

Me/We: Black Queer Praxis of Healing Justice, Creativity, and Care

By

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Abstract

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The *how* and *now* of 21st century social justice work in the United States is characterized by politicized healing and creative embodied abolitionist praxis. This suggests that our liberation and political movements are inseparable from our intimate relationship to Spirit, ancestors, the natural world, self, and community. What distinguishes this approach from preceding movements for Black liberation is its explicit centering of queerness, healing, the body, and a focus on collective interventions that disrupt systems of historical violence and harm and replace them with systems of community care. Introduced as *Movements* – short thematic concepts that emphasize core Black queer feminist practices and intentional action – the stories, rituals, and tools presented in this dissertation intervene and disrupt current and historical systems of harm and settler-colonial oppression. These practices center the laborious work of practitioners who are caring, creating, and holding space for themselves and the community. My study explores the work of Black and queer mothers, healers, and artists residing in Chicago, IL through ten in-depth interviews, one Kitchen Table Cypher (a co-designed group dialogue), and participatory dreaming and observations. Building on the foundational work of scholars and community practitioners such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Prentis Hemphill, I introduce an original lens, Creative Afro-Queer Ecology (C.A.Q.E) to activate the theoretical, applied, and methodological concepts of four elements of healing justice: creative embodied pedagogies, Afro-futurism and Sankofa, Black queer feminism, and ecological perspectives. Through three *Movements* – “The Body,” “Water,” and “Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers” – I conclude with a conversation about what this means for our collective movements in healing justice, suggesting that the framework

requires that we apply praxis from Black queer people and includes spiritual and ritualistic elements.

Keywords: Healing Justice, Community Care, Black Queer Politics, Feminist Ecology, Afrofuturism, Historical and Cultural Trauma, Mothering, Artist, Cultural Organizers, Healers, Body, Water, Non-Linearity and Circularity

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the children who survived the ships and continue to live deep under the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. To all future seeds leading us to our liberation. And to my mama: mother, artist, healer, *ancestor*.

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Opening Prayer

Imagine yourself with me in a sacred grove of trees. This is the grove of **healing** and **justice**. At the entrance of this grove, we are met by our human ancestors who guide us *slowly* to the base of three ancient trees. These are our first ancestors. We provide **offerings** to them – *prayers, sacred herbs, water, tobacco*. The three *ancestor trees* protect the sacred grove. Their branches reach up, seemingly touching the stars, far beyond the crown of the younger trees around them. Their trunks are textured in a variety of shapes and colors, indented with markings that hold memories of the centuries they have stood upright, weathering storms, winds, and sometimes unwelcome extractions of their resources. Every spring the trees in this grove sprouts lush leaves. During the summer they offer peaceful shade to support the new growth of *future* ancestor trees. The trees have deep roots that have had many eons to expand into the intimate crevices of earth and mud. The soil is rich with elixirs that activate humans' guttural intuition, human-spirit connection, and past and future life dreams. They have been listening in on the conversation of wise elders for centuries, overhearing sacred ways of intentional practice, at every level of our ecosystem from the individual to the environment. They hold the wisdom from which we draw in order *to remember*, in order to garner the strength to intervene in oppressive systems and to work collectively towards practices that holistically support our minds, bodies, and spirits.

This is the story of *Movements* amidst the ancient *ancestor trees*, whose seeds were planted centuries ago before the (English) language was formed. These stories are limited by words, but we try to put language to them. We explore the stories through our senses. We connect to the stories by listening to nature. We try to make sense of things because as humans that is what we do. We apply meaning through our brilliant, faulty, and easily influenced minds.

As in all stories, this one is pieced together through threads of time, of “she said,” “they said,” “the ancestors say.” This story is fragmented by a history of settler-colonial terror and enslavement, but it’s also tethered in joyful resistance, survival, and tradition. This story is an invocation of what has occurred, what is unfolding, and what is possible. Many of the pieces of this story exist in blood memories that have been nourished in the soil for centuries. In order to best gather the wisdom held in these trees, we consult information that is passed down, and down, and down again. We consult our bodies. We listen to Spirit. We sit with our ancestors (both trees and humans). We see and absorb these *Movements* for what they are, *stories in motion* in a sacred grove of *ancient trees* seeded to support us in caring for, tending to, creating, playfully teasing, running alongside, falling in the dirt, soaking up the sun, and huddling together with comrades in a makeshift tent under the stars, experimenting for our liberation. The work of activating the visions in this grove of *ancestor trees* is joyful. It is also work; it can be exhausting. Please enjoy my original hand drawn images intentionally placed throughout this dissertation as invitations to *pause*; to *stand up* and *move* your body when it asks you to. *Pray* out loud if your voice wants to be heard. In this grove of *ancestor trees*, you are always welcome to return to **play**.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“The only way to survive is by taking care of one another.”

Grace Lee Boggs¹

At its core, healing justice *is* worldmaking. It is the work of dreaming, radically imagining, and creating transformative systems of care *with* and for those most impacted by oppression. In this dissertation you are invited into *Movements* that activate the principles of healing justice. These *Movements* provide **stories, practices, rituals, and tools** that **intervene** and **disrupt** current and historical systems of harm and oppression; that **value** and **center** the emotional labor and praxis of care for those holding space and doing the work; and that operate from a **politicized healing** lens to create imaginative and transformative alternatives to harm. This research study examines the praxes of Black queer radical imagination through the stories and practices of those at the center of **caring** (mothers), **creating** (artists), and **space holding** (healers). Until now, the work of integrating spirituality, creativity, politicized healing, and embodiment practices simultaneously was only seen as tangential, or at most complementary, to liberation and social movement work. Healing justice is the now of our movements.

The practices that emerge through healing justice are imaginative yet tangible alternatives to harm that encompass “all of the fantastic, with the arc bending toward justice” (brown & Imarisha, 2015, p. 4). The stories featured in this dissertation center the lived experience of individuals who are practitioners and part of certain social movements while also exploring intimate collective spaces that illustrate the relational aspect of community that expands our options not only for surviving, but for **being** and **thriving**. The *Movements* of this dissertation are grounded in the rich creative spaces that draws from speculative fiction -creative explorations

¹ Boggs, G. L. (2021) as cited in Dexterity Books Editorial. *All the Good: Doing Life After the Diploma*.

of technologies, tools, and strategies- and the radical imaginations of Black queer people. Walidah Imarisha states, “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” (brown & Imarisha, 2015, p. 3). In *Freedom Dreams: The Black radical imagination* Robin D. Kelley states the Black radical imagination is “a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation. It is fundamentally a product of struggle, of victories and losses, crises and openings, and endless conversations circulating in a shared environment” (Kelley, 2002, p. 150). My dissertation argues that social justice work cannot be divorced from our imagination, nor can it be separate from spiritual work. The *Movements* in this dissertation demand that we believe in what appears impossible and that we expand the healing justice principles to include the mystical traditions of Black spirituality and Black radical tradition. *Reader:* Throughout the pages of this dissertation you are invited, to behold, be curious, and to learn from the creative embodied practices explored here, practices that disrupt Western and white dominant narratives about blackness and queerness and expand the possibilities of liberation for all people. The *Movements* in this dissertation offer evidence that a healing justice lens is not only central but crucial in order to activate healing for all people, particularly Black queer folks.

Research Questions

The principles of healing justice are the groundwork for this dissertation; they inform and shape each chapter. The overarching aim of my research is to offer co-constructed healing justice practices that enable individuals, intimate collectives, and larger social justice movements to meaningfully engage with the praxes of Black queer practitioners and to integrate practices that meet Black, queer, and non-Black communities’ needs for reduced harm and collective

liberation. There are three **core objectives** that guide the development and design of this project. The objectives are: 1) To establish a more holistic understanding of historical trauma for Black people, through the lens and lived experiences of Black queer mothers², Black queer creators, and Black queer healers; 2) To examine, document, and actuate the creative and embodied practices being used by Black queer people that support healing and liberatory praxis; and 3) To understand the contextual elements (time-space reality, place, environment, et cetera) that best situate Black queer people in their work (creative, political, parental, other) and how they position themselves for individual, collective, and community healing. My overarching goal and core objectives lead me to the following two **research questions**:

1. What tools, rituals, and practices are Black queer mothers/artists/healers in Chicago using to support healing and liberatory praxis *and* to address trauma and oppressive systems at the individual, collective, and community level?
2. How are these praxes of Black queer resistance and radical imagination engaging tenants of possibility and the future?

I begin Chapter 2: “It’s Lit: A Review of Healing Justice, Historical Trauma, and Black Resistance” by considering research, scholarship, and community practices within the framework of healing justice. The chapter begins with the subsection “Healing Justice: What is needed for Liberation?” providing an overview of the history and six principles of healing justice which seek to disrupt harmful systems by identifying and actualizing holistic collective interventions and practices that create transformative systems and life-affirming conditions for Black people. In the following subsection “Historical Trauma and Settler-Colonial Violence” I examine literature on the impact of violence and oppression against Black and Indigenous bodies,

² I use the term mother, mothers, and/or motherhood throughout my dissertation to refer to the act of mothering, as a verb. I was first introduced to this concept through Alexis Pauline Gumbs. I expand on the framing of *mothering* in the Review of Literature “Mothers (Caring).”

psyches, and spirits in the United States, with a focus on Black historical and cultural trauma. “Caring, Creating, and Holding Space: Interventions as Resistance” details how the roles of mother, cultural organizer, artist, and healer exhibit historical and contemporary interventional practices in movement work and within healing justice. The literature examines the lineages of resistance with a particular emphasis on Black queer people. “Mothering (Caring)” examines mothers as a biological and community role traditionally assigned the laborious work of caring for, about, and with individuals and communities. I draw heavily from Black feminist scholars Dani McClain (2019), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012; 2016), and Dana-Ain Davis (2016) to synthesize the queering of motherhood and the potential for mothering to lead us towards more just and liberatory systems in society. “Artists (Creating)” explores the role of artists and cultural workers as masters of both disruption and creation. Scholars Bracey Jr, John H., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst in their book *SOS Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (2014) provide foundational context for the origins of Black artists and art making as a form of social intervention and Black futuristic dreaming. Lastly, in “Healers (Holding Space)” I review literature connecting historical and contemporary Black spiritual traditions and “African-American folk healing” (Mitchem, 2007) to liberation and healing justice. Jennifer Richardson (2018), Shawn Ginwright (2010), Stephanie Y. Mitchem (2007), and bell hooks (1993) among other scholars provide in-depth analyses of the personal, intimate collective, and community practices held in Black healing spaces.

