I think is what Venus is about. I think it's ... What is the right word? I want to say imperative, but that's such a production kind of word. It's the essence of our life force energy.

It's fun, it's beautiful. Who doesn't want to ... Who isn't drawn to erotic energy, and it gets so twisted, it's averted and comes out all sideways, but this pure, erotic energy, especially when it comes after, like when it's been expedited by first expressing all that has been suppressed and held and contained. The rage,

the anger, the grief. When the erotic energy flows, when we dredge all those channels, there's nothing more beautiful.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm (affirmative). I, of course, go back to the ... When I think about celestial objects or celestial states, I think, of course, about Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of the Erotic" and the ways in which that gift that she gave the world that was very specifically grounded in her experience, in the experience of Black women, Queer, Black women in particular, opened up a reckoning, or I don't even want to ... Maybe *reckoning* is not quite the right word, but an *invitation* to a serious contemplation, an embodied contemplation of erotic energy in the context of the ways in which it has been attacked and maligned and sidelined precisely because of its power.

I think about, in terms of story, it's like how I came to understand the erotic, right, as a weird, nerdy teenager in Springfield, Massachusetts, who is what I think we would now call genderqueer and not quite understanding anything about how to align what was happening in my consciousness to New England puritanism, Black and white. That it was through encountering Lorde and encountering Ntozake Shange, and I think about her novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, which contained love spells and contained this thing about what it meant to use what we term the erotic as life force amplification. To feed it, to stoke it, to cultivate it like a garden, and all of these writers were explicit about the fact that that was inseparable, as you're describing, from a deep, incisive and unflinching engagement with those things that are repressing it, that are compromising the lives of the people who are writing this.

So I never felt that a full embodiment of the erotic was going to be anything easy. It was like, "No, you're going to have to get in there," but it was like ... I think I was acculturated, like the people, not only the books and the ideas, but the actual people who were my models for engaging it, were often lesbian feminists. I mean, that *this* is who ... because, for them, sexuality was not separate from your politics, your desire was not separate, and the idea was how can you bring all of it home to the body and begin to resonate that like a star? You're radiating a kind of wholeness, and that, to me, I could see the ways that, in more contemporary language, we might call femme energy—or—energy that is not afraid of that kind of holistically embodied sexuality and sensuality alongside these other aspects of the self.

That it goes back to the continued persecution of women, it goes back to the continued persecution of the femme in folks of any gender and it speaks to the power *and* the danger of that kind of integrated



inhabit[ation] of one's own desire, and I'm curious for you, when you think about that, when you think about ... even I'm going to throw the word Venus out to you, so the planet Venus, but also Venus is this mythic being, what comes up for you? What are the associations, when I say Venus, what do you think, from the sublime to the ridiculous?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

More than I think something or have a visual association or metaphor or something, I have a feeling about it.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). What is that?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

It's like an erotic yes, like a hmm. It's like an erotic handshake. Like, "Yes, Venus, yes."

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Yes, erotic handshake! That's cool, that's right.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I was lying on the beach the other night thinking about like ... thinking like, "How do we make all these associations with these planets and where they are, the constellation, and just how in tune one must have been to notice, oh, yeah, I feel this way and that's happening in the sky?" To make a connection over to something that's so far away and to recognize the atoms that are millions and trillions of miles away are somehow engaging with my atoms, and, wow, what kind of attunement was that? Yet, we feel it now, right? Like we feel the pull of the moon, and I'm so ... It just tickles me that this almost universal acknowledgement of what a full moon does to us. Even the most hardened New York City cop would be like, "Oh, yeah. Full moon, I don't want to work on a full moon. People are bat-shit crazy on a full moon."

