

# Ypsi on my mind

*poems by Women of Color*





## Untold Stories of Liberation & Love

[www.liberationstories.org](http://www.liberationstories.org)

**Ypsi On My Mind** is a project of *Untold Stories of Liberation & Love*, an Ypsilanti-based collective. We support local women of color's creative courage to embody and envision community abundance and self-governance.

*Special thanks to Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation for providing funding for Ypsi On My Mind.*

**This is an open source community zine!**

## Ypsi On My Mind

Ypsi On My Mind is a collection of poems by women of color exploring how we see and experience Ypsilanti — past, present, or future. Ypsilanti is crucial to our region — and Black, Latinx, Native American, and other women of color are crucial to Ypsilanti. So, what does Ypsilanti mean to women of color? **These poems offer a glimpse.**

## About Ypsi

The place that is now called Ypsilanti was home for generations to vibrant villages of Wyandot, Potawatami, Odawa, and Ojibwe people who thrived along what is now called the Huron River. In the 1800s Ypsilanti was a strategy hub for Black leaders guiding Black people escaping slavery to Canada through the Underground Railroad. In the 1930s and 40s, Black workers from the Willow Run plant gained national attention for their organizing for economic and racial justice. Black women's history in Ypsilanti includes stories of classical musician Allie Louise DeHazen, community leader Isa Stewart, teacher Wealtha Sherman, education and childcare advocate Mary Eleanor Delany, and educator Maude Forbes, all pictured on the Parkridge Community Center mural. Today, Ypsilanti remains a major cultural, economic, and political force, drawing on the history and present day leadership of women of color.

**Please share and reproduce widely!**

## The Refuge

This place is the refuge  
where with faith,  
a grieving teenager sent her baby girl  
lovingly down river  
to rescue her from the 1980s.

To her,  
this vibrant and sleepy town/  
lush with green and full of fresh air/  
yet unafraid of hard work/  
and without pretense/  
would shield her child from/  
though it did not hide/  
the truth waiting up the road.

This place near palaces and prestige  
might give everything she could not.  
But it gave nothing she could.

4 While the girl child,  
wearing a mask she did not know she wore,  
contracted and eased  
contracted and eased  
until she pushed herself  
into the wilderness.

The errant jungle

Blindly tending wounds  
she did not know she had.  
Searching for a name  
she did not know  
she did not need.  
While her mother waited for her to call  
this place  
what it always never was.

Even though it was

Home.  
In this holy story,  
though,

the miracles the girl child performed  
We're mostly silent  
Revolutions  
that she thought she fought alone.

But her mother  
was always there.  
Even when she wasn't.  
Even when she could not be  
For climbing the odds stacked high against  
them.  
Doubling down  
on bad decisions  
until they became good ones.

And when the girl returned  
To this place

A woman

A mother herself

Dressed in all the accolades  
this place bought on credit.  
She realized the river baptized  
The demons laying in wait.  
And she was free to create  
the refuge  
For which her mother had prayed.

Erica B. Edwards

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## Ten Pairs

Every tear escaped behind a mask at dinner unnoticed, a pattern of paw prints on pedestrian streets, the sound of a toothbrush connecting with the floor—their significance well known by the cat at Prospect and Cross St. relaxing this morning. It's my birth year and the prices went up on fresh thrown butter, criminal feminisms, and the recycled money for ten pairs of rainbow milk Saucony Peregrines.

We are in the streets.

I went to Eastern along with two grey coots while Pete worked at the Willow Run factory. It was all consuming—two buses filled with snobs—the community thought this was The Second Coming. With a military-like attitude toward retirement we went to a demonstration and then to Arhaus to shop for a cream Chesterfield. We took our stinking bodies to the side of town where Sidetrack had burned a fire straight through the core.

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We are vaping.

In pink pumps I lost three friends and slowly read the headline: The fun tomato, shishito, beans, and exceptional headaches experienced can't beat a vaccine appointment on a 50 degree day. In the teacup of a frog's springtime coronation and the image of my wife's bright straw hat and tankini I dreamt of border excavation. This is when sesames strung up in the covered porch were added to the land contract thoughtfully late.

We are fumbling towards repair.

