

nobody

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FULLY THE BEING THAT I AM

Nina St. Pierre in conversation with Tanaïs.

Until a couple years ago, I'd never worn perfume regularly. It always felt either wildly out of reach, or frilly and cheap. Then I came across Hi Wildflower, the beauty line by New York perfumer and writer, Tanaïs. Started as research for their first novel, 2015's *Bright Lines*, Hi Wildflower officially launched in 2016 and quickly became a major independent beauty brand, sold everywhere from Urban Outfitters to Lord & Taylor. At the beginning of 2021, they closed Hi Wildflower to launch their new brand, Tanaïs, in March 2021. Their forthcoming, second book, *In Sensorium: Notes for My People*, is an essay collection about scent, sensuality, colonization, and South Asian and Muslim perfume cultures.

It wasn't just the lush earthy scents, vibrant-hued lipsticks, and Tanaïs's glamorous Instagram aesthetic that drew me in, but the language they used to speak about scent and color and spirit. Like wine

or cacao or coffee, I learned that perfume represents the terrain and timespace of its elements. Its scent carries the toil and joy of each flower's journey; it is stamped with the brutal history that each aromatic or resin underwent to arrive here. *Now*. On your skin. What you smell is its terroir. And also its human cost. Its spiritual toll. Tanaïs explores these complexities in all aspects of their work.

I felt something like possibility, hope even, springing up as we spoke. Tanaïs's ideas are incisive; their words bring a knife's-edge clarity to the often murky language of the esoteric. Being spiritual does not mean sugarcoating things, but holding them up to clearly see both their light and darkness. It is a reckoning. An act of alchemy. Rendering the resins and florals, the ancient brutalities and beauties, into something transportive—something more whole than its parts.

What follows is an abridged, lightly-edited version of a much longer conversation that began somewhere thousands of years ago and will continue on for just as long, with or without us.

NINA:

I just want to say, first off, I love your work and I'm so excited to talk to you.

TANAIS:

I'm off Twitter right now because I find it very toxic for writing. But we've had nice interactions on Twitter and it's just nice when writers and people who are thinking about the stuff that I'm thinking about, like syncretism and cannabis and psychedelics and all the mysticism, are finding each other. It's still pretty rare in the literary world to talk deeply about those things, I think.

NINA:

Yeah, that's interesting. I've actually always felt a little outside of that world. And I think part of it is like there's such a standard narrative of what a writer was when they were a kid. And I don't really identify with that at all. In the literary world, there's almost an intellectual elitism or looking down on spiritual stuff as if it's just *woo woo* or not cerebral enough.

TANAIS:

I think that's a disdain for the sacred and the feminine, which is really connected to the colonial project. I mean, this whole idea of literature is also rooted in the emergence of domination and capitalism and proliferation of ideas. That's not to say literature isn't more ancient than that. I'm just saying, like, the modern novel and modern fiction and literature are fashioned from a period that all of this, you know, global takeover of what we now call developing countries was happening. So to me, as a wild-hearted, Brown, feminine, Bangla person who is writing from the syncretic Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu space, I have to see through all those illusions telling me that I'm too much. That I'm not a worthy subject or creator of literature.

NINA:

I should start by asking, what does syncretism mean for you?

TANAIS:

The definition of syncretic for me, that I operate with as I write and think through it, is different strands of culture and spiritual thought that are braided together, that are blended, that are intermingling, that co-exist; that create something that is a new form, a shamanic kind of form. And where I'm from, there have been different strands of spirituality that can be called Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim and Christian. And what I emerged from in my practice—spiritual practice and writing practice—is the syncretic intersection of all those different milieus.

I actually started learning about a lot of ancestral stuff—because Tantra and yoga and Kali worship are from where I'm from, they started in the eastern reaches of South Asia—through white and Black people who were interested in these things and were not from my culture. And that makes sense to me, because in the context I'm from, those very spiritual practices were the realm of very powerful Brahmin men. And they excluded people like me, who are Muslim converts from a low-caste Hindu background.

So this is the thing: I have been excised from spiritual practices that originated with the feminine people of my land, who were being terrorized by the very people who absorbed those cultural practices, created Durga and Kali and great goddess worship, as we were like: we don't want to be victimized and violently treated, so we are converting to another religion in which we have some sort of safety from this, because our actual beliefs have been weaponized against us.

How do I get back to that? Are you going to tell me that Kali doesn't belong to me? Are you going to tell me that I'm not a great goddess? Are you going to tell me that I don't have a claim to this indigenous form of the fertility goddess, the snake goddess, because I'm Muslim? No. No one's going to tell me that. No one's going to fucking tell me that. My last name before I became Tanaïs was Islam. So I have been marked by a religion that is seen as antithetical to this country, as well as the larger kind of benign, spiritual, Mystical Brown that is the one that the New Age people cling to.