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Yes.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

There's this ... We know it. We know it. It's just like ... I don't know. We just ... It's one of the most magical, marvelous things in this existence to know that we are relating to the stars in the sky. So my feeling about relating to Venus is like, yes, all of the images of Venus that I've seen, of course, I'm acculturated to connect Venus with beauty and feminine, but really it's the feeling in my body that makes me feel awake and alive, turned on, excited. Yeah, Venus, and you want to talk about Venus? Okay. Let's engage with Venus.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Yeah. I think about, too, this running through a list of associations in my head, and ... I mean, we have, of course, Venus Williams, and I mentioned, I was saying Bjork had that song when we were younger on her debut album called "Venus as a Boy", but largely, I think about the pink razor blades for women, quote unquote, that are "Venus" blades, and also, of course, Botticelli's "Venus", this painting of the Goddess Venus being born from a shell in the middle of the ocean, but, like the pink razor blades, it's so sanitized and so composed. If you look at the picture and its symbolism, the idea of the birth of a fully-grown goddess from a shell in the middle of the ocean, none of that is going to be neat and sanitized. You know what I mean? The eruption and the wildness and the current and the incalculable force, the energy that the ocean contains, you can't nick that all away with a little razor blade. It's not something you can mash, and I think it's so interesting that this power has been overlaid with these images of a fragile and often, very largely, fragile white femininity, right? Like it's to be adored and put on a pedestal, and what you said right away is, "It's in my body". It's not a performance. It's not a framed experience in a gilded frame to be looked at at a distance and separated from you. It is to be embodied, and that really hits me. In this, for the Aten Project, I wrote "[Hymn to the] Child of Venus", and the brilliant filmmaker, Adelina Anthony, made the short film video for this piece and featured this absolutely stunning young man, who is her nephew, and what I'm struck by is that, in this video, he absolutely feels like Venus to me. He's full of love, and love as a fully *embodied* energy.

So it was interesting that Venus, in my imagination from the beginning of this particular project, showed up as a young person, and showed up as, in this video, as a young man, in particular, and, I guess, I'm sort of ... I mentioned to you earlier, I found this, in looking at the many different applications of Venus in mythology, Venus has been anthropomorphized across gender, the spectrum, from those more typical assignments in a, quote unquote, identified female version to those cultures that identify Venus as a male, and there are cultures for which there's a fluidity of gender expression, but among the Maasai, I find out

there is a tale of the planet Venus visiting the earth in the form of a boy who befriends an old farmer and becomes the one who is the caretaker of the farmer's cattle.

The only request that the young boy makes of the farmer is, "Do not ask where I come from." The man betrays the young boy's trust by spying on him and learns of his celestial origin, and so the boy returns to the sky, but I thought that idea of hiding in plain sight, like the power, in a way, just the power of Venus, the planet, show itself in plain sight through our everyday embodiment as this holy thing that, on some level, maybe we don't talk about it because there's a magic that shouldn't be named. There is some quality that's bigger than that.

So, I guess, I'm just sort of interested in this idea, for me, of what it means to be a bearer of that kind of love, and that it's a transgressive love and a transgressive way to be in the world. When I think about that, for sure, in terms of young, queer folk, particularly young, queer folk of color, what it means to walk on the earth with that kind of love and that kind of joy and that kind of desire as your birth right, but to have it be so much a focal point for violence and for repression. Yeah, and so that in your work I feel that your invitation to pleasure, getting to know you better this year through our conversation, is so deeply tied to an understanding of the cultural and political and social implications of walking that path. I'm curious if you might reflect upon ways that you see that kind of intersection in your life. Is there a story about what it's meant for you to walk in the world that way, or have you seen the consequence of walking in the world that way? Some story that strikes you.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

There's so many threads in what you just said that I want to follow, follow through with, and one is this, in the film, in *Aten*, Venus is depicted as a young man who is skateboarding, and he is beautiful, to be sure, but what is really so compelling is how the feeling, this flow state, the feeling that he is in, doing something that he loves, clearly loves, and it's just ... I mean, it's ... and skateboarding's so smooth and elegant, he's in the flow of it. I mean, and it's like, "Oh, my God," to witness somebody who's engaging with their desire and their passion and in the flow is so, oh, my God, magical. It's like watching musicians perform on stage when they're fully inhabiting their existence and with all of their senses, and that's what really comes across in that film.