Everyone worried about the draft were asked to observe the following rules: There was a lot of fear in single family homes since time began, different values of mass incarceration between wards. Artists on Maple St. paying \$1200 for an apartment and the new crew coming up on straightened sidewalks; I don't know their edge or if they can handle themselves. Get the bills paid and hawk badly needed newspapers on the corner. At least the residents can heart react.

We made new patterns.

We got into groups against wars and balanced in our tennis shoes against historic houses. In the loam of different approaches we asked the same questions and exchanged practice notes. All participants are safe and there is trust, so how does this feel? I remember that backlash is inevitable and comes from missing critical information. In a low voice the spider leaf crests in the spray of sunlight and water. A window smashes. Something needed is let in.

*Amber Fellows*

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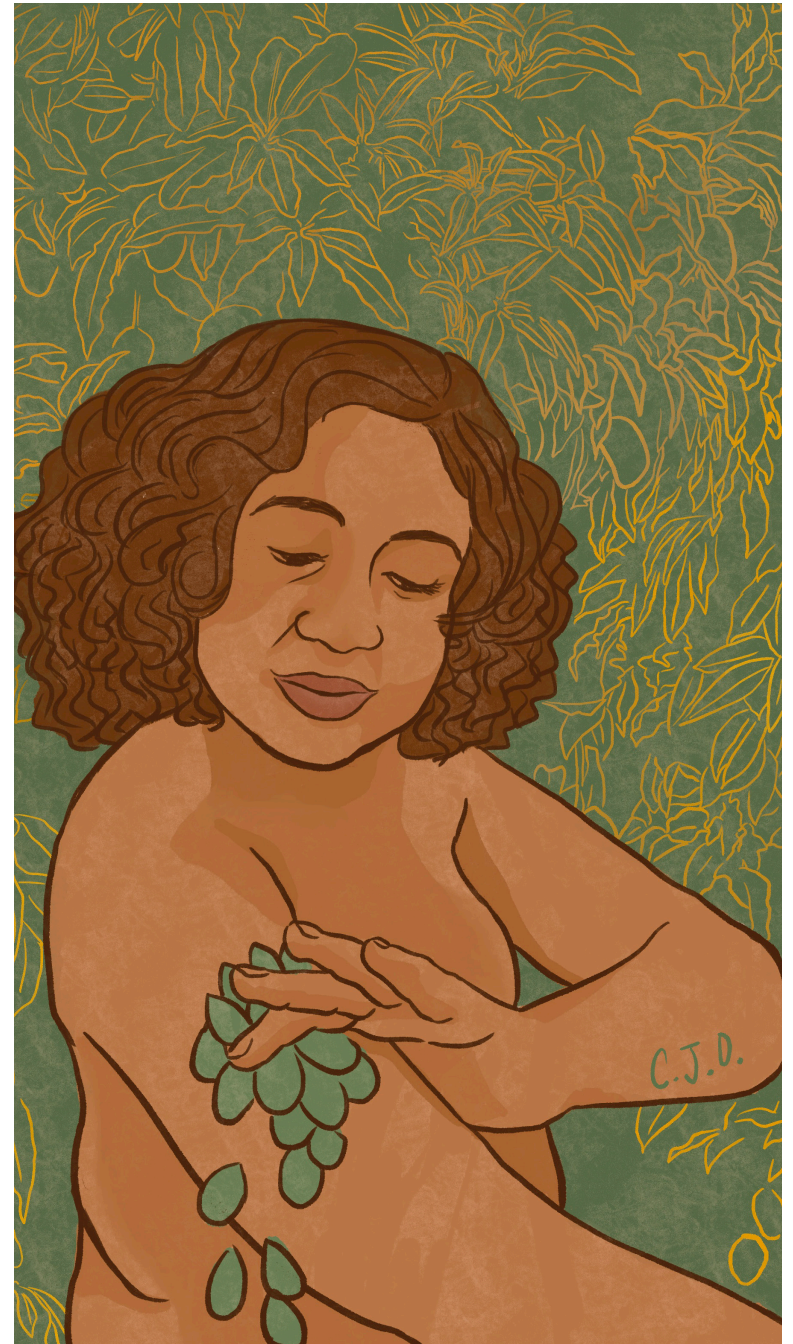
## In The Saddle