Chapter 3 introduces my original conceptual framework **C.A.Q.E. - Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology**. I developed C.A.Q.E. as an extension of the healing justice framework that is grounded in the important and considerable work of practitioners within the field. C.A.Q.E. is an applied lens informed by the scholarship and applications of 1) creative

embodied and place-based pedagogies, 2) Afrofuturism and Sankofa, 3) Black queer feminism, and 4) ecological perspectives. Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology contributes to healing justice by explicitly proposing four theoretical and applied elements to consider as practitioners, activists, and scholars deepen our understanding of working within the healing justice lens. My articulation of the four respective elements develop from three areas: 1) my personal experience as a healing justice practitioner, a community facilitator, and healer, 2) my empirical research and analysis of current scholarship, specifically gaps in the literature around the framing of historical trauma and healing interventions (that often compliment but fall short of the core principles of healing justice), and 3) an iterative analysis from my qualitative research (interviews and participant). While I present the considerations within C.A.Q.E. as four unique elements, their connection can best be described as bi-directional and interwoven rather than definitively distinguishable. As such, C.A.Q.E. also informs decisions throughout my research study and design, including the methodology, analysis, and the formatting of my dissertation.

Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology is an invitation for community, healing justice practitioners, and scholars, particularly within the fields of Black and American Studies, Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Applied Sociology, and Community Psychology to explore, deepen, and activate core tenants of healing justice through four elements. Through the praxis of creativity and embodied practices, Afrofuturistic time-space realities, Black queer abolitionist politics, and contextually situated considerations of the human ecosystem, the geographic and political environment, and the non-human spheres (such as nature, spirit, ancestors, and other non-human guides) C.A.Q.E. offers both theoretical and practical contributions from which to undertake the difficult work of addressing and intervening on trauma and generating life-affirming systems of care; these elements emerge throughout the dissertation as both subtle and explicit “how-to.”

However, similar to my use and framing of *Movements* within this dissertation (described below in “How to Read the Movements”), C.A.Q.E. is not meant to be a stagnant or prescriptive framework, rather my hope is that it provides four branches that extend from healing justice and that deepen, evolve, and expand our praxis as we continue to be in experimental practice with each other.

Chapter 4 presents my research methodology, which includes ten in-depth interviews, a Kitchen Table Cypher, and participatory observations. I attempt to engage the applied principles of healing justice and the conceptual tenants of C.A.Q.E. articulating those connections throughout my methodological approach. My research study incorporates a trauma-informed research design (for example, seen in the decisions made behind the Kitchen Table Cypher). Additionally, in order to activate traditional Black feminist methodologies, I center the lived experience and embodied knowledge of my participants and utilize dialogue and reflexivity as a researcher in order to analyze their stories. Another example is exemplified through my use of an Afrofuturist lens which informed how I formulated and sequenced my interview questions.

How to Read the Movements (Chapters 5-8)

Chapter 5 through Chapter 8 of this dissertation are written in *Movements - messy*, layered, life-affirming, non-linear, unapologetically taking up space in sometimes subtle, and very often intimate loud ways. The concept of *Movements* is drawn from Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s writing, particularly her recent book *Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals (Emergent Strategy Book 2)*. Gumbs work “consists of an introduction and nineteen thematic movements (it would be too linear to say chapters and anyway. They are much shorter than chapters) organized around core Black feminist practices like breathing, remembering, collaborating, etc.” (Gumbs, 2020, p.10). As detailed above, the word “movement” is meant to suggest short thematic concepts and emphasize **core Black queer feminist practices**, and the

process of **intentional action**, in this case the work of moving us towards healing justice and liberation.

There are three main voices in these *Movements*. In no particular order, the first is that of the participants interviewed for this project, their voices are central to the content and provide the texture that lives throughout the *Movements*. All excerpts from participant interviews indicate the author of the particular quote, and are single-spaced and indented and in “quotes”. The second voice is my voice, that of the empirical “academic” analysis, that also includes the research of other scholars and my interpretation of the interviews and text. I will sometimes highlight words or concepts in **bold** in order to help the reader make clear connections to specific healing justice frameworks and/or important themes throughout the *Movements*. The third voice invites the reader to be open to Spirit and all of the ways that Spirit speaks to us. Throughout the dissertation, messages written in *lower case and italic* address the reader and invite you to be open to Spirit speaking to you as you read. For example, that may look like a whisper from an ancestor, even one word, write down what you heard. Or an intuitive hint from your own consciousness. In order to imitate moments when I received messages from Spirit throughout my writing process (and as an experimental facilitation practice) I periodically invite you to listen to this third voice, for example: *Reader: soften into what you felt. pause. move. drink water. touch your heart. take an intentional breath.* These are invitations, not instructions. Trust your own guiding system.

These *Movements* are presented as three “findings” chapters and a conclusion. “*Movements in the Body*” (Chapter 5), “*Movements in Water*” (Chapter 6), and “*Movements with Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers*” (Chapter 7) are each divided into a prelude and three subsections. The subsections are numbered – “One” through “Nine” - not to suggest priority or

chronology, rather to provide organization and connect respective subthemes. “*Movements in the Body*” examines stories of the intimate and autonomous body as it relates to (a) generational wounding and transference of pain, (b) self-affirming practices and pleasure, and (c) the power of changing shape through our bodies. “*Movements in Water*” describes practices with water as an element for holding, releasing, and visioning. These stories explore the use and significance of water in (a) healing historical trauma, (b) building a relationship with oneself and their community, and (c) visioning outcomes for the future. Lastly, “*Movements with Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers*” offers healing interventions by honoring the teachings of circularity as it relates to (a) the cycles in life and nature, (b) the architecture of circles as a shape that holds space and helps resolve conflict, create connection, and offer care, and (c) cyphers and an energetic and spiritual approach to exploring change, experimenting with new shapes, and better understanding liberation. Consider each thematic *Movement* in Chapter 5, 6, and 7 to be the seedling of future *ancestor trees* in the sacred healing justice grove, whose task it is to tend to the memories and tools of healing and liberation for Black queer people, and thus, for all people, while simultaneously, reflecting the very real conditions of the individual narrators’ lives. These stories are told through whispers held in the veins of the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves of these ancient trees.

Chapter 8 “*Movements in Collective Praxis*” concludes my dissertation with a discussion of the theoretical and applied implications of “*Movements in the Body, Water, and Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers*.” This *Movement* resituates us in the City of Chicago where **the work** of healing justice as an active framework is given texture. Part 1 offers theoretical context for healing justice as “*Healing Justice: A Politicized Black Queer Spiritual Cosmology*” that allows individuals and collectives to explore “*Sankofa as Liminal Time and Space*,” and understand the

conceptual framework as an “Ecology [that] Spirals Backward and Forward between Me/We.” I present healing justice as a theoretic lens that invites us to “Get Weird.’ And *Be* Magic.” In the pages between Part 1 and Part 2, I present “The Space in Between”, inside which the identities of mother, artist, and healer take on expanded and interwoven roles and shapes through three “Movement Archetypes: - “The Time-Traveler,” “The Shapeshifter,” and “The Architect.” Part 2 centers “Healing Justice: Ritualized Black Queer Embodied Meditation(s)” as an applied collection of everyday spiritual healing and creative pedagogy, such as rituals and prayers. I also discuss the “Collective Challenges and Possibilities” within organizational healing justice work. I conclude Part 2 with reflections on the relationship between *Movements* as intentional, laborious, yet playful practices towards collective liberation.

All of the *Movements* are a dreamscape of embodied rituals, musings (hopeful and imagined realities), and real-life struggles. The *Movements* exist in the liminal spaces that are the realm between fact and fiction, real and sci-fi, the living, the yet to be born, and the ancestors. All of the practices are tangible, and yet they require we build a relationship to the intangible. That is to say, the *Movements* are grounded at their core in the affirmative and unapologetic imaginings and beings of Black queer, mystic, disabled, surviving/survivors, neurodivergent, parenting, disrupting, creating/creative folks. Finally, I want to include a brief note on the critical “Participatory Dreaming” phase of my dissertation process (further expanded upon in Chapter 4) which combines elements of my scholarship, community practice, and art-making and reflects my holistic practice. My applied experience has directly impacted my project and are all integral to how and why my dissertation research unfolded in the ways it has. I draw directly from my experiences as an organizer and healing justice practitioners, an artist, and a scholar, therefore throughout the dissertation you will find original art, text, and poetry.



CHAPTER 2

It's Lit: A Review of Healing Justice, Historical Trauma, and Black Resistance

“Healing justice identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence and bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds”

Prentis Hemphill³

Healing justice is a contemporary framework that illuminates layers of the ecology of Black trauma *and* the possibilities of Black healing. The first section in this literature review, “Healing Justice: What’s Needed for Liberation?” presents the history, emergence, and practices of the healing justice framework that acknowledges oppression and centers care (Piepznar-Samarasinha, 2016; Hemphill 2017; Pyles, 2020; Brown, 2021; Bosley, Morris, Harrington, & Le Dantec, 2022). Following the overview of the healing justice framework, “Historical Trauma and Settler-Colonial Violence” examines pivotal scholarship produced about Black trauma, with a focus on historical and cultural trauma (DeGruy, 1997; Brave Heart, 2000; Eyerman, 2001; Ginwright, 2005; Jenkins, 2014; Raffo, 2017). In “Caring, Creating, and Space Holding: Interventions as Resistance” I present literature about mothers, artists, and healers, three critical roles in healing resistance and disruptions to systems of harm and oppression. “Mothering (Caring)” examines mother as a care role in community, emphasizing the unique position of Black and queer mothers within the numerous care roles in Black communities (Hill Collins, 2005; Abdullah, 2012; Morgan, 2015; Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2016; Menakem, 2017; brown, 2018; McClain, 2019; Haga, 2020). “Artists (Creating)” features brief case studies from the extensive history of Black artists and their use of cultural organizing as a tool to disrupt and resist dominant white cultural narratives. I feature two case studies: The first offers a general

³ Hemphill, P. (2017). Healing justice is how we can sustain Black lives. *Huffington Post*, 7. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/healing-justice_b_5899e8ade4b0c1284f282ffe

overview of the Black Arts Movement (Sonn, 2010; Bracey Jr., Sanchez, & Smethurst, 2014), and the second features Emory Douglas and his work with the Black Panther Party (Doss, 1999; Goldbard, 2006; Douglas, 2008; Freeland, 2009). Lastly, in “Healers (Holding Space)” I introduce literature that discusses spiritual resistance, healers, and the work of holding space for healing specific to Black communities (Ginwright, 2010; Jordan, 1985; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989, 2003, 2005; Chavez-Diez & Lee, 2015; Dei, 2017; Richardson, 2018; Bambara, 1970).