Then I think about Botticelli's "Venus" who is standing there to be gazed upon, like the action is *upon* her. She is there to be adored, and in that adoring, one is isolated. Like to adore is to other somebody, and to ... I think, especially so often for women, we are gazed upon. So I think there's something here, even as you ask the question like, "What is it like to walk through the world in this?" There is something ... like

erotic energy needs to flow. It needs to act, it needs to be walking, it needs to be moving, it needs some kind of action because in its stillness, it is suppressed, it is controlled, it is denied, it is cut off from us. When we can't move our bodies, we cannot access our erotic energy, and so that's why I think this film, it's such a perfect depiction of Venus, this flow state. There's an innocence in his youth and there's also this completely knowing, wise, embodied soul that is doing what the soul wants to be doing on this planet.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

And I think about, yeah, I think about action versus stillness, being acted upon.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

I love that.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I think this speaks very much to the experience of the Black experience of being acted upon, being controlled, and why joy, pleasure is a spiritual practice and radical, political act of defiance and reclamation, but for all of us, man, we all of us, we are all tweaked in some way. We are all trying to break out of this conditioning, these structures, and going back to my daughters, it's really quite painful to witness the acculturation that happens of, "Okay, now you are going to learn how to sit still in school. Now you are going to learn how to eat only when ..." My daughter's lunchtime is at 10:30. Like, "Eat at 10:30 when they tell you you can eat." You disengage from the body and to be acted upon, and then how do we remember who we are? How do we remember what brings pleasure? It's crazy that we have to remember what we desire, but I, myself, had to be taught, as an adult woman, what is desire and how do you name it? I've been in so many rooms with women who are like, "I don't have any desires, I don't know." Come back to me and we all think of something.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm (affirmative). When you say remember, it's always very important to me when I hear that word that I connect it so profoundly to the myth of Isis and Osiris, and in brief, that myth is that Isis and Osiris

were brother, sister, husband and wife in the pantheon of ancient Egypt, and Osiris was the abundant ruler, right? His brother was Set who was married to Isis' sister, Nephthys, and they lived in the barren desert. Set was jealous ... It's a very typical story of the ancient world of jealousy and a desire to possess what the other has. So he murdered his brother and he dismembered him and scattered his body parts across the land. Isis, in her mourning, committed herself to gathering up all of the pieces, and she brought them together, and he was missing the phallus because the phallus was thrown into the river and the crocodile ate it.

So she had to fashion another one from clay, and she got the magic spell from the God Thoth and became the magician who could resurrect. She remembered him. She brought him back to life and they had sex. She conceived her child, Horus, who, in the mythic system, goes on to become the avenger of Osiris and is responsible for the setting and the rising of the sun every day because Horus' victory brings the sunrise and the swallowing of the sun by Seth brings the night and the battle goes overnight, et cetera, but that idea of remembering, and that it was connected to her pleasure. That it was her erotic energy that brought him back to life and remembered his constitution, right? Like his integrity. So that idea of remembering that you're describing is you're not remembering something that was forgotten, you're remembering something that was dismembered, right?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

It's the result of a violent severing, which is this longstanding series of violences against the wholeness of our personhood. I'm even questioning the fact that I just used the word personhood, even separating it from what we call nature, right? Like we're already participating in these categorized, taxonomical distinctions for life, for life force. So I think about, again, when I was in high school, a teenager, and coming into my own sense of gender identity and coming into my own sexuality, and that I definitely ... what we, back in the 80s, would call ... was a "gender-bending" person, right? Remember that term?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm (affirmative).

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Or “androgynous”. These are interesting words that would get used, and I remember one time, I had my little, young cousin ... We were at a birthday party and she sat on my knee and was talking to me about her life. I think she was four years old, and she looked at me and cocked her head to one side and the other, and she was like, "You look like Boy George," and was like, "Why are you like that? Are you a boy or a girl?" and she was so innocent that she just was like, "What are you?" But I used to be ... I was attacked in high school. I was bullied and physically attacked all the time for occupying this space that wasn't contained and wasn't legible, and so much of that was about the fact that my own sense of desire and the erotic and pleasure was manifesting in a cis-male body in ways that were, quote unquote, femme, right? So they were creating this... for people who needed to read things in these categories and these binaries, I was too many things at one time.