Nothing does a better job of reminding me that I'm alive  
than riding my bicycle  
losing my breath as I sprint up Cherry Hill Road  
But I also like to noodle around the dirt roads  
like I have nowhere to be  
stopping to greet a crane or a wild turkey

8 My favorite way to say hello to a neighbor  
is by ringing my bell at them  
My favorite route to work  
is down Rue Deauville to Holmes  
waving to the students (and their mothers!)  
who are waiting for the school bus

Pavement or gravel: both are good  
The way home is on a bicycle, riding in Ypsi

Jayanthi Reddy



Artwork: Carolina Jones

## An Ode to Complex Movement

A housemate in Detroit  
From Pennsylvania  
Once told me that she had a polyamorous relationship to place  
That multiple cities called to her that she all loved equally but  
different.

A sister-teacher-friend in Detroit  
By way of Puerto Rico  
Once told me that people have always moved between borders  
That migration has always been a part of the human experience.

My maternal family in Detroit  
By way of the mountains of Appalachia in West Virginia  
By way, too, of Georgia  
By way of the TransAtlantic  
By way of enslaved Africans  
By way of roots unknown from this land and that land,  
By way of enslaver -  
Have had a complex relationship toward movement particularly,  
When movement looks like kidnapping and displacement,  
When movement looks like restriction under Jim Crow and racist  
mortgage lending practices  
When movement looks like “the rent is too damn high” so we  
are forced to move where there are cheaper prices,  
effects of gentrification.

But when movement looks like dancing - do you move?  
What say you?  
And when moving looks like clapping and tambourines  
Holy spirits and holy ghosts and mounted bodies by ancestors  
and ridden bodies by orishas  
And when movement lay foundation and groundwork for a  
pathway toward liberation  
And when movement is led by following cosmological direction  
of generals like Harriet,  
And when movement remembers that borders were  
constructed separating us from each other for another's gain -  
think the “Berlin Conference.”

Ypsilanti, oh Ypsilanti, what does it mean for this Detroit Black  
spirit-woman to call you “home”?  
Cities live inside me - Detroit, Salvador, Luanda, Belém, Lansing -  
Ypsilanti,  
A city once resided in by a great-grand ancestor who moved Ohio-  
North,  
Whose land I will not be able to find due to development and our  
elders' missing memories.  
Ypsilanti, what does it mean for this traveling, escaping, and now  
rooting daughter to call you home?  
So much shared history between your Black roots and my own,  
White pine, forsythia, cottonwood, sumac  
Diasporic and intertwined.  
I asked Spirit, “Why here? Why Michigan, at all, where racism is  
profuse and throughout?”  
It said to me “that before Michigan, remember ... Mishigami” and  
the Great Lakes Basin -  
To remember that borders are human-made,  
Too, on this land - colonially made,  
That there are peoples whose shapings of land are very different  
and precede 1701, 1823, and 1837,  
That whiteness does not own Michigan or timelines or borders,  
And neither does it have a monopoly over you and your liberation  
and your relationship to place(s).

A house-mate, A sister-teacher-friend, A set of histories, An  
ancestor, Spirit  
All point me here, and I am here.

I look forward to getting to know you.

*Violeta Donawa*



## Ypsi On My Mind

My being relates to this place  
Like a turtle full of substance steadfastly  
Forging  
Its path  
Simultaneously with hard knocked blinders for focus  
And the significant shell also serves to expel  
The smears  
And the naysayers  
And the  
Unappreciative gut crushers  
Who choke and squash her rousing voices

Yeah, I've got Ypsi on my mind  
Where people are still human  
And are willing to put their names on the line  
For diamonds in the rough  
And no expectation of paybacks  
To be deposited in the political accounts of thine  
They look in your eyes and  
Trust flows unless it is undermined  
With a heartfelt request to not be forgotten  
"Will I remember them even when the need isn't mine?"