Healing Justice: What’s Needed for Liberation?

Healing justice is a framework that comes from spaces of anti-colonial social disruption. It is a praxis rooted in the experiences of people of color, disability justice, queer movements, and reproductive movements. Specifically, “Healing justice as a movement and a term was created by queer and trans people of colour and in particular Black and brown femmes, centering working-class, poor, disabled and Southern/rural healers” (Page, 2016). It is a concept from the people, for the people. The term “healing justice” was first coined in 2007 by Cara Page and the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective (March 2018, in-person notes; 2020)⁴. During a panel discussion addressing reproductive justice and disability justice, Cara Page explicitly named the important intersection between the two movements, and a framework was given roots. Cara Page writes,

If it's not centering Black / Indigenous / people of colour (BIPOC) healers, it's not healing justice. If it's not affordable, it's not healing justice. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016)

⁴ Prentis Hemphill presented a brief history of the healing justice framework during a 4-day national gathering of organizers and healers from across the United States called the Healing Resistance Convening. This information is from my personal notes taken between February 28 and March 3, 2018 Phoenix, Arizona. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha also provides a brief history of healing justice in “A Not-So-Brief Personal History of the Healing Justice Movement 2010-2016” <https://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010%E2%80%932016>

Not only does healing justice insist that we are anti-racist, anti-ableist, pro-LGBTQIA⁵, it also requires that we understand the lineage of Black, indigenous, and people of color in the United States is one that is deeply impacted by systemic violence and historical trauma, and therefore necessitates that we center and create transformative and caring systems in their place. Healing justice is a lens founded by organizers, practitioners, and community leaders intricately involved in social movement spaces and interventions. At a time where people are seeking to address harm both inside their organizations and within larger systems of oppression, healing justice offers a clear theoretical and applied framework.

Healing justice is a relatively new framework (circa 2010; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016; Pyles, 2020) and has become increasingly foregrounded within movement spaces and beyond, especially since 2020. This popularization also comes with growing concerns of its appropriation, as indicated in Cara Page and Erica Woodland's forthcoming book (Spring 2023) *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety* wherein one section "addresses the ways healing justice is being co-opted and commodified" (Carapage.co, para. 6). Nonetheless, several organizations have integrated the healing justice framework to inform their working campaigns and community work in principles ways, for example, B.O.L.D. (Black Organizing for Leadership & Dignity), People's Movement Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the Chicago Torture Justice Center, all of whom have adopted a politicized healing lens. Healing justice proposes explicit core principles that differentiate it from other applied frameworks like transformative justice, such as foregrounding Black queer disabled and working-class people. Nonetheless, many of the practices are rooted in similar principles to transformative justice and Black liberation strategies.

⁵ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (questioning), intersex, asexual and (agender).

Alongside healing justice, scholars and practitioners such as Shawn Ginwright have articulated and practiced transformative justice and healing-centered youth organizing frameworks for decades. Through his research, youth work, and facilitation, scholar and activist Shawn Ginwright coined the term “radical healing.” Ginwright defines radical healing as a process "which builds the capacity of young people to act upon their environment in ways that contribute to well-being for the common good" (2010, p. 85). Similar to my orientation around the pitfalls of Black trauma-research, Ginwright work critiques social science research(ers) who often frame Black communities' relationship to trauma as maladaptive, negatively impacting their behavior, or pathological. This criticism provides a key reorientation to how he approaches radical healing practices in order to reframe how young Black youth understand their worth and move into action. Ginwright frames radical healing as an ecologically responsive strategy; the practice of which is done through caring relationships, community connections, political consciousness, and cultural identity. Radical healing seeks to activate change and healing at three levels, 1) individual level wellness: strengthening political and social consciousness, hope, optimism, and voice, and focusing on the capacity to create, 2) community-level wellness: collective power and control over local public policy which involves community organizing, for example planning a neighborhood block party (the intended outcomes of which signal increased trust, relationships, networks, and optimism about capacity for social change). The third component is social-level wellness: an invitation to engage in larger social movements and other forms of collective action.

A further example of how radical healing materializes is featured in Ginwright’s work with Camp Akili, a five-day summer camp in California for Black teens to engage in cultural learning that further deepen their healing process. Ginwright states “Camp Akila creates a space

where being black, young, and poor are not liabilities; rather, these identities are fertile soil for the seeds of activism and social justice” (2010, p. 87). During the retreat, youth are asked to commit to honest truth telling and dialogue about their real-life experiences of oppression and trauma, systemic violence and racism, even self-oppression (internalized racism) and blindness. An example of the camps activation includes conversations around “good hair” or “bad hair”, a dialogue within the Black community that often points to internalized racism. The hope of this conversation is to foster a consciousness of these forces among youth by illustrating how they internalize these ideas that can then provide them with a powerful critical perspective, or “oppositional gaze” about social world and place in it. Ginwright’s three plus decades of work and scholarship at the intersection of youth-organizing and healing provides invaluable contributions to the larger conversation surrounding the importance of politicized healing and healing-centered political organizing. The healing justice framework offers “radical healing” an expanded understanding of the Black, queer, rural and/or urban, poor political experience, particularly articulated through a Black queer feminist lens.

Since 2020, healing justice has been more widely adopted by institutional fields outside of social justice organizations, such as human-centered design (Bosley, Morris, Harrington, & Le Dantec, 2022) and social work (Pyles, 2020). Human-design researchers Brooke Bosley, Christina Harrington, Susana Morris, and Christopher Le Dantec (2022) received consultation from Cara Page, co-founder of Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, to explore the healing justice framework as a tool for collective healing from systemic traumas. The authors propose healing justice is a design intervention wherein participants are able to center Black joy and healing as they grapple with the impact of policing. The authors found that,

Healing Justice and Afrofuturistic Feminism are essential methods in creating workshops and workbooks tackling systemic and institutional structures, and Black joy should not be tied directly to traumatic experiences, but instead given room to form organically. (2022, p. 482)

Other examples include *Black Womxn Flourish*, a Baltimore-based design collective using a healing justice framework to create interventional and preventative well-being tools for Black women. Through a community-led design process, they re-imagine Black women's practices of wellness, centering joy and celebration, and decentering western approaches to healing (Brown, 2021 as cited in Bosley et. Al., 2022).

Prentis Hemphill, former Director of Healing Justice with the Black Lives Matter Network and current Founder and Director of The Embodiment Institute and the *Finding Our Way Podcast*, states “**Healing justice is the *how* of our movements** – it’s the texture, the experience and the vision that guides us. It’s our effort towards transforming ourselves, our ways of building relationships and our institutions to support and sustain Black aliveness that has carried us forward” (2017, para. 5). Hemphill identifies six core guiding principles to a healing justice practice. The principles include: (a) engaging people who are visioning imaginative and transformative alternatives to harm (for example alternatives to the carceral system), (b) engaging and supporting individuals, specifically in political strategy, who are capable of holding trauma and dedicated to the complexities of emotional change, (c) identifying “the institutions that interrupt and undermine our individual and collective abilities to heal. And in those places we organize towards change and interrupt our dependence,” (d) centering a praxis of care and valuing emotional labor and resilience, (e) centering care and accountability, (f)

bringing these interventions (and ones yet to be imagined) from the margins to the center of our work (Hemphill, 2017, para. 7-13).

As Prentis Hemphill states above, healing justice is the “how” of our movements. It is a conceptual framework that must simultaneously be situated in innovative and transformative applications within communities most impacted by oppression and systemic violence. These reimagined systems must recognize the impact of anti-Black, settler-colonial, and cis-heteropatriarchal violence on the bodies, minds, and psyches of people of color. Healing justice therefore necessitates that our reimagined systems center those most equipped to address trauma, for example trauma-informed practitioners, healers, embodiment practitioners. It also necessitates that the new systems we create acknowledge and celebrate the arduous labor of working to mend hundreds of years of intentional anti-human, anti-nature, anti-life violence. It requires that we center those who care, those who dream and build, and those who create and hold collective healing spaces.

Historical Trauma and Settler-Colonial Violence

“The function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being.”

Toni Morrison⁶

In the United States Black historical trauma is marked by white supremacist systems of violence and denial; these systems have had paramount effects on the Black body, psyche, and spirit. The complex and generational impacts of settler-colonial violence in Black communities is integral to understanding the framework of Black trauma. American Psychological Association

⁶ Morrison, T., St. John, P., Callahan, J., Callahan, S., (1975, May 30). A Humanist View. [Lecture]. Portland State University’s Oregon Public Speakers Collection: “Black Studies Center public dialogue. Pt. 2,” Portland, Oregon. https://www.mackenzian.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Transcript_PortlandState_TMorrison.pdf

defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea” (American Psychological Association, 2019). Continuing to draw from the language of psychology, three types of traumas are outlined: (a) Acute trauma results from a single incident, (b) Chronic trauma is repeated and prolonged such as domestic violence or abuse, and (c) **Complex trauma** is exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature. In settler-colonial nation-states such as the United States, Black communities, Native American communities, First Nations people, and other indigenous communities have all suffered from complex trauma due to insidious, generational, and continued forms of systemic oppression, for example, the tragic normalization of death and state-sanctioned violence such as policing and the carceral system. Additionally, these communities' wounds are often compounded by generational trauma within their families from their ancestors. Historical trauma and cultural trauma are both forms of complex trauma; the respective frameworks articulate particular community impacts based on analysis of racial, ethnic, and cultural specificity. The following review of literature on historical trauma focuses on scholarship within Black and indigenous communities, outlining relevant past scholarship, while also pointing towards some of its misgivings and highlighting areas for further research and development.

There is now a common understanding that historical trauma - cumulative wounding across generations - (Brave Heart, 2000) in Black and indigenous communities impacts the body, psyche, and spirit (Walters et al., 2011). Lakota scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998; 2000) first coined the term “**historical trauma**,” drawing from the restrictions of traditional

cultural and spiritual practices has lasting impact on historical collective memory. Generational trauma, also referred to as transgenerational trauma, is a young body of research that suggests trauma can be genetic, biological, and psychological, and that its impact is passed down from the first generation of trauma survivors to the next generation (Ginwright, 2005; Raffo, 2017).