That idea of that wildness, I think, like many kids of our generation, those things were attacked in order to sever them, in order to contain that energy, and I think a lot about the grace that befell me through the people that I met, through the people who took me under their wing, who provided a space for me as a young, Queer, Black kid to come into my sense of gender and sexuality, even while it was in the midst of this ... a violent context of other kids, and some adults who were definitely shaming or dismissive of me because of that.

What was really powerful was that I could do that in a way that a lot of young people weren't able to do without being fearful of being abused, without being fearful of being mistreated, and that is also when you mention Justin, who is the beautiful young man who's the skater in the video. When I think about young people who are occupying spaces that are many things, crossroads spaces, that we don't really have space for them to do that publicly without fear of them being abused.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Yeah. Mmm-hmm (affirmative). I emailed you my reaction, my witnessing that film, and seeing his really beautiful expression of self, his ... I have these words like “pure”, “good” coming up. That's nonsense because they create these idealized notions of someone or something, but it made me confront my internalized fear of young men, as I mentioned in my email, like raising these daughters who are now out at night with their friends, hooking up and I just ... My instinct is like, "I must protect them," and I'm like, "From what?" How I'm indoctrinated into this fear of the masculine expression of erotic energy, and just watching this was just a reminder of like, "Oh, there's so much beauty in that." We are all yearning for love and pleasure and connection and passion. We're all yearning for it, and why wouldn't the young people have a better shot at it than us adults, really?

Just their proximity to the innocence and curiosity and wonder and awe, and it really shifted something for me like, "Oh, yeah. This is what my daughters are yearning to connect to, is this kind of quiet, grounded, centered embodiment in another human form." Wow, that's ... It really, truly, flipped ... I went ... because this has been a summer of like, "You're going where? What? Who?"

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Uh-huh (affirmative).

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I'm really questioning that. Like, yeah, why wouldn't yearning for that kind of love, why wouldn't it be met with an equal yearning for love and tenderness.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm (affirmative). There is a thing about that wholeness, that integration, and how vulnerable it is in our contemporary culture, and I think about the ... in popular culture right now, two of the people that come to mind that are using their erotic energy as a almost ... I'm thinking like to create a kind of earthquake in consciousness and to, in some ways, deliberately provoke, and in other ways, recenter and re-anime. I'm thinking of Lizzo and I'm thinking about Lil Nas X, and how, in both cases, they are boldly centering their embodied sexuality, which in both cases, they're stepping into arenas that have such long histories of distorted stereotype images of that sexuality, and they're saying, "I'm going to step in here and I'm going to embody it on my terms and I'm going to give you the context I want to give you."

It's very powerful to see the impact and to feel, especially from this rising generation, a refusal to segregate their erotic energy from the rest of their activism. Like saying, "We are not doing that. We are not doing that," and it then makes me think so much about how deep and how unyielding the extractive relationship has been from the larger society, historically. I'll tell you, I wrote this song, the lyric and the vocal melody, it all poured out of me and then I sent it to my brilliant collaborator, Josh, who made the setting of the rhythm and many of the colors that surround it, with chords, but this song came because I was thinking about a relatively new friend of mine who is one of the most beautiful people I've ever met, both in terms of their physical beauty, but in terms of their ... I think what you describe in your observation of Justin in the music video, that idea of the stillness of spirit and the quiet flow of spirit.

It struck me that so many of the people that engage with my new friend come to them with extractive intent, whether that be to objectify them for their physical beauty, whether that be to draw upon that

grounding or to just suck out what bit of wisdom or heart they could get from them, and I just said, "Oh, my goodness. You're ..." and this is a person who is in the community of, I would call, of the community of healers, who is here to offer deep ... I see cosmic wisdom that is known, is hard won, is embodied from life experience, and what does it mean to walk on the planet knowing that your mission is to serve the healing and to serve the reconstitution and the remembering when the vessel is one that almost commands extraction from the system? Like it's a ...

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Beauty is a mind fuck, isn't it?