I've got Ypsi on my mind

The front porches and warm smiles  
Without the patronization  
Or the calling of a woman like me "a nobody"

I've got Ypsi on my mind

The brothers and sisters at first sight  
Who felt like what kin should be  
The idealized "bhaiyas" and "didis"  
Of my family's culture who  
Should make everyone feel a sense of belonging

It's been a long couple of years  
And, sometimes, it feels a lifetime  
I've been cowering inside a shell  
Due to trauma through no fault of mine

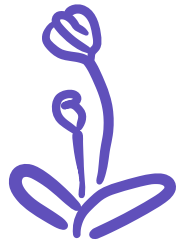
Sticking my head out intermittently to help and to heal and to  
hold together  
These yet to be realized dreams of yours and of mine

As I observe Ypsi flower and take her place  
I feel grateful to be in proximity to the grace in her space  
As a neighbor in fact  
But, in my pores, as a cellular soulmate  
I borrow her energy and cheer for Ypsi  
And let her courage feed me  
Don't believe me?  
You probably don't live in Ypsi.

I've got Ypsi on my mind

Whose energy I draw upon  
As I pray for the life force  
To expand my muted voice  
And, like her,  
Take my rightful  
Equitable place.

Anuja Rajendra







Artwork: Carolina Jones

## Birthing Home

When I say I'm undocumented  
People are always asking me what  
It means to be american.  
Or at least what I think it means.  
As if those questions mattered.

As if land could be owned,  
As if I could be bound by borders,  
As if american-ness defined me.

Ask me instead what the Huron River  
Sounds like in April,  
Ask me how I greet the waitress at  
Encuentro Latino with a "Yes, I'm here again,  
I love this food" shyness.  
She is familiar like the sound  
Of car pulling into the shared gravel driveway,  
The one used by all my neighbors.  
My neighbors who text each other  
Everytime someone is going grocery  
Shopping to see if anyone needs  
Anything. Such intimacy, to trust  
Another with your sustenance.

I don't care to know what  
It means to be american.  
All I know is I have chosen  
This land, and this land has chosen me.  
After years of feeling like I couldn't claim  
A home, the Earth has opened  
Itself to me like a seed bursting.  
It's tendrils wrapping me tight.

Ypsilanti has tangled it's fragrance  
Into my hair,  
Anchored it's spirit  
Into the softness of my womb,

And birthed Home.

**Maria Ibarra-Frayre**



## Plum Juice

There's a brown girl in the rain  
Tra la la la la  
There's a brown girl in the rain  
Tra la la la la la  
Brown girl in the rain  
Tra la la la la  
and she looks like the sugar in a plum  
Plum  
Plum

I sing those lines to you as you spin in  
Circles  
Plum juice running down your chin.  
Our bags and baskets  
Heavy with  
Leeks, apples, potatoes, and of course  
Plums  
your brother darts between market stands  
Asking too many questions  
And  
Standing too close to strangers

Maybe it's the weight of the baby on my chest  
Or the stench of soil underneath  
My fingernails  
But today you look to me like a  
Charm  
Of hummingbirds  
I whisper you're welcome to each  
Person you bump into  
My eyes glinting back at each sideways glance  
Beaming like it's the first day of  
Summer  
And all my favorite songs are playing  
On the radio

You're welcome  
For that dose of impish magic that floated  
From his smile  
And got caught in the light of your  
Dangling earring

You're welcome  
For the fairy dust left behind  
With little girl fingerprints  
You're welcome

Today it feels like there is more than enough  
Enough money  
Even though my check was short  
And the water bill is late  
Enough time  
Even tho I've slept through alarms  
And ignored emails

we buy pastries and lemonade  
Even tho we only came here for peppers and meat  
We spin in circles  
Humming along with the songs in our hearts  
We dance in the middle of the sidewalk  
Sneakers levitating just a few inches from  
The ground

Brown girl in the rain  
Tra la la la la  
and she looks like the sugar in a plum  
Plum  
Plum

Nuola Akinde



## Healing Roots

I try but can't quite place the memory  
That moment I felt rooted into the history  
I hear the stories blowing through the leaves  
As clearly as I tattoo my life into sleeves

The nodes of connection deeply multiply  
I felt grounded, even as I learned to fly

I brought with me so many doubts and questions  
In my body lived generations of traumatic lessons  
There was no more time to just push it aside  
No more room where the hurt could simply hide

I have the power to be the best version of me  
Whispered this place called Ypsilanti

