

NO MAN'S LAND

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Venus X
Lorene Scafaria
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US \$16/CAN \$18 DISPLAY UNTIL JANUARY 31, 2020

ADWOA



ABOAH



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It is the first day of London Fashion Week and Adwoa Aboah is in boss mode. Dressed in a Molly Goddard pantsuit, tortoiseshell Gucci aviators with neon yellow lenses, and Nodaletto leather go-go boots so chunky they might be better described as “architectural,” her outfit is, to say the least, very ‘70s. “My idea for today was Gloria Steinem,” says the model and activist, grinning. “Whenever I’ve got something important to do, I have to wear a suit.” The pinstripes adorning Aboah’s suggest she means business, but her socks—the same radioactive lemon as her sunglasses—are decorated with Acid house smileys. I know this because, within thirty seconds of meeting her, she has removed her shoes.

PHOTOGRAPHY—RENELL MEDRANO STORY—SIMRAN HANS

Stylist: Nathan Klein, Hair: Mark Maciver, Make-Up: Mary-Jane Gotidoc, Nail Artist: Lauren Michelle Pires, Special Thanks to LG Studio, Fashion Assistants: Rhianedd Dancey and Lowri Cooper
Previous Spread: Full Look by Simone Rocha, Current Spread: Full Look by Simone Rocha





Full Look by Chanel

WE WILL GET STUCK IF WE DON'T BRING MEN ALONG FOR THE CONVERSATION.

Ogunbiyi talks about “being the only black girl in the room at Cambridge.” As host, Aboah is a frighteningly good interviewer and gets her guests to spill their dreams and in-

Aboah arrived in London’s Soho neighborhood right from a breakfast hosted by the British Fashion Council, where she has just launched The Mentoring Scheme, which will pair five young fashion industry hopefuls with five established players. They include a photographer, a stylist, an editor, and a talent agent, who happens to also be her mother, CLM Agency founder Camilla Lowther. From a British mum and Ghanaian father, the model—best known for being the cover star of *British Vogue* in 2018—is normally a Fashion Week stalwart. This year, though, she’s sitting the season out: Aboah is going back to school, sort of.

The 27-year-old is taking Gurls Talk, the mental health charity she founded in 2015, on tour across six U.K. schools. What was originally an Instagram account, Gurls Talk, has grown into a global community that exists both online and off—with a weekly podcast and live events in cities like Paris, Warsaw, Accra, and her native London.

Panel discussions star notable women from across disciplines: two-time Olympian Caster Semenya, transgender model and actress Hari Nef, and the CEO of Soronko Academy—West Africa’s first coding academy—Regina Honu. Aboah’s events are more like mini festivals: Panels are followed by practical workshops and celebratory parties. Past collaborations with Coach, Revlon, and Nike were edens of embroidery workshops, healing stations, dance classes, and live music (Little Simz, Jorja Smith, and Lykke Li have all performed), plus things like pop-up photo booths, which help commemorate the sleepover vibe Aboah has created.

Both the podcast and the in-person conversations tackle broader women’s issues like social media use, mental health, body image, and sexuality, as well as burdens and anxieties specific to women of colour, the kind that are rarely discussed in public—just listen to Episode 21 of *The Gurls Talk Podcast*, where Nigerian-British writer Ore

securities by leading with her own. “I just learned on the job. Maybe being more open about my life has made me an easier person to talk to. I’m not hiding anything anymore,” she says.

Indeed, it was Aboah’s own experiences with anxiety, addiction, and suicidal ideation that encouraged her to create a place where girls could connect and offer each other support. In 2014, Aboah attempted to take her own life; on World Mental Health Day in 2018 she shared an incredibly vulnerable Instagram post, mourning the broken young woman she once was. “I’d like to jump into the photo, kiss away the tears, hug her forever and tell her that she’s not alone, tell her that many others suffer with mental health problems but that there is light at the tunnel, tell her that this too shall pass,” she wrote. “For the rest of my life I promise to shine light on this illness that so many times is forgotten, I promise to give the unheard a voice whenever I can, I promise to remember the girl in that



photo and everything she had to go through and to protect the woman I have now become."

Aboah spoke to *No Man's Land* about Gurls Talk, growing up, and the things that bring her joy.