We don't talk about any of those ugly parts of spirituality, but it's all in there. And that's what we're feeling, right, when we're like, *I'm so evolved and so great. Does it serve my highest power?* And I'm like, why is it serving you? What is this idea of serving you? I definitely have a disdain for it. I have to be honest.

“those ugly parts of spirituality”

NINA:

I can only imagine.

TANAIS:

So I can only find that space in the syncretic way, which does not ask me to divorce myself from Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism. And I'm talking in religious tradition terms. But it's not just that. It's like also being a non-Black person of color in America and a non-Indian Muslim, South Asian. It's like, I'm a lot of “non things.” Non-binary. But I don't see myself as a “non” anything. Like I am fully the being that I am. I just cannot be categorized under hegemony.

NINA:

That's so interesting, yeah. With the language that exists, all those definitions are a reaction to something. So it makes sense that as a writer you have to reclaim the language or create new words, new language for what that is.

TANAIS:

Absolutely.

NINA:

Do you believe that there is some—I don't even know what you want to call it—some higher space, some lower space, some kind of cosmic field that transcends the human categorizations of body, class, race, nationality? All things that I think are, let me just say, extremely important to be understood in the context of spirituality, and I agree are grossly missing from the white-lady New Age vibe. This is something I think about a lot, because my mom was very much *that*. I grew up in the transcendental meditation movement. I was born in Fairfield, Iowa. My parents meditated in a golden dome and did all that kind of stuff.

TANAİS:

I love that stuff too! I mean, it's weird right? There is something joyous about that. But it also can be toxic if, like, you're not caring for your child. I'm not saying that was the reality. But just, we know where that can go as well. So... do I believe in an eternal self, or like a beyond the body?

NINA:

Not so much just beyond the body, but I guess for a little context, my mom got out of transcendental meditation when I was four. She raised me in California. She read everything she could. I went to Baptist churches. I went to Buddhist temples. She studied *A Course in Miracles*, Christian Science, and was kind of like this renegade-type person who was also struggling with, I think, profound mental illness. And I didn't experience her as an extractive person. But I mean, growing up and thinking about things more critically, I have new questions about it.

TANAİS:

I have been really trying to learn more about this idea in Tantra. The actual word [tantra] means a loom, a weaving, a warp. I think the syncretic way is to loom strands of consciousness, and threading different strands of being, into something that is more true. And for me, it's always going to be finding that place where the sacred and the profane can coexist. And I think the nature of having a body is to have a profane experience and to try to find the part of us that is beyond time, beyond body, beyond, like, human suffering, to eradicate all suffering, to let go of our attachment. Like these very Buddhist ideas of non-attachment. I think that's where I'm trying to go.

And I'm very attached to material things. I have my crystals and my candles

and my home is like very full of sensuous shit. I make art. I make things with my hands. I make perfume. But perfume has always been my metaphor, that I have been working through for many years now. It is a profane substance that is worn on the skin that reminds you of your body, but it evaporates into the air. It is something that is created of the ruins of the world, like chemicals and botanical materials. The ruins of plants and the ruins of actual petroleum. You know. It is made of something that is dead that can activate something that is very, very alive and in tune with the universe. Fragrance is how humans have survived the filth of our own embodiment and the toxicity of waste. So I have a very profane example of how I try to find that place. Perfume. And I think for every person, that's the journey.

“The whole world is here.”

NINA:

This last year really brought up a lot of the stuff that I was raised with and kind of pushed away, saying, *I'm going to go to New York and get my hustle on and get mine!* You know? And then I was kind of shuttled back to my beginnings like, *Whoa,*

this is not what I was taught. I always knew this was all bullshit.

TANAİS:

New York is a beautiful place, though. The whole world is here. And that's different from every other place. I'm a fucking New York bitch. I'm like, New York is the best. I'm glad you came to New York because it's a really beautiful place to be alone to find that self, I think. Running away to the woods—which is what's happening now—and this idea of owning land? That's not even our land to own?

NINA:

Right.

TANAİS:

We need to be living in cities because cities are the jungles for animals like us. And that is where we thrive, like we live in close proximity to each other. We create culture together.

NINA:

It's interesting because, you know, the only reason I even really brought my mom up was because that is where my questions begin. And so I think that, you know, when I was a teenager, even in my twenties or whatever, there wasn't this mainstream kind of, like, white-lady New Agey thing happening.

TANAİS:

No. It's like you were weird for that. Totally.

NINA:

Yeah. When that started happening, I felt almost protective?

TANAİS:

Imagine how South Asian people feel!

NINA:

I know! So that's what I'm saying.

TANAİS:

It's like levels of being gaslit.