She almost remembered the story of her birth  
As if it was the funniest thing to happen on Earth  
How many times she heard about that toilet  
Everyone knew, no use changing the subject

Truly born and raised by her beloved Ypsi  
She never got used to being injured, unheard, un-free

The power of her voice makes flowers bloom  
Through osmosis the land taught her what comes after soon  
Together, they lovingly tended to one another's needs  
She knows she is safe wherever the future leads

Her middle name means power  
To the people, she'll always remember

They recognize the wounds they've been healing  
Change, the one constant, no longer sends them reeling  
Across generations, to the time long before Momji  
They tap into the wisdom of our Universe's Energy

They think back to the place their mother once knew  
Grateful at the foresight to plant a garden that grew

*Desiraé Simmons*

## Thee Beast

Hair  
All over my body.  
If you collected every strand  
My particles would travel for miles  
And encompass more land than a conqueror could imagine.

My hair  
All over my body,  
Covered as a beast.  
My unique strands carry richness:  
Showing them  
I am the ruler of this land.

But He,  
He expects me to groom myself.  
Remove my beastiality,  
To be presented as more domesticated  
Suitable to his gaze.

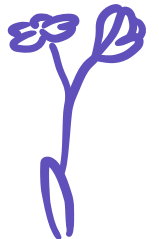
But baby,  
The rivers are never calm  
Because Life cannot be controlled.

Merely respected, cherished, and loved.  
As a holder and creator of Life,  
Can't you see, without me  
You can not be carried?

I carry my hair  
And I carry you

If one must go,  
Why should I lose my crown?

*Rachael Somers*



## Poema para Ypsilanti

Querido Ypsilanti amado Ypsilanti!  
 Desde el corazón te recito con amor  
 Me levanto a una solo vos con un son conquistador representan-  
 do a todas las mujeres Latinas blancas y de color  
 con amor de mi Señor y Salvador  
 La ciudad que engendro este conquistador .

La naturaleza es exterior  
 Mirando el río hurón me inspira una canción

Levántate oh mujer guerrera emprendedora mira cómo corre el  
 agua en tu exterior  
 Visita sus parques y lagos con amor y diversión!

Para el condado Washtenaw!

*Roxana Quijada*

## Home (an ode to Ypsilanti)

I didn't grow up in one place  
 I am glad I didn't  
 But if I could offer one place for my children  
 It would be here

Home is where we set our ground and grow  
 A place we can call our own  
 Be true to ourselves and where we came from  
 My roots dig deep and I will cultivate

Here is home

*Brenda Dinorah González*





Artwork: Carolina Jones

## A Goddess of Contentment

You are a land full of abundance  
 an abundance of collective beloveds.  
 You have taught me to be still  
 in the Season of the present moment.  
 Moment of growth  
 Moment of learning  
 Moment of breath

You are a space without borders  
 we unlearn toxic borders.  
 We are the people of Spirit.  
 You have nurtured between us a bridge...  
 Of interdependence  
 Of coexistence  
 Of love

You are a powerful home to me  
 A home that has showed me love  
 Sacred love...  
 rooted in the process of integration.  
 Seven months ago I was born again  
 A plentiful new beginning  
 In Your Womb, I shed my Serpent Skin.

You are a Goddess of Contentment  
 holding space for me  
 So that I can manifest within  
 the confinements of my own Shadows  
 my freedom to contemplate You  
 And my sacred rhythm in Unity.  
 We Both are guided by the force of Abuela Luna.

A Goddess of Contentment  
 You Are a land full of abundance  
 You Are a space without borders  
 But most importantly  
 Ypsilanti  
 You Are home to me.

**Erika Murcia**



## 1893 Cyclone Damage at the Chinese Laundry

Hold the photograph close. The erasable space appears: you, nameless, hand on your hat, outside on the sidewalk. I saw your hand move. I saw your hat lift as you looked into the hole.

Did you know the hole would unfold? Boil the pockets. Soap the river. Your voice is your own. Use it to ask this counterclock wind for an unremovable dream.

*Linette Lao*

## Ypsi (most of the time)

I can find  
a friend of mine  
in Ypsi  
most of the time

Building community and gathering with  
People who want to change the world  
Striving for a future with care

I envision the post-pandemic moment  
Where we can gather again, together  
We'll still recognize each other...