Cultural trauma provides an additional lens to understand the scope of trauma research. Scholars such as Radley (1990), Eyerman (2001), and Smelser (2004) contribute varying discourses that frame Black cultural trauma. Ron Eyerman⁷ clearly articulates the intimate relationship between **collective memory** and historical representation as an interwoven lens through which Black people understand their trauma lineage. He states cultural trauma causes “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2001, p. 2). Eyerman’s focus on collective memory suggests, for example, that slavery impacts Black folks not solely as an institution of oppression but as a “collective memory.” He means that while most Black people alive in the 21st century never experienced slavery personally, the collective memory of slavery impacts how Black people continue to understand their history and formulate their identities. Eyerman suggests there is a difference between the effects of trauma on an individual level and the effects of trauma as a cultural process. Through a cultural trauma lens, one intervenes, for example, in the impact of slavery by creating various forms of representation, such as storytelling and art, that are “**linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory**” (Eyerman, 2001, p. 1). Eyerman continues,

⁷ It is my intention to reference and center scholarship conducted by Black and indigenous people. Particularly as it relates to interpretations of Black narrative, lived experiences, and trauma. With that being said, Ron Eyerman is a cis-white male scholar. Nonetheless, I believe his contributions to the analysis of Black cultural trauma are interesting and important in order to provide an overview of the scope of this literature.

Cultural trauma is rooted in an event or series of events, but not necessarily in their direct experience. Such experience is usually mediated, through newspapers, radio, or television, for example, which involves a spatial as well as temporal distance between the event and its experience. (2001, p. 3)

Dr. Joy DeGruy offers a trauma framework specific to the Black community. DeGruy argues that the stressors caused by slavery and contemporary anti-Black systems are devastating; however, “even more impactful than the physical assault on their bodies was the daily assault on their psyches” (1997, p. 119). Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is defined as “a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continue to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today” (1997, p. xx). She proposes trauma is passed down generationally through parenting and states that PTSS impacts even those with positive family history, meaning all Black people who are descendant of enslaved Africans. DeGruy suggests PTSS exists as a survival syndrome - a pattern of behaviors brought about by specific circumstances. She discusses three categories of patterns of behaviors: vacant esteem, ever present anger, and racist socialization (1997). Her analysis, however, is damage-centered and perpetuates stereotypes of Black people -- Black men in particular. For example, to support her argument that PTSS initiates maladaptive behavior, DeGruy states young men are “unconsciously filling the roles of pimp, ho, thug” (1997, p. 154). Limitations in DeGruy’s methods and conceptual framework include emphasis on individual behavior and interpersonal interaction that fail to analyze the larger societal impacts informing those behaviors. Additionally, DeGruy’s narrative analysis retains a cis-heteronormative perspective and lacks a gender-expansive discourse around male and female characteristics. It also relies heavily on a damage-centered and deficit-based lens. Nonetheless, DeGruy’s research offers an

important empirical contribution to the limited research around Black historical trauma, particularly research conducted by Black people. The PTSS model could be expanded through the examination of **ecological** and **intersectional** impacts.

The use of an ecological lens to understand Black trauma, for example, questions and intervenes in unidirectional and/or single unit analyses that lead to findings, for example, that an individual who experiences violence will automatically exhibit increased negative behavior (Jenkins, 2014). In contrast, research on the “ecology of Black trauma”⁸ examines the implications of trauma at the individual, intimate systems, and community levels and considers contextual factors within spiritual, cultural, and historical spheres of influence.

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is a model in the human service field “that assumes that an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma” (The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, 2022). Trauma-Informed Care recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual’s life. TIC seeks to demystify and disrupt historically negative correlations between behavioral health service providers and those receiving care. It challenges the traditional understanding of the responsibility that agencies and practitioners have when they work with individuals who may be experiencing, for example, Post Traumatic Stress, and it suggests that the relationship between “provider” and “patient” or healer and client must be collaborative rather than paternal or prescriptive. Many fields of study, such as Art Therapy and Social Work utilize an adaptation of the Trauma Informed Care model. However, the application of the model has received a number of critiques over the years, including a concern that the framework has an underdeveloped

⁸ I first termed the phrase “ecology of Black trauma” during my work as a community facilitator and transformative justice practitioner. The term is briefly introduced in Williams, P.I. (2018). *Reflections on the negation of Black(ness)//Affirmations on the creations of our own spirituals. in:cite Journal.*

analysis of systems-level factors affecting communities most impacted by violence (DeCandia & Guarino, 2015). This has translated into doctors' and other practitioners' tendency to over-pathologize communities, especially communities of color, women of color, queer people, poor people, and disabled people (Etoniru, 2019).

As indicated above, most research on trauma attempts to examine the varying spheres (physical, psychological, cultural, spiritual) and ecological levels (individual, intimate collective, collective, societal) of an imaginary or hypothetical non-raced human. However, at large, the frameworks discussed previously fail to explore the simultaneous effects and affects of Black trauma, due to the complexity of historical and persistent violence and oppression. An integrative and comprehensive analysis that considers the **intersectionality**, historical context, political affiliations, and systematic forms of oppression particular to Black people will deepen empirical understanding. Many community scholars and trauma-informed practitioners (Hemphill, 2017; Haines, 2019) do have comprehensive gender, racial, economic, and embodied analyses and practices, particularly those situated in social justice organizations. Leaders and collectives in these spaces continue to develop and refine their praxes to also include a historical, intergenerational, spiritual, and cultural analysis, for example Harriet's Apothecary and The Embodiment Institute⁹.

Caring, Creating, and Holding Space: Interventions as Resistance

Burgeoning conversations about the importance and impact of improvisation, innovation, and experimentation reflect the foundational roots of varying forms of Black resistance and interventions. Many examples include projects that reclaim the narrative histories of land and Black erasure (Turner, 2012; McKittrick & Woods, 2007; McKittrick 2011), Black placemaking

⁹ For more information about the services and programs offered by Harriet's Apothecary and The Embodiment Institute, see harriesapothecary.com and theembodimentinstitute.org.

in predominantly non-Black cities like the city of Chicago (Hunter et al. 2016), cultural renaissances such as hip hop and the Black Arts Movement (Sanchez & Smethurst, 2014), and the practices of ancestral spiritual traditions under the guise of European or settler-colonial religions (Mitchem, 2007). These innovative forms of resistance double as tools of survival and disrupt the notion that Black people have no control over their identity, cultural narrative, history, and spiritual practices. The subsequent literature in “Mothering (Caring),” “Artists (Creating),” and “Healers (Holding Space)” provide evidence that Black and queer people have been attentively caring for, daringly creating with, and radically tending to and holding space for each other for centuries.

Mothering (Caring)

In the United States the separation of Black families through slavery *and* the resistance to this through connection to chosen family and geographic kin is deeply rooted. Dani McClain suggests “For the more than four hundred years since the inception of slavery on this continent, Black women have had to inhabit a different understanding of motherhood in order to navigate American life” (2019, p. 43). Hortense Spiller argues, Black people are not in control of their identity, but assigned to an infrastructure by historical placement, writing, these are “the names by which I am called in public” (1987, p. 65). Spiller articulates the interwoven complexity of historical trauma, gendered “male” and “female” bodies, and the white patriarchal shaping of Black women and mothers as both subject and object. Dana-Ain Davis suggests “The inheritance of Black feminist theorizing allows us to think through the politics of Black mothering, as both trauma and a site of potential transformation” (2016, p. 11). Black feminist theorizing on the action of mothering demonstrates the many ways and circumstances where Black mothers

leverage their conditions to create interventions that have maintained Black communities for centuries.

While this dissertation seeks to feature the expansive definition of mothering as a care intervention and queer endeavor, it is impossible to begin the exploration of Black motherhood and mothering without also naming the lineage of violence directed at Black women and Black women's bodies. One of the ways hegemonic tools of violence continue to assert dominance and control over historically under-resourced and marginalized people is by claiming power over the autonomy of individual bodies and distorting the narrative of their communities. Hortense Spiller argues Black people are not in control of their identity. She suggests they are assigned to an infrastructure of historical placement. She writes, "these are the names by which I am called in public" (1987, p. 65). Spiller articulates the interwoven complexity of historical trauma, the gendering of "male" and "female" bodies, and the white patriarchal shaping of Black women and **mothers** as both subject and object.

Resmaa Menakem states that "contrary to what many people believe, trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens *in the body*" (2017, p. 7). The experience of violence against Black women's bodies is exposed through articulations of the Black women's body as "subject" (Spiller, 1987). Such as derogatory media images of Black women that constantly other and distance them from the realm of what is seen as human or worthy of value and protection, for example, images of Jezebel (overly sexualized), Mammy (asexual) (West, 1995), the matriarch and/or unwed Black woman -- which places blame on the Black family structure (Roberts, 1997) -- and the Welfare queen -- the supposed devious and exploitative nature of poor and Black women receiving welfare (Hancock, 2004). These tropes are all representational fabrications that inform and expand legal policies set to bound Black

women's bodily autonomy (Carby, 1992). These stereotypes also overwhelm the historical narrative of Black women's sexuality and mute numerous accounts of institutional sexual violence such as "legally and culturally sanctioned rape and gender violence" (Morgan, 2015, p. 36). This includes the problematic rhetoric that denies women of color, and Black women in particular, the choice -- to have a child, to raise their child in a healthy environment should they choose to raise a child, or to not have a child at all.

Black mothers, whether they chose to raise biological children, adopt, or not to have children, often make the decision to be active in a community of mothering individuals, including non-birthing people and queer people. Community mothering is a commitment to shared responsibility in raising the child/children within a set intimate system (Edwards, 2000). Melina Abdullah writes "For Black communities, 'Mama' serves as a self-defined Black motherhood identity, rooted in historic memory, and one way in which Black women step into motherhood as an empowering, and potentially revolutionary space" (2012, p. 59). The recognition of other mothers and non-biological mothering stands as an African retention. "Mama" serves as a title of respect for both "bloodmothers" and "othermothers" (Hill Collins, 2005, p. 178). Understanding *mother* as a verb -- *to mother* (Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2016) -- means expanding the definition of the noun *motherhood*. It means understanding that Black mothering "is an action done by a range of people, including grandmothers, aunts, and queer and gender nonconforming people who don't identify as women but who see themselves engaging in" (McClain, 2019, p. 2) acts of *mothering* and care.