Simran Hans: Today is the first day of Fashion Week, but this year you're scaling back your involvement. How does that feel?

Adwoa Aboah: Yes, I am taking a season off. It's uncomfortable. I've never taken a season off by choice because I love it and I feel... not indebted, because I don't feel like I owe them anything, but there are a lot of people I really love and want to champion. I love the whole process, the excitement. But it doesn't leave me any space to do the stuff I really need to concentrate on. I also think that, although there's a fear about being forgotten—who knows what would happen from just having a season off, the new opportunities that might come my way.

GURLS TALK HAS NEVER ONLY JUST [BEEN] FOR GIRLS.

Do you remember your first Fashion Week?

My first ever show was Giles Deacon, but I've been doing the full rounds for the last three, four years. It's exhausting. [This season] I'm doing other things. I'm doing this mentorship scheme—I'm about to go up north to speak in schools, and I'm doing a whole school tour with Gurls Talk and going to six schools in a week.

What will the back-to-school tour involve?

We are going to schools outside of London that don't have access to lots of different speakers. I'll be bringing a counselor with me, and we'll be doing workshops. It'll start with an assembly talk. I will be going back to my school, which will be in-ter-esting...

Did you like school?

No, I hated school. I haven't been back to school since I left school. PTSD! But I'm coming back stronger than ever, with a great gang of women around me. The counselor that I'm using is someone that I have a lovely history with—we were in treatment together [for addiction]. I'm sure it will be different, but it's always triggering because it wasn't a happy time in my life.

In the past, you've described yourself as a shy child, yet you've taken on this leadership role. At what point were you able to shed that shyness in order to be confident both for yourself and for other young women?

I feel my most comfortable when I'm speaking in front of a group of teenage girls. I'm trying not to be cheesy, but I just feel like that's what I am supposed to do. I have spent my life looking for a place where I could feel that comfortable. So instead of finding it, I created it myself. But it wouldn't be a possibility without all the girls.

What is it about teenage girls that you're drawn to or feel protective over?

It'd be exhausting, and wouldn't help me to be looking back constantly on how I could have changed things in order to make myself a happier human being. But what I can do, and why I'm so protective, is make sure that their transition into adult life isn't as tumultuous as mine was.

Tell me about the joy in your life right now.

I moved back to London. I'm so happy to be home. I was in L.A. for two years, and then New York for nearly three years. That whole Gurls Talk period, I lived in and out of London. I'm in West London now. I'm

literally at home.

What's that like, living at home again?

I love it. I'm really good friends with my parents. I spent a lot of these last couple of years traveling incessantly, being by myself, incessantly. That I can come home, and there's going to be two people I love more than life itself sitting on the sofa, is a dream come true. My sister's moved back as well. So we're all living at home!

Speaking of joy, I hear you're obsessed with interior design.

Mmmhmm.

Your face just lit up.

I love interior design! I'm always obsessing over curtains or door knobs... It's so fun. I was always into decorating my room and making a nest. I'm a Taurus; it's always about home,

nesting, cozy vibes—from rehab to boarding school to the first apartment I had.

What things do you need in the room for it to feel like home?

I'm a hoarder, so everything. Candles, trinkets, shells, stones. When I moved from L.A. to New York, my sister came to help me unpack—she was unwrapping this thing in piles of tissue paper—and brought out a stick.

Like a twig?

Yeah, a twig. And she said, "Oh, why have you got this?" And I went, "I don't remember, but I know it's important." And the stick is still there. I wish I could show you a picture of my room right now—it is on another level. I'm living in my childhood room. All my stuff from New York is on a ship on its way to England. I've kept a lot of stuff. I

have the dress I wore to my first big snogging party at age 15. I have the letters that my granddad sent me when he was still alive in Ghana. I have my notebooks from rehab... I have fucking everything. You feel quite claustrophobic in my room because there are boxes to the ceiling. But a girl's gotta do

I'M COMING BACK STRONGER THAN EVER, WITH A GREAT GANG OF WOMEN AROUND ME.

Full Look by Chanel

I just listened to the episode of your podcast with Love Island's Ovie Soko. Oh, we love Ovie!