But more than a year has gone by  
Will we shake the sadness out of our weary eyes  
And take off our masks with a smile?

Speaking of hope...

Is it naïve  
That I feel safe here?  
Like I can be myself?

Like everywhere else  
Exists good and bad  
An echo of many college towns

Like many others  
We're not from here but  
Here we are.

*Nancy Nishihira*



## Familiar Daughter

The sound of the heavy rain woke me on a late August morning  
Giant droplets slapped oak tree leaves  
their vivid green shrouded the slightly cracked window letting in  
tepid summer air  
The sun played touch and go behind blimpy clouds  
Strolling sans umbrella through junctions to take in the  
atmosphere some things are clear about this place so different,  
so storied, and quaintly gay  
A rebellious icon extends skyward amongst flags and fists  
Where past meets present, where there is and there isn't

Glittering the riverside are old train depots and graffiti  
embellished brick hollows of last centuries paper mill or factory  
site or school, their only job for now is to stand  
Bookmarks in history until someone comes back to that page,  
maybe to highlight a mil?

The cool and powerful river snakes through knolls and  
overpasses, behind streets where lampposts are kept warm by  
hand knit fashions

Children laugh on their bikes and shoot hoops across the street  
And the air of busses gathering at the depot mixes with fragrant  
fried oil  
Bee gardens thrive in some of the alleyways and parking lots that  
double as skate parks

Michael Brown's name scrawled on a concrete block and the  
streets tell on themselves by name, of foregone tribes, of salt  
traders, and of Black travelers finding their way to work, and to  
breathe with more ease

Some of the sidewalks here are alive, reclaimed by tree roots and  
systems holding on to dear life

And the open sign at the African market is on 24 hours a day but  
you'll only know its true because the shop door will be  
permanently flung open and Fatouma will be sitting outside on a  
lawn chair taking a long distance call

Stories about different parts of town are just as assorted as the  
people who tell them  
So I go where I may  
And a man at the party store greets me with a head-nod and 'how  
you doing',  
most people do the same  
The locals know how to ask for answers  
Let go of flower petals and cry amongst the conifers, mushrooms,  
and steel that weave this spellbound hamlet echoing Greco  
resistance  
And teaching her students to do the same

Connstynce Chege



## I Stand Tall

I stand tall on my foundation in a city that has shown me both love and hate. As I sit next to the water at riverside park, I feel the sun caress my face. This is my sanctuary, where I find solace and peace as the soothing sounds of water calm my spirit.

Here is where I am flooded with memories of my childhood in a neighborhood called liberty square that no longer exists. A time when double dutch, hopscotch, and games of hide and go seek filled my summer days. A time when being home before the street lights came on was the golden rule. When arguments were settled with fists not guns...have you ever had to knock a stick off a shoulder. I cherish these memories, these moments, these times, that created my foundation.

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I stand tall on my foundation in a city that has shown me both love and hate. Where my first experience with racism still haunts my mind. As a child, only 6 years old, to be called a nigga and slapped across the face, shocked, dismay, nowhere to turn.

I stand tall on my foundation in a city that has shown me both love and hate. Here is where my morals were shaped, where I learned to stand up for myself, stand up for what I value, stand up for my beliefs. Here is where I got my first job, experienced my first kiss, and found my first love. Here is where I gained valuable street smarts, common sense, how to navigate in the hood to all levels of society.

Here, I grew from a child into a strong, independent, beautiful black woman. In this city I stand tall on my foundation in a city that has shown me both love and hate. This city I call home. This city I love.

**Lolita D. Nunn**



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Artwork: Carolina Jones

**Amber Fellows** is a Japanese-American, working millennial, qtpoc punk, and an 18-year resident of Ypsilanti. These pandemic days Amber loves ritualizing piano practice, eating dessert, and looking absolutely cute despite not being on Instagram. Catch them on a walk on Water Street Trail or online getting into fights with politicians.

**Anuja Rajendra** is a community builder and social entrepreneur. Anuja is a double alumnae of the University of Michigan (Engineering and MBA), a social entrepreneur, and a recent Candidate for the Michigan State Senate. She is an MPLP Fellow and serves on boards including APIA-Vote Michigan. She is a mom, auntie and proud Michigander!