In the 21st century, the confines of motherhood and mothering have expanded to increasingly reflect a multitude of mothering, co-mothering, and queer parenting dynamics. Black feminist and queer people ensure that Black mothering and motherhood continue to

explore all that the role encompasses (Davis). Alexis Pauline Gumbs suggests the queering of mothering is synonymous with Blackness and “**the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life**” (2016) regardless of biological or family relations. Gumbs suggests mothering is older than feminism:

[It] is older and more futuristic than the category “woman.” We are investigating and amplifying the nuances of practices that have existed as long as there have been people of different ages with different superpowers invested in each other’s existence. (p. 9)

The invitation to adjust the word “mother” to the verb “mothering” is again, the queering (expansion) of the ecology of mothering. It means understanding *mother* “less as a gendered identity and more as a possible action” (Gumbs, 2016, p. 23). Initiatives such as the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers (Brooklyn, New York) are examples of the “queer work” of mothering because they explicitly reframe mothering as a collective affair that foregrounds “the practical and intangible needs of those whose survival is most threatened in their community” (Gumbs, 2016, p. 30). For this dissertation *mother* and *mothering* are understood as a queer practice that can be done by everyone providing care, doing the emotional labor of tending, and embodying resistance through the practice of Black existence.

Artists (Creating)

“The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.”

Toni Cade Bambara¹⁰

Black cultural traditions and art celebrate Blackness and disrupt the narrative that Black people are unworthy of humanity. Historically, the artist, the storyteller, the Griot, was responsible for creating the mental archives of a community. Reyez Cruz and Sonn (2015)

¹⁰ Bambara, T. C. (1982). Interviewed by Kay Bonetti.

suggest that culture is a set of ongoing social constructions that speaks to the ways we learn to live and make sense of life in relationship to ourselves and each other within a specific social, economic, political, and historical context. Therefore, culture exists even in the worldmaking of speculative fiction and sci-fi literature or the visual representations of reimagined pasts outside of slavery through an Afrofuturistic interpretation.

In the introduction to anthology *SOS: The Black Arts Movement Reader* John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst state, “artists were extremely important in framing the discussion of what it would mean to be liberated, of what it did mean to be Black, of what the content of Blackness was” (2014, p. 5). In communities of color the creative process is often collective in nature; therefore, cultural spaces and the artists within them are especially well positioned to produce art that engages and builds collective transformation. These spaces simultaneously capture the narrative and history of a community in their place. Artists and cultural workers such as Amiri Baraka and Gil Scott-Heron left a deep imprint during the Black Arts Movement. The 1960’s Black Arts Movement created a platform for the Black community to assess and discuss their political, cultural, economic, and spiritual conditions. The plays, cartoons, poems, prose, programming, and stories supported opportunities for Black people to engage critically with their experiences and construct an awareness of their cultural heritage and history (Bracey Jr., et. al., 2014).

Cultural organizing is about creating and imagining as much as it can be about disrupting. The work of Emory Douglas, prominent artist and cultural organizer for the Black Panther Party, is another example of how Black art is used to disrupt and intervene in systems of oppression. The Black Power Movement, also noted as beginning in the 1960’s was a period of cultural resistance and art making that ushered in a new height of relentless messaging around Black

pride and empowerment in many spaces and on many cultural levels (Reed, 2005). As suggested by the Black Panther Party's strategic positioning, art alone is not enough. Emory Douglas noted "for the cultural to be truly effective politically, it must remain connected to social movement groups with a clear, explicit agenda for structural, economic, and political change" (Reed, p. 67).

Douglas continues:

No artist can sit in an ivory tower, discussing the problems of the day, and come up with a solution on a piece of paper. The artist has to be down on the ground; he has to hear the sounds of the people [...] If we, as artists, do not understand our role and relationship to society, to the political situation and the survival of Black people, then how can we create art that will project survival? (2008, p. 123-124)

In the context of the Black Panther Party, visual imagery was used as a powerful tool to raise consciousness, as it was easily accessible, easily distributed, and intrinsic to Black culture. The Black Power Movement very intentionally severed any ties of Blackness that invoked historical memories of slavery and hegemonic portrayals using a white supremacist rhetoric. Freeland (2009) suggests the artistic expressions of the time were a means to "foster mobilization by presenting the political ideology of Black Power that enforced notions of black pride, but also offered a venue for the creation of black culture that was not defined by the dominant white culture" (p. 263).

Art as cultural resistance is often less about the final artwork than it is about the process of engaging in conversation with a community through the art. Goldbard suggests the "product" is the transformation of "participants' consciousness as they discover and express their own cultural values" (2006, p. 84). Artists, and the different mediums through which they create, transform, and reimagine their conditions and communities, are architects in themselves. The

artworks they create act as vessels to support communities in controlling their own narratives and exhibiting representations of their own cultural values. Stephanie Mitchem suggests, “The creation of art to explore the human condition is certainly an intellectual task. For African Americans, such art also holds a healing dimension as we find ways to voice the realities of our lives’ conditions” (p. 101). Within the scope of this study, art and culture are defined as the creative, visual, performative, auditory, embodied, and representational collective memories that “define” a community. This may include cultural celebrations or rituals in artistic form - the creative embodied practice that is the imaginative process of envisioning a world worth struggling for. These examples provide evidence of the rich cultural history of artist-makers, community cultural organizers, and creative spiritual disruptors in Black people’s multi-faceted lineage of transformative interventions and forms of resistance.

Healers (Holding Space)

The definition of “healing” within the context of healing justice expands beyond popularized notions of wellness or self-care, such as therapy, or yoga, or a sound bath. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us healing justice is “not about self-care – it’s about community care” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016, para. 32). Within the scope of this dissertation, I use the term “healing” as in, “yes, *I am sure, that I want to be well.*”¹¹ Healing as in “we are collective bodies” (brown, 2017, p. 203) meaning my healing is inextricably embedded in yours and the larger community. Dei (2017) asks us to consider “What are the tools/frameworks Black and African diaspora can deploy to forge community and solidarity, and to resist anti-Blackness, anti-Black racism and other social oppressions? What critical analytical tools can be developed to account for Black and African lived experiences, agency and resistance?” (2017, p. 32). Dei’s

¹¹ Bambara, T. C. (1992). *The salt eaters*. Vintage.

questions are important to consider within the framework of healing justice, which requires an analysis of historical trauma and centers the praxes of healing resistance. This includes resistance that is found in our body, soul, psyche, and a full lived experience that refuses “to submit to oppression” (Abdullah, 2012, p. 58); resistance as in practices and ways of being that draw from principles of healing justice. It also includes forms of healing and cultural resistance centering praxis of care, creating alternatives to systems of harm, and honoring the labor and work of those who understand the complexity of trauma and the intricacies of healing.

Many healing justice practitioners and Black-centered social justice movements do employ therapy and yoga (Ford, 2016) however, these forms of healing do not comprise an exhaustive set of practices for collective healing of historical trauma and persistent systemic violence. Healing justice is rooted in ancestral and generational recovery and reclamations of traditional practices that enslavement and other oppressive systems attempted to erase (Mitchem, 2007). For Black people, healing is political. It is a process that invites communities to unlearn, disrupt, and decolonize cycles of violence, anti-Black racism, and internalized racism. Formally, the people leading the work of healing within Black communities are, for example, rootworkers, Griots, herbalists, and somatic practitioners. Informally, healers are anyone who is trauma-informed and holds space with intention, caring praxes, and an arc towards liberation.

Healing resistance has roots in black theology (Butler, 2001) and practices of Kingian Nonviolence⁴ (Haga, 2020). Black theologian Lee Butler explores cultural resistance through the means of African American folk healing. He states that the forms of resistance embedded in Black culture and spirituality disrupt existing conditions:

Standing against a rage that colorizes land rights, over-sexualizes sacred spaces, and racializes human dignity, the resistance culture declares its selfhood through what

appears to be the outrageous, audacious, unrehearsed presentation of sight and sound.
(2001, p. 50)

Mitchem further situates Butler's perspective by stating "culture as a form of resistance maintains a separate way of knowing in order to avoid dehumanization. Cultural resistance stands against the status quo" (2007, p. 28). African American folk healing (Mitchem, 2007) provides a critical perspective around Black people's unique approach to cultural and spiritual resistance. Mitchem offers:

Folk healing among African Americans has always been more than herbs and roots. Black people apply creativity in defining their bodies along with their relationships to the community and the cosmos. Spiritual survival is set in motion with this approach. Contemporary African American folk healing may integrate ideas but will retain some sense of black cultural resistance against dominant American culture. (2007, p. 91)

Jennifer Richardson suggests that we must focus on spirituality drawn from radical Black feminist traditions as a pathway to reclaim self and community. She argues:

Healing is an act of resistance to oppression that can produce counter knowledge, celebrate the spirit, and foster community through affirmation and sharing, particularly as it pertains to African women. (2018, p. 283)

A reading of *Sisters of the Yam: black women and self-recovery* (1993) by bell hooks deepens our understanding of the approaches that Black communities take in order to understand their trauma and uncover affirmations of the potential for recovery and healing. hooks explains the motivation for this work was to center Black women and "to create a context where we as black females could work on our individual efforts for self-actualization and remain connected to a larger world of collective struggle" (1993, p. 5). Her autoethnographic account acts both as a

case study of the Sisters of the Yam support group and a self-titled self-help book. hooks emphasizes that open conversations and story-telling are important tools for sharing information about ourselves and for healing in community (hooks, 1993). One of the failures of many models of “healing” in a colonial and/or non-collectivist framework is the emphasis on individual healing processes. The fact that Black folks are innately collectivist in spirit and practice is exhibited in hooks case study. This underlines the fact that inventing, practicing, and holding space for transformative healing justice interventions must include the opportunity for intentional and affirmative interdependence. This includes creating and holding spaces that both process harm and move towards the varying practices of healing work.

Shawn Ginwright’s approach to radical healing (detailed above in “Healing Justice: What’s Needed for Liberation?”) has informed work in collaboration with community organizations, initiatives, and practitioners beyond his direct initiatives. Mara Chavez-Diaz and Nicole Lee, community organizers and youth mentors with Urban Peace Movement, define healing as “a regenerative process that is inclusive of mind, body, and spirit and that aims to restore and renew the individual and collective emotional and spiritual well-being of youth, families, and the broader community” (2015, p. 3). Chavez-Diaz and Lee draw from their experiences to map, explore, and activate applied principles of healing-centered youth organizing. They outline key practices for healing-centered social change that explicitly guide their approach. The recommendations include: 1) Embed and institutionalize healing practices into social justice organization, 2) Build the capacity of social justice leaders to foster healing, 3) Develop key partnerships between community healers and social justice leaders, and 4) Increase investment to sustain healing centered organizing. These four recommendations provide clear, malleable, and collaborative directions. Chavez-Diaz and Lee also include four key principles for

healing-centered movement work. Those principles are: a) Healing is in response to the needs of the community; b) healing is political; c) healing and organizing intersect; and, d) healing is found in culture and spirituality. Chavez-Diaz and Lee’s work with young people illustrates one of the myriad ways to make healing justice accessible and tangible. They introduce concrete ways for organizations to commit to social change and to embed healing-centered care systems into their protocols, emphasizing the strategy of collaborating with trauma-informed healers or practitioners to integrate formal practices into their designs, while supporting organizational leaders with a foundational knowledge of healing-centered organizing.