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Yeah. I do get it.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

I mean, we want to adore it. We want to look at that Venus, Botticelli's "Venus", and just adore beauty, and separate and want and yearn, and I think it goes back to the very beginning of the conversation of like it's for all of us to enjoy. There isn't anyone who's more deserving than another, but somehow beauty, we elevate beauty and worship it and adore it, and that distances us. Then there's nothing to do but to have a really wonky engagement with it.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm (affirmative). How do you imagine, even in one step, what's one step, a practical step, that you might suggest to help us shift that?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Approval. Self-approval. We're so ... Like, "What do you look at when you look in the mirror? What do you say to yourself when you look in the mirror?" Do you say, "Hello, beautiful," or do you be like, "Oh, my God, I got to tweeze these eyebrows"? I think we can begin there by saying, "Hello, beautiful," and I think that's what Lizzo is teaching us. Hello, beautiful. Like, "Yeah, I don't need you to tell me what you think of me. I know, I know my beauty. I know my ..." It's undeniable. You can't take it from her, you can't negotiate it with her. That's what she's telling us and showing us, really, and just having so much fun with it.



I think that you and I have both encountered, we've all encountered these, what I call, permission-givers in our lives, and people who show us how to do that. They're doing it. You're like, "Oh, yeah. You come in a different package than what everyone else is telling you is allowed." You're like, "You're engaging your erotic energy, you're in your own flow. You're making and creating and taking your own pleasure, no matter what anybody thinks about you or has to say about you or believes you're worthy of." That's the revolution.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Mmm-hmm (affirmative). That really ... That is a revolution. Oh, my friend, I thank you so much. This has been a true delight, and I'm going to make sure that folk can access information about you, about your work on *The Pleasure Report* for which people can sign up and get these hugely insightful and motivating weekly writings from you, but I also want people to be aware of the vast array of works of art that you've contributed to our world. You're just one of the most capacious people I know, and again, to folk who might be listening, one of the things that I'm going to invite you to do, as part of our meditation on Venus, is to do like Sue and I have done, which is to pick a partner to talk with for a year. Try it out. Try it out and see what happens if you commit to another human being who will help be a mirror for you.

When I think of Venus, of course, I always think of the Orisha Oshun, and that as one of the figures who is an embodiment of love in that tradition, and is not only romantic love, but as you're talking about, that incredible, assured self-love. She is often pictured with a mirror in one hand, do you know?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm (affirmative).

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

And that to know that part of the requirement is that self-regard, that understanding of how beautiful one is, and that sometimes it is good to have a mirror in another human being who can help to clean the smudges or correct the distortions that they hear in the way that you describe yourself because sometimes you don't see it all the way clear. So, yeah.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Is there anything else you'd like to share that we didn't get to talk on that feels important before we say farewell?

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Oh, well. No, I just ... I love that description of, I mean, the way that we are mirrors for one another, in particular, you and I in our practice of talking to each other every week. Sometimes the people that we're closest to are too close to have that mirror. I think we're so enmeshed, so it's just been this partnership, this dialogue that exists outside of any other kind of construct is really a marvel.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Indeed, and I should say that outside of joyful meetings at pre or post show receptions, we never had that kind of conversation.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Nope, nope.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

We never did this, so it's important to know that what we did was take a big risk. We didn't know. We didn't know, but we took the risk.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

But we also were following something, right?

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Yeah.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Like you said that you had spirit tell you to talk to me and ...

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

That's it.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

... I had been thinking about you at the same time. So we followed ...

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

We followed what Venus said.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

We followed what Venus said.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

That's so true.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

That's the last thing we can say about Venus is ...

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

That's it.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

... and that desire comes sometimes as a little whisper.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Thank you, my friend.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Oh, my God, thank you.

**Daniel Alexander Jones:**

Thank you, thank you.

**Sue Jaye Johnson:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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This conversation was recorded as part of *ALTAR NO. 1 – Aten*. For more information, additional conversations, and to participate in this immersive journey, visit:

[aten.life](http://aten.life)

Learn more about the speakers and their work at:

<http://www.danielalexanderjones.com>

<http://suejaye.com/>

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