**Brenda Dinorah González**, a first generation Mexican, from Donna, Texas. Spent her summers in Michigan and New York with her family of twelve working as migrant farm workers. She is an EMU graduate and lifelong learner. She feels very passionate about bilingual education and the benefits that it brings to our global society. She uses her platform as a teacher to share light. She lives in Ypsilanti, with her husband and two daughters.

**Connstynce Nduta Chege** is a Ypsilanti resident and multi-disciplinary artist who explores learning and liberation through various modes of storytelling. She writes from her perspective as a 3rd culture immigrant and neuroqueer Black woman striving to integrate, decolonize and heal alongside her community.

**Desirae Simmons** is a community organizer, activist, and advocate serving in multiple grassroots organizations and coalitions. Desirae is a founding member of Liberate! Don't Incarcerate, Rising for Economic Democracy in Ypsi, What's Left Ypsi, and Untold Stories of Liberation and Love. She lives in Ypsi with Zander and Indigo who offer a portal to her wildest dreams.

**Erica B. Edwards** is a mamascholar of education whose work is dedicated to centering Black children's joy in and out of urban public schools. She lives in Ypsilanti with her greatest inspirations - her two beautiful sons, brilliant husband, and sweet dog - who teach her daily, the deepest meaning of love.

**Erika Murcia**, also known as Erika Sanadora, is a multiracial Mesoamerican Latinx curandera, guardian of poetic storytelling, daughter of the Salvadoran diaspora, student of ancestral medicines. She facilitates individual & group healing programs through embodied ancestral power. Erika lives temporarily in Turtle Island known as the U.S.

**Jayanthi Reddy** is a queer, South Asian educator, casual cyclist, and novice poet. She teaches high school math in Washtenaw County where she is continuously learning alongside her students. She lives in Superior Township, MI.

**Linette Lao** is a designer, writer and teacher. As a Chinese-American and part of the city's 3% Asian population, she is interested in finding her own connection to Ypsilanti's complicated history, which has always been a fertile site for dreams as well as struggles. She lives and works downtown with her husband Mark and her children, Clementine and Arlo.

**Lolita D. Nunn** is an optimistic, innovative, change-maker who believes in doing the right thing, leading with love and kindness. She is here to walk in her purpose, guided by faith, and doing her part to make this world a better place. Lolita is happy to call Ypsilanti her home.

**Maria Ibarra-Frayre** is a lover of trees, poetry, and tea. She immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico when she was nine and grew up in Detroit. Maria is an organizer, a poet, a partner, and friend. She fights daily to help create a kinder, more caring Michigan. She lives in Ypsilanti with all her plant-babies.

Poet, Singer, Musician and Mama! **Nancy Nishihira** is an Asian-American artist of Ryukyuan descent. In her spare time she works on her Etsy shop (rockstarkitten), makes absurd videos with her friends + follows her love of creating music. Nancy Nishihira has lived in the Ypsilanti area for over a decade.

**Nuola Akinde** (she/they) is the daughter of Yoruba and Bahamian artists, immigrants, and culture-keepers. She spends her days relishing the mundane magic of children and seeking liberation through play. Nuola, and her three children, live on the occupied land of the Council of Three Fires, commonly known as Ypsilanti, Michigan.

**Rachael Somers** is a poet, pianist, podcast host, and dancer. She uses mediums of expression to amplify justice and peace. In Ypsilanti, she has worked with the group Staying Power in the practice of artist activism through poetry. Her most recent project is co-creating the podcast Colored Conscience, discussing the modern issues and experiences of empowered women. As a current student she strides in learning about her own culture and peers to learn how to create the change she wishes to see in her reality.

**Roxana Quijada** es Latina y vive en Ypsilanti.

**Violeta Donawa (she/her/ella)** is a quiet soul of Panamanian and African-American descent who deeply loves the sacred work of question-asking and reflection. Poetry and journaling are longtime tools she's used to explore racial identity, spirituality, and family. Violeta was born and raised in Detroit, lives in Ypsilanti Township, and the majority of her work as a clinical therapist is based in Washtenaw county.







**Cover illustration and publication design by Akanni Hayes**

**May, 2021**