Conclusion

The case studies presented in “Mothers (Caring),” “Artists (Creating),” and “Healers (Holding Space)” demonstrate various ways that healing, spirituality, cultural organizing, political disruption, and justice intersect. The literature suggests the roles of mother, artist, and healer are held by people with an array of compositions, including those in a position to care, create, and/or hold space for healing justice and liberation. In the Black community, an intricate relationship exists between how we experience trauma and what that means for how and why we *have to* commit to healing. The fact is Black people **ritualize healing, conjure forms of resistance, and create generative cultural practices** intrinsically because these are spiritual languages that closely align with traditional forms of Black expressions (Mitchem, 2007). Sometimes, Black people engage in forms of healing and resistance subconsciously or on the surface, such as the simple act of convening comfortably on a corner stoop, or placing a plucked wildflower on the sidewalk memorial of a stranger as one walks past. These examples offer insight around the Black spiritual cosmology, traditions, and language (spoken and unspoken).



CHAPTER 3

Introduction: C.A.Q.E. - Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology

I have merged praxes within the concepts of “Creative,” “Afrofuturistic,” “Queer,” and “Ecology” to produce an original matrix that engages multiple theoretical, applied, and methodological elements. C.A.Q.E offers four concrete elements to consider as an extension of the existing healing justice lens. “**Creative**” considers elements of the “HOW” of healing justice work. I examine embodied practices, place-based pedagogy, and memory-based information retrieval practices that support Black and queer liberation (Haymes, 1995; Hunter et. al., 2016; McKittrick, 2011). “**Afrofuturistic**” examines the element of “WHEN” through an analysis of various concepts of time-space reality, including African-based worldviews such as Sankofa, Afro-futurism, and Black and queer speculative fiction (Kelley, 2002; Womack, 2013; Winchester III, 2008; Harris, 2018; Karam & Kirby-Hirst, 2019; Young-Scaggs, 2021). “**Queer**” reviews scholars and activist-based praxes to understand the “WHO” of Black queer feminism within identity formations and abolitionist politics (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1989; Collins, 1998; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Gumbs, 2016, 2018, 2020; Crenshaw, 2013; Ahmed, 2017; Green, 2017; Green et. al., 2018). Lastly, “**Ecology**” considers the “WHERE/WHAT” by exploring the human ecological experience at the individual, collective, and community levels, including the social and political landscape, the natural environment (Trickett, 1985, 2009; Gumbs, 2012; 2020), and the non-human spiritual. While I present each element in complex but distinguishable categories, Creative, Afrofuturistic, Queer, and Ecology are best applied when considered and practiced as interwoven and bi-directional praxes to integrate within our healing justice interventions and alternative systems making.

Creative

(**“The HOW” Practice + Memory**) Black Diasporic people have used storytelling, creative and play-based practices, and spiritual rituals, among other approaches to help situate collective memories within place for centuries. Examples include freedom hymns and the retelling of slave rebellions that rang softly but adamantly on the fields of cotton plantations (Mitchem, 2007). These practices exist as disruptions to damage-centered Black narratives and counter their overemphasis on pervasive violence and oppression in Black life. In contrast they hold stories of resistance and survival passed down generationally to ensure anti-colonial Black futurities through **pedagogies of embodied practice** (Mitchem 2007; Hemphill, 2022) and **geographies of “persistence and inventiveness”** (McKittrick, 2013 *in* Nxumalo, F., & Cedillo, S., 2017, p. 106). Both of these pedagogical approaches (embodied practice and/or place-based practice) help formulate Black social and political identities. I focus on two approaches to pedagogies and practices, (1) creative, embodied, and spiritual knowledge exchange, for example, teaching in the classroom (Lewis, 2011) and in the community (Mitchem, 2007), and (2) concepts of Black geographies (Nxumalo, F., & Cedillo, S., 2017; McKittrick, 2011; Turner, 2012).

Prentis Hemphill provides a series of short-video reels that demonstrate how to develop embodied practices, offering a working definition of embodiment. They suggest the first step is awareness, stating **“embodiment is about being aware of what is in your own body and being** [bold emphasis added]. Bringing your awareness to your body. Not what you think your body is doing but what your body is actually doing in real time in your life” (Hemphill, 2022). In the second episode, they emphasize the relationship between embodiment and practice expressing, **“practice is the repetition of behaviors and actions that eventually become habitual and**

therefore embodied [bold emphasis added]. The question is what are you getting really good at to the point that it's becoming embodied?" (Hemphill, 2022).

Ritual and applied spirituality is one of the ways Black people intentionally practice and therefore become embodied. Stephanie Y. Mitchem provides context for the approach to **embodied spiritual practices** within what she calls "African American folk healing" (2007).

She states:

Embodied spirituality is grounded in a different perspective of the human person, a perspective that unifies body and soul within the life of the past, present, and future community in conversation with an ever-present God." (p. 85)

Mitchem details an example of an embodied spiritual practice. MAAFA: International Middle Passage Remembrance and Renewal Day occurs annually on July 4th in cities around the United States across hundreds of organizations. The event centers ceremonies and rituals to honor the lives of enslaved ancestors (many of whom whose names are unknown). The events educate the larger public about the nature of enslavement and the Transatlantic Slave Trade; however, their primary purpose "is for each participant's benefit [...] to face their individual and collective issues around enslavement" (Mitchem, 2007, p. 112). The spaces aim to help Black people retrieve and reconcile individual and collective memories of place and social conditions. One annual event held by the Ashe Cultural Center in New Orleans, Louisiana includes a day-long ceremony. "The Remembrance" includes collective altar building, a procession of drummers and dancers who led the way through an erected structure in Congo Square¹² signifying the Door of No Return, among other practices (Mitchem, 2007). These pedagogies of practice and embodied

¹² Congo Square is the site of a major slave market in New Orleans, Louisiana.

ritual exemplify creative ways that Black folks are integrating spirituality, reclaiming sites of mourning and violence, and recontextualizing their memories of place.

Another concept of Black pedagogies of embodiment comes from Mel Michelle Lewis who provides an example in *Body of Knowledge: Black Queer Feminist Pedagogy, Praxis, and Embodied Text*. In her work, Lewis (2011) explores her relationships to teaching, through a “Black queer feminist pedagogy” (p. 49) and to her own body as “a site of learning and knowledge” (p. 50). Lewis draws from the term “embodied text,” introduced by Mae G. Henderson (1994), in order to conceptualize the body as a form of text *and* the body itself as a physical living document for cultivating and teaching knowledge of social, cultural, racial identity and beyond. This practice speaks to the work of both honoring the body as a source of memory and a way to re-member and situates the body as a vessel for transmitting information. If and when people are given the space, tools, and resources, the creative pedagogies and embodied practices that emerge also provide counter-violence models and affirming ways of being for Black, queer, femme, disabled people.

Creative embodied practices in the body and as ways of being are also connected to how we navigate and create pedagogies of place. Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo’s (2017) research offers examples of creative embodied praxis at the intersection of pedagogy and geography. The authors draw from intersectional analyses and solutions offered by Black feminist geographers to suggest embodied pedagogies for the classroom and school environment. Specifically, Nxumalo and Cedillo conduct pedagogical research utilizing a Black feminist lens within Early Childhood Studies to explore the decolonialization of place, environment, and nature. One pedagogical approach suggests that teachers and students seek out and create “artistic/creative interventions” in order to “(re)story places in ways that disrupt Black placelessness.” (p. 106). This approach

may utilize, for example, “Black speculative fiction and Black poetics” (p. 106) to “co-create with children place-based and environmentally attuned literary representations that situate Black childhoods in places, including ‘nature’ in ways that unsettle deficit or absented depictions of Black children” (p. 106). The authors suggest these creative interventions may help situate children’s sense of belonging in both tactile and embodied ways and invite children to engage questions of “racialized environmental (in)justice, human/more-than-human relationalities, as well as past-present settler colonial histories of place” (Nxumalo, F., & Cedillo, S., 2017, p. 108). Nxumalo and Cedillo’s empirical research offers context for the embodied practices and pedagogies of practice, belonging, creativity, and place within the specific environmental context of schools and the experience of childhood.

Black and queer people’s relationships to place is often inextricably linked to experiences of identity and belonging within any given place. How we negotiate the relationship between identity, belonging, and our environment can vary drastically depending on the geography. Stephen Nathan Haymes suggests Black pedagogies of place must include explicit formations of identity that recontextualize and resist dominant (Western or settler-colonial) control and regulations and that context, for example, urban geographies, plays an important role in that formation. Haymes (1995) offers a framing of pedagogy of place specific to the conditions of urban Black communities. His exploration of place-based pedagogy suggests that for colonized Blacks to name and transform -- or decolonize -- their own situation, they must first establish “pedagogical conditions that enable Blacks in the city to critically interpret how dominant definitions and uses of urban space regulate and control how they organize their identity around territory, and the consequences of this for Black urban resistance” (Haymes, 1995, p. 114).

Transforming Black people’s relationship to place necessitates creative resistance that

amends the erasure of Black people’s physical relationship to a place and strengthens their sense of being and archives and activates memories associated with the site. Scholarship on Black placemaking and Black geographies highlights various forms of creative embodied praxes, in particular by disrupting the tendency to associate Black urban spaces as exceptionally plagued with violence. Rather the framework illuminates the complexities wherein embodied pedagogies are formed (Haymes, 1995; McKittrick, 2011) and highlights Black placemaking and pedagogy as experimental markers of play, pleasure, politics, and memory (Hunter et. al., 2016).

Black geographer Katherine McKittrick writes extensively on the conceptual and cartographic details of Black memory, geographies, and places. She states, “Black diasporic histories and geographies are difficult to track and cartographically map. Transatlantic slavery, from the slave ship and beyond, was predicated on various practices of spatialized violence that targeted Black bodies and profited from erasing a Black sense of place” (2011, p. 948). Therefore, the emergence of placed-based pedagogies provides essential counter-violence models to Black being and belonging in place. She argues it is the practice of Black placemaking that engraves these sites into memory, emphasizing the use of Black imagination as a tool to recontextualize painful memories to place. McKittrick states, “The site of memory is also the sight of memory—imagination requires a return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where Black people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship; this means a writing of where and how Black people occupy space through different forms of violence and disavowal” (2006 p.33).

