

Searching for Nelsa Lowe

Hannah Lowe

I'd always known I had an aunt named Nelsa in Jamaica, one of my father's many Afro-Chinese half-sisters and brothers. I'd also known, for as long as I can remember, that she had taken her own life shortly after I was born.

I recall my dad saying she had a *bad thing for men* or perhaps it was *a thing for bad men*.

When my half-brother Rob cleared out his mother's house six or seven years ago, he came home with a portrait photograph of Nelsa, the only one I've ever seen. She must have posted it to my father in London. The inscription says *To Ralph, from Nelsa, with all my love, 6/8/55* – but if you look closely, you'll see she has signed her name *Moy*, then

crossed it out. *Moy* in Cantonese means *little sister* – a term of endearment and familiarity – and was, I came to find out, the name Nelsa was known by in Kingston.

But before this, I only had the photograph to go on, and one reference in the digital archives of *The Gleaner*, which mentions her ownership of the Moby Dick, a famous downtown Kingston restaurant, and refers to her as *the legendary Nelsa Lowe*.

My search to know more about my aunt has taken me back to Jamaica several times and to the few people still alive who knew her – two of whom told me that my aunt was a well-known figure in Kingston in the 1960s, not just as a restaurant hostess but as the proprietress of a waterfront brothel. But women like my aunt – despite her success in business – are rarely memorialised, not least because she worked in a subterranean and illegal industry.

A photograph, a brief mention in a newspaper, a death certificate, a man who knew my aunt in passing 50 years ago. How to reconstruct her life, with so little to go on?

And whose story is it to tell? From the beginning, I was mindful of the ethics of writing Nelsa's story. I hope I have walked the terrain of this project with enough care.

Over months, I have corresponded with writers and thinkers across the world: experts in Caribbean women's lives, in the Chinese Caribbean, in sex work, and also also those from the world of esotericism – a tarot reader in Bethnal Green, a medium in California, readers of the *I Ching*, the ancient book of Chinese divination.

I called on artists to respond to Nelsa's photo and, one by one, letters and artwork devoted to my aunt arrived in the post, including this image from the photographic artist Dominique Nok, who coloured in my aunt's portrait.

All of these responses and conversations opened my mind much more fully to my aunt Nelsa's story, rooting her in my mind and heart so surely, I have often felt she is here beside me as I write.

Hannah Lowe

Hannah's work, mainly as a poet and memoirist, is concerned with migration histories, multicultural London and the complex legacies of the British Empire. Her forthcoming book is *The Woman in the Chinese Collar* (Feb 2026, Scribner). She is the founder of the

writers mentoring programme, Writing Otherwise, and Poetry Editor for *WritersMosaic Magazine*.

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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