I thought it was interesting that you brought a guy onto Gurls Talk for the first time and that you're starting to discuss masculinity.

I know there are plans for a Boys Talk Event, too. Why is now the right moment to bring men into the conversation? Personal experiences have definitely led me to this moment.

With friends and partners?

Friends, and partners, and family. We will get stuck if we don't bring men along for the conversation. [Boys Talk] would definitely not be in the same structure as Gurls Talk, but I think we're going to have to do a lot of trial and error to find out what works. And it wouldn't have me as the face of it. What we will be doing with our event that happens later this year is giving the platform to men who haven't shared about mental health. How would that make a young boy feel, looking at their idol, who seems like the most perfect person in the world, if they shared about having chronic anxiety.

What does a week in the life of Gurls Talk look like? How do the decisions get made?

There's a lot of emails, a lot of phone calls. There's so many different projects—I'm

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pretty lucky to have found Anna [Meacham, my publicist] and Jamil [Shamasdin, my manager] because we're very similar. We all work in a very instant kind of way. But it's always a group decision. We're constantly, especially in this time that we live in—cancel culture—we always have group decisions about how we should word things. Is this the best approach? Are we staying true to ourselves? Are we selling out? It's a constant conversation.

Something that I thought of when I first heard of Gurls Talk is the long-standing feminist tradition of consciousness raising circles. Like in the 1970s, women gathering...

Exactly, that's where it's all stolen from, babes. From me sitting in an all-women's AA meeting. This is what it's all about.

I'm interested in the intergenerational connections that you're fostering; how women of different ages and backgrounds can share and learn from each other.

That's where I got most of my information from, whether

Dress: Y/Project, Gloves: Erdem, Earrings: Jacquemus, Shoes: Penelope Chilvers





Dress: Y/Project, Gloves: Eden, Earrings: Jacquemus, Shoes: Penelope Chilvers





Dress: Mary Katrantzou

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Full Look by Simone Rocha



I RESENTED MY VULNERABILITY, AND MY EMPATHY, AND THE WAY MY BRAIN THOUGHT. BUT ACTUALLY THAT'S WHAT HAS CREATED GURLS TALK.

it be my grandma, my mum, or my younger sister, who's been such a mega source of information in my life. She was way more confident [than me]. She put herself out there way more than I did. She wasn't as scared of things as I was.

What were you scared of?

Ugh, just everything. My mum always says that she thinks I came out the womb full of fear. I think I'm just a worry guts really, which definitely held me back. I definitely still worry as much as I did, I just kind of try and pep talk my way out of it. I'm constantly giving myself a pep talk in order to get through something.

Do you worry about the same things that you used to worry about?

I used to worry about what other people thought about me back then. I don't really worry about that that much now. I'm a perfectionist, so that makes things quite stressful because I'm always competing with myself and thinking, how I can do it better, and what I can do more of? And I think the thing is with being an activist and philanthropist, it's not a nine-to-five job.



Previous Spread, Current Page: Dress, Belt and Earrings: Alexander McQueen, Hat: Vivetta
Opposite Page: Full look by Gucci, Shoes: Christian Louboutin





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The problem is still there when you wake up the next day. There's still more pain all over the world. I resented my vulnerability, and my empathy, and the way my brain thought. But actually that's what has created Gurls Talk. But it is hard being a highly sensitive human being.

We can't be of service if we don't take care of ourselves.

No, of course not. I take a lot of time to myself. I do a lot of exercise. I'm very particular about the people I invite into my environment and my space. I am sociable, but I'm also a bit of a hermit.

What's your dream hermit day?

Just not leaving the house really. Or maybe I'd walk out of the house, but I'd just be like, down the road in my favorite cafe, and then I'd just come back home. Do what I have to do, go to the gym, and then just be safe in the house. I like being cozy at home. A lot of the people I hang out with, I've known since I was, like, six. If you're always putting yourself out there, and you're in the public eye, sometimes

taking power back is about sticking with what you know, and staying comfortable, and staying safe.

Previous Spread: Dress: Dilara Findikoglu, Boots: Erdem Current Spread: Full look by Simone Rocha Current Spread, Opposite Page: Dress: Dilara Findikoglu