A final example that exemplifies the relationship between embodied practice, creative pedagogy, memory, and place is offered in *Evoking a site of memory: An Afrofuturist Sonic Walk that Maps Historic Toronto’s Black Geographies*, a thesis by Environmental Studies scholar

Camille Turner (2012). In her work, Turner creates an experimental pedagogy of memory and place by incorporating performance and walking to resituate Black people's placed-based memories associated with sites in Canada. Her project works through the lens of Afrofuturism to recontextualize and assess Black Diasporic people's history, noting that the history, places, and contributions of Caribbean people in Canada has been largely erased. Turner's use of digital media and performance reimagines "the past from the perspective of the present and future to reap Blackness onto the Canadian landscape in embodied and sonic ways" (Turner, 2012, p. 2). Turner crafts a participatory project that includes a sonic walk mapping historically under-referenced Black geographies in Canada (Turner, 2012).

"Creative" is an invitation to incorporate embodiment, creativity, and spirituality into our theoretical and applied practices. This may include, but is not limited to our concrete formations of place, pedagogy, memory-retrieval, and intervention models that disrupt hegemonic systems and ways of being. It may also include integrating creating spaces and offering collective practices that center opportunities for Black queer and impacted communities to play, explore pleasure, find stillness, and participate in other forms of embodiment that exemplify liberatory structures and ideologies that emerge as a result of working through a healing justice lens.

Afrofuturistic

(**"The WHEN" Time-Space Reality**) Afrofuturism is understood as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack, 2013, p. 9). The term was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994. It has been described both as a literary and cultural aesthetic (Dery, 1994; 2008) and an epistemology (Castro, 2012) that uses "the tools and tropes of science fiction, as well as references to African and non-Western mythology, as a means to confront and

analyze the present-day issues faced by people of color” (Winchester III, 2018, p. 42). Kodwo Eshun asserts,

Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken.” (Eshun, 2003, p. 288)

Afrofuturism’s contemporary impact and utility has helped Black people navigate Black suffering and generate innovative possibilities of futurity within the Black imagination. In addition to noteworthy Afrofuturistic art such as John Coney’s *Space is the Place*, Octavia Butler’s speculative fiction, Sun Ra’s various music albums, and Jean-Michael Basquiat’s visual art, Afrofuturism has been leveraged in human-centered design (Winchester III, 2018) and popularized in Hollywood through movies like *The Black Panther* (Karam & Kirby-Hirst, 2019).

The Afro-futurist group Wildseeds, a creative project of members of a healing circle lead by Lakeisha Harris (2018), is an example of radical healing spaces where Black people actively reimagine for themselves what Black aliveness looks like. Harris states, “Many Native American peoples think several generations ahead, and Black folks, if we can gather ourselves from all of this daily oppression, should center ourselves in that mindset” (Harris, 2018, p. 253).

Afrofuturism asks people to re-envision a world “free of race-based power issues” (Womack, 2013, p. 24) through conversation about Black racial identity, pop culture, intentional communities, and achieving liberation through visualization.

Those honoring concepts of time and space through frameworks such as Afrofuturism, therefore, disregard white cultural beliefs that understand time as a unidirectional and sequential reality. Marimba Ani (1997) writes, “The mode of determining structures of the western

worldview is that of power, control, and destruction” (p. 5). She continues, “realities are split into pairs of opposing parts. Conventionally, one of these becomes valued, while its converse is understood as lacking value. One is ‘good’ and the other is ‘bad.’ It then becomes necessary (valued behavior) to attempt to destroy one (the ‘bad’), while the other ascends to supremacy” (Ani, 1997, p. 5). These assertions suggest that European, settler-colonialization, and white supremacy culture hold concepts of the world that generally lack a critical understanding of the complexity and interdependency of communities and phenomena, and that they position topics, ideas, and people within a binary, rather than a cyclical spectrum. Reyez Cruz and Sonn (2015) expand on this notion by stating, “The convergence of Western thought and ways of knowing with Eurocentric colonialism resulted in the imposition of a hierarchical articulation of difference (e.g. ‘civilized/uncivilized,’ ‘modern/primitive,’ ‘expert knowledge/general knowledge,’ ‘development/underdevelopment,’ ‘saved/condemn,’ ‘White/Other’) to the benefit of the ruling class” (2015, p. 10).

Within the framework C.A.Q.E., I situate the philosophy of Sankofa in relationship to Afrofuturism in order to further distinguish and expand an understanding of time and space within an African-centered worldview. The English translation of Sankofa means “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” It is also translated as “go back and fetch it,” and “return to your past.” The Adinkra symbol of Sankofa, an image of a bird facing forward with its head looking behind it, is depicted in the West African Ghanaian tradition and includes a rich cultural heritage “of using pictorial images to convey wisdom of Akan life” (Temple, 2010, p. 127). Temple (2010) suggests:

A conceptualization of Sankofa practice is based on an observation that a viewpoint and orientation promoting any one of several meanings and applications of Sankofa have

evolved among U.S. populations of African descent who have ancestors who experienced enslavement. The current generation in its cultural and behavioral practices is attentive to Sankofa because its wisdom offers a solution to reconstituting the fragmented cultural past. (p. 128)

Black people's application of Sankofa in the United States has both been about "coming back" and "moving forward." The fusion of Sankofa worldview and Afrofuturism also requires that one questions the polarity that is prominent in Christian beliefs, such as the belief in heaven and hell. These binaries generally conflict with the African spiritual belief that humans have the ability to connect to ancestral realms while living. Sankofa is a traditional cultural and behavioral practice which offers traditional elements to best situate Black and queer people within the more contemporary praxis of Afrofuturism. Within the application of Sankofa philosophy Afrofuturism allows us to explicitly explore time not as directional and linear (i.e. "go back and fetch it" in order to move forward); rather as cyclical, existing as a continuum of movement between the past, present, future, and all the worlds in between (Slater, 2019). These strategies and beliefs are exemplified in Afrofuturism's speculative agenda and practices of retrieval and/or rewriting of historical narratives.

Queer

(“The WHO” Identity + Political) Black Queer feminism or simply BQF is a contemporary theoretical, applied, and embodied politic rooted in the work of Black and queer organizers, social movement practitioners, and scholars within the last three decades. Work from canonical Black queer thinkers such as Black lesbian scholar Cathy Cohen and artist-scholar E. Patrick Johnson have provided foundational contributions to the formation of Black queer theory (Cohen, 2005; Johnson, 2001). As an emerging praxis, Black queer feminism define itself;

drawing heavily from canonical literature in the fields of Black Feminism such as the Combahee River Collective, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lourde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis among others. Black queer feminism also looks to intersectionality - Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and Lisa Bowleg among others, Queer Studies - Cathy Cohen, Judith Butler, among others, and Quare Theory - E. Patrick Johnson¹³. Theoretical scholarship on the “gap between the conceptions of feminist thought and feminist practice” (Harris, 1996, p. 3) first emerged beginning in the 1990’s with articles such as Laura Harris’s *Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle* (1996)¹⁴. In the article, Harris foregrounds the “sexual politics of racialized and classed sexuality” (p. 3) as a Black feminist theory and practice. However, thirty years later, the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100)¹⁵, a Black activist organization for youth ages 18 to 35, is one of the first organizations to explicitly incorporate the term “Black queer feminist lens” and operate through a Black queer feminist and abolitionist framework in their praxis, mission, vision, and community work¹⁶ (BYP100, 2014). The organization was founded only recently in 2013. Similar to ongoing conversations in Queer Theology, perhaps Black Queer

¹³ This is a non-exhaustive list of the scholars and authors who have contributed to the theorization of Black feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory.

¹⁴ I received a note of caution from one of my dissertation committee members which prompted me to further research Laura Harris. I could not uncover any information on how Harris self-identifies and I do not want to assume her racial identity. However, I am led to believe Harris is a non-Black and/or mixed-race scholar and professor in the fields of English and World Literature and Africana Studies.

¹⁵ I was an active member of BYP100 from early 2014 through 2018. I expand on my relationship to this organization in Chapter 4 “Who Am I? A Statement on Positionality and Research Purpose.”

¹⁶ BYP100 is not the only organization that has incorporated a racialized and queer analysis into their political organizing framework. Other examples of foundational initiatives are INCITE!, Generation 5, and the Combahee River Collective; more contemporary organizations include Freedom Inc. However, BYP100 one of the first to explicitly name it stating “We mobilize through building a network focused on transformative leadership development, direct action organizing, advocacy, and education. Our membership core believes in the principles of decision-making, radical inclusivity, and is building a Black politic through a Black, queer, feminist lens” (BYP100).

feminism is a praxis that defies containment and rather “strives instead, for differentiation and plurality [...] that is, life and love in all its diversity, which at the end, transforms and renews all its praxis” (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007, p. 304).

Black queer feminism diverges from its roots in Black Feminism and Womanism through its interpretations and practices that explicitly center Black queer abolitionist and liberatory praxis, pleasure and respectability politics, and examinations of systems of oppression that explicitly target Black and queer bodies. The concept of Black queerness is preferred by abolitionist, community organizers, and healing justice practitioners in particular, for its fluid expression that considers celebratory difference *and* Black struggles (Alexander, 2017). As Bryant Keith Alexander asserts,

'Black Queer' captures and, in effect, names the specificity of the historical and cultural differences that shape the experiences and expression of queerness. Moreover, it is in this sense that our intervention, as it were, manifests its radicalism. Further, we believe that there are compelling social and political reasons to make claim to the modifier Black - in Black Queer - both terms, of course, are signifiers or markers of difference; just as queer challenges notions of heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia, Black resists notions of assimilation and absorption. (2017, p. 287)

Charlene Carruthers, author, artist, and BYP100 co-founder, provides a concretized definition of the Black queer feminist lens as a political praxis “based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups see to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression” (2018, p. 10). Jenae Bonsu, scholar and former BYP100 co-chair, writes, “Utilizing a Black Queer Feminist lens, a theory of radical inclusivity, we are intentional about bringing the people who are most marginalized in our

communities to the center of our work” (p. 213). Her case study features the experimental nature of Black queer feminist processes through a discussion of the refinement of the politics and practices of BQF within BYP100.