NINA:

Yes. Everything I was given was taken from somewhere else.

I guess I'm curious if you think that as people, like you said, living in the profane, as people living in bodies on this planet, do we always need to understand spiritual practices with an intersectional lens? Also in the context of race, class, ethnicity, etc.? And/or do you think that there is some point at which the spiritual self can actually transcend all those things? Which I think is what a lot of the white toxic spiritual shit is saying, but that's not what the practice is.

TANAİS:

I want to make it a concrete example. One of the most iconic holidays in the Hindu tradition that is translated here is Holi. Festival of colors. It's beautiful. I've experienced Holi. It's really fun. You get a little wavy, run around with water, and squirt guns with color in them and spray each other with color and you're covered in color and it's beautiful.

But Holi is basically a celebration of a Dalit woman being destroyed—Holicka. And Holicka is a Dalit—*untouchable, low-caste person*, we don't use those phrases anymore. We say Dalit. It is basically a story of upper-caste, you know, heroes, vanquishing an itinerant evil, savage barbarian king. And in this festival, where we are celebrating colors, it is literally about the murder of a low-caste woman. That's what we're celebrating. And people don't fucking know that. So that's what I'm saying. You need to scratch deep and you need to go into the

thing that we're celebrating.

The stories that we build around that, the mythologies that we build around that, the religions that we build around that, the reification of power that we build around that? That is what we have to question. Why did it become a religion? Why did it become a practice and a faith that is used to dominate?

That's what we have to go to in order to get to the spiritual practice. If you're not talking about the dark-skinned, feminine, Brown body that was destroyed to have this ritual, then you're not talking about the thing that needs to be talked about. Because you're not talking about the violent, profane thing that is simultaneously in existence with the truth and transcendence that you're trying to aim for. They cannot be extricated from each other. I think that's a part of my project. I can hold the pain and the pleasure in the same breath. I can hold the destruction and the building of new truths and community in the same breath.

Patriarchal religious melee will never explain the secrets of the cosmos to us.

NINA:

So what happens when language falls short of capturing the sacred experience?

TANAIS:

I think we have to return to the sensuous body. There is such a disdain for sensuousness. I don't want to just say in literature, because I think literature is—there are definitely writers who are doing beautiful work writing sensuously. I just think like in terms of language, this idea of minimalism versus maximalism, spare and unflinching, versus, like, lush and meandering. You know I feel like we're more in the lush and meandering world than the spare and unflinching world.

NINA:

I've always hated when an editor is like, "This is great, but what's the takeaway?" The *takeaway*? Is this fucking McDonalds? Read the thing. The thing is the thing. That's it.

TANAIS:

The thing *is* the thing.

As a Bangladeshi person my people literally died for their language. To be Bangladeshi is to have been Indian, to have been Pakistani, to have been British, to have been all these other versions. And every country has this experience. There have been multiple versions of what the land was named and called in the languages that arose from that land. So what happens when language fails us, or doesn't belong to us?

I'm trying to go back to a pre-modern, pre-colonial ancestral self that allows me to connect to something much deeper than anything a white person could imagine about me. I cannot be imagined in that context only. Even experiencing something like adornment.

“The
thing
is
the
thing.”

NINA:

I've been thinking a lot about glamour, too. I feel like you're very glamorous.

TANAIS:

The women of my land have always been outsiders—low-caste women, Muslim women who have been subjected to domination. And our beauty, our adornment, our sensuality was weaponized against us. I'm from the east side of Bengal, which was split in half by the British because they wanted to divide and conquer the east and the west who were getting too powerful, and they wanted to have more control. In Bengal. In 1881, any woman who was unmarried and above the age of 15 was considered, on the census, a prostitute.

To assert a self that is outside of the spectrum of patriarchal control is to actually be considered a prostitute. So that's where I'm looking and where I'm from.

NINA:

That's some shit.

TANAIS:

So for me to be walking in my slutty clothes, looking the way I do, wearing my gold, being a 5'7" dark-skinned Brown woman in this world, who likes to fuck across genders? That is asserting something; that is saying no to white supremacy and Brahminical supremacy.

NINA:

You know Rachel Rabbit White? She's a poet and sex worker and talks about her beauty rituals as Venusian offerings, and how she's recast her practices of adornment as sacred.

“like
know-
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world”

TANAIS:

I very much am in alignment with that person because whores have always held the knowledge of the world. People who are queer and trans feminine and people who have been destroyed by patriarchy have held the deepest knowledge of this world because they see exactly how power, when it is unchecked and trying to destroy them, how that actually plays out and how that manifests.

It's like knowing all the secrets of the world.

So to adorn yourself in the face of that is truly embodying a power that is beyond the spectre of patriarchy and white supremacy. That's beautiful. *



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