As a practice, Black Queer Feminism is daring, caring, vulnerable, and accountable. That is illustrated in the ways queer Black people create space, reclaim and celebrate traditional and alternative practices of care, and center the stories of Black and queer communities. A Black queer identity, politic, and abolitionist praxis requires a commitment to

Centering Blackness in all its forms, queerness in all its forms; including the philosophical and practical creation [...] of inclusive spaces of/for/from us. The work should be framed not so much as working tirelessly *against* cis-heteropatriarchal norms, capitalism, transphobia, ableism and the like. (Green, M.K, Taylor, J., Williams, P.I., Roberts, C., 2018, p. 924)

Rather Black queer abolitionist praxis is about working towards transformative and innovative approaches and designs as alternatives to current harmful systems; frameworks and practices that employ transformative approaches that “seek safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, of state or systemic violence, including incarceration or policing” (Generation Five, p. 5).

It is also important to note that those who identify as Black, queer, feminist and/or abolitionist and within social movement organizations do not necessary employ BQF values nor embody the practices put forth through the frameworks proposed above. My lived experience of Black queer feminism in theory and action means loving all of the identity arrangements and possibilities of Blackness, queerness, and feminism. It means chanting “Our Blackness is our own” (BYP100, 2016). It means proclaiming “Not queer like gay. Queer like, escaping

definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like and pursue it” (Wint, B. as cited on Kim Katrin, Facebook, 2015). It means feminism as in both how we live *and* how we think about how to live (Ahmed, 2017), as well as pleasurable embodied sensations that affirm unapologetic identity expressions and an abolitionist politic.

Ecology

(“The WHERE/WHAT” Ecosystem + Spheres). The ecological praxis invites us to consider, explore, and engage with components of the ecosystem wherein healing justice practices and interventions occur. Within the C.A.Q.E. lens, those components seek to explicitly consider three core areas 1) the human ecosystem, meaning how the individual relates to the intimate collective and the larger community and conversely how the community impacts the microcosm, 2) the environmental context and unique conditions of the ecosystem, and 3) the non-human sphere such as the spiritual, ancestral, and natural world. Integrating these three components of the ecology (or ecosystem through an ecological lens) allows healing justice practitioners to map and outline the considerations that support our practices.

Many scholars have contributed to the development of ecological praxes and methodological approaches. One of the foundational ecological theories in Community Psychology examines the individual within their larger ecosystem, distinguishing the individual, intimate/familial collective, community, and environmental spheres (Murray 1938; Kelly 1968; Ryerson & Edison, 2008). Trickett writes,

To think ecologically is to consider how persons, settings, and events can become resources for the positive development of communities; to consider how these resources can be managed and conserved; and to approach research so that the effort expended will

be helpful to the preservation and enhancement of community resources. (Trickett et al., 1985, pp. 283–284)

Trickett’s proposition includes an exploration of culturally situated community interventions as “multilevel, ecologically based, collaboratively conducted, and designed to increase community capacity” (Trickett, 2009, p. 260). Similar to Trickett, scholars who situate themselves within the field of Community Psychology tend to understand community *or* environment as the most impactful level of the ecosystem; then considering interdependent components that together form an individual’s context. Feminist researchers have expanded **ecological interventions** to include feminist political ecologies (Elmhirst, 2011; Hanson, 2016), ecological considerations of non-human systems and patterns (Hughes & Lury, 2013), and the emotional/social responsiveness to community and self as an ecological commitment (Gumbs, 2012).

Alexis Pauline Gumbs suggests that an ecological approach to Black feminist praxis and methodology must be “beautiful, accountable, account (a story), account (a reckoning of resources), reflective, means staying rooted, and long-term” (2012, 67-68). In her work with *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* (2012), a multi-mediated and co-facilitated community meeting space and virtual blog based in Durham, North Carolina, Gumbs activates intergenerational space through ritual, trainings, workshops, webinars, and interactive publications. Individuals and collectives are invited to gain contemporary knowledge about the “insights, literatures, and practices of Black feminism, or in other words the intergenerational practice of describing and accounting for how we are transformatively interconnected” (Blackfeministmind.wordpress.com, 2018). *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is co-facilitated by SpiritHouse, an arts-based social justice organization, where participants co-design curriculum and programming. Gumbs curates these spaces to realize the “dynamic relationship

between contemporary visionaries and the legacy of Black feminist activism, creativity and thought” (2012, p. 62). The project utilizes a Black queer ecological approach based on the principles that: “we have what we need (each other); everything is useful, everyone is priceless; we are part of a larger environment that we can relate to symbiotically or destructively; our ecology includes spiritual, physical, practical, social, emotional, technological, and intellectual resources” (2012, p. 66). Gumbs’ intersectional application of Black Feminism, queer praxis, and an ecological approach also exemplify the conceptual and applied activation of Afrofuturism and co-created methodology.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ practice offers examples that engage humans at multiple ecological levels, it also considers the geographic context and the non-human (i.e. spiritual and ancestral) spheres of her uniquely situated ecosystem. The third component to consider within the “ecology” is the non-human. For many Black folks and people of African descent, this is most observable through varying forms of spiritual practice, conjure, magic, and other forms of traditional African religious and spirit practice. Lakeisha Harris (2018) suggests traditional practices have always been used towards freedom, especially by women. In the U.S. context of enslavement these practices have been coveted under the hospice of Christianity to maintain the rituals under the auspice of "religion" but also to protect them from colonization (Harris, 2018). Harris, co-founder of Black Witch Chronicles, a digital coven, the Black Witch University, a year-long training and mentoring program to realign and support young Black witches to their sources, and Sojourner’s Healing Room, a place-based healing and support space, embodies Black spirituality. In her work Harris sees gardening, herbalism, and cooking as witchcraft and magic and planting as reclamation of space. She embodies and values the magic of spiritual

connection as an innate life source within all Black people and her work creates opportunities to reactivate that in others. Upon reflecting on the taboo of witchery Harris says:

Calling oneself a Black witch is owning that space by understanding that we have this intricate relationship with nature and do ourselves a dis- service by not acknowledging that partnership, that partnership with the divine, that partnership with our brilliant selves, and that we are magical beings. I know that some people hate “the magical negro.”

Whatever, honey, get over yourselves. We create magic all the time. How do you think we’ve survived all this time? How do you think we’ve gotten this far under slavery, under segregation, under all of the continued oppression? (2018, p. 254)

Spiritual practice in all its forms - witchcraft, root work, herbalism et cetera - that is, the practice of connecting to the divine and to the expansive world outside of the human is an integral component of understanding our capacity for healing and justice beyond the current systems of harm. The non-human sphere plays an integral role in the history of Black resistance, the formation of liberation strategies, and proclamations of Black futurity. The spiritual sphere (wherein our ancestors, Spirit guides, dream messages, and other realms outside of our conscious knowing) is not positioned as “separate” from but rather interconnected with the human sphere. Therefore, creating spaces within healing justice for practitioners, thinkers, and community participants to be in conversation and practice about the environmental context of our human conditions in simultaneous harmony with the natural and spiritual world is essential.

Conclusion

Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecologies engage multidisciplinary and multidimensional approaches to healing justice. The **C.A.Q.E** framework identifies our politicized, embodied, and cultural relationships to each other as humans at the individual, intimate collective, and

community levels, considers the environmental context, and explicitly integrates the spiritual and non-human spheres. It examines and advocates for a relationship with the environment that is symbiotic rather than destructive. These include consideration of the physical, practical, social, emotional, technological, and intellectual resources (Gumbs, 2012) within a community's ecosystem. C.A.Q.E. also seeks to understand the complexity of "an ecology of Black trauma" (Williams, 2018, p. 29; see Appendix M), visualized as the complex accumulation of trauma from multiple "spheres" and the potential for creative healing praxis at the human ecological levels (individual, intimate collective, community), environmental levels *and* spiritual spheres (ancestral and non-human). C.A.Q.E. examines the praxis of Black queer community care through the subtle articulations of creative and spiritual resistance, of altered time-space realities through an Afrofuturistic lens, Black queer abolitionist praxes, and the ecological underpinnings within healing justice. These include, for example, understanding time as non-linear and creating intimate (often informal) Black and queer spaces for critical knowledge-production and exchange. It situates and explores Black queer identity formations through lived experiences and storytelling about **being** and **belonging**; seeking to expand our understanding of violence and trauma *and* center the people creating transformative tools and practices that build and envision possibility in Black and queer communities and beyond. C.A.Q.E. is a lens that centers the individual as a microcosm of the whole cosmology. Praxis of Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology honor and develop within ourselves through rituals and practices that are in right relationship with the cosmos and all of the spheres in between, infusing care and support to self, the intimate collective, the larger community, the natural world, and our spiritual guiding systems.



CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

I begin this chapter with “Who Am I? A Statement on Positionality and Research Purpose,” including a brief introduction of myself that provides the context of the political and cultural practices that have brought me to this work. “Research Design” discusses the methodological details of this dissertation study. I begin with an introduction to the “Participants” and provide individual “Participant Profiles” that celebrate the uniqueness of each participant. I then review the “Recruitment,” “Data Collection” (“Participatory Dreaming,” “Phase 1: Interviews,” and “Phase 2: Kitchen Table Cypher”), “Analysis,” and “Study Limitations.” In “The Importance of Language” I outline my intentional use of and working definitions for the terms *Black*, *queer*, *praxis*, *trauma*, and *holding space*, respectively. Chapter 4 concludes with “The City of Chicago,” which draws from participant interviews and empirical literature to situate the stories of the Black queer mothers, artists, and healers in this study within the context of their social, cultural, and political geography.

“Who Am I?” A Statement on Positionality and Research Purpose

I am the daughter of Marie-Noelle Marechal and Wesley Cecil Williams. I grew up hopping on discarded mattresses and dreamscaping in the vacant lots of the Humboldt Park neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois. Our home was a safe haven for drop-in bike repairs and midday snacks for hungry young neighbors and friends. I am a Black, mixed-race (African American and French), queer woman of color. I am well-traveled and have light brown skin. Having been raised in a bi-lingual and bi-cultural household, I experienced the world outside of Chicago from a young age, traveling once every two to four years from Chicago’s northwest side to my mother’s rural hometown of St. Didier de Formans in central France. I have had an awareness of my privileges and my marginalized identities from a young age. I hold privileges as

a college graduate (first generation) and doctorate degree holder (pending approval). I navigate marginalized identities, as a Black queer single mother of one biological child and a community mother and chosen auntie to many children.

The work of healing justice and community care is close to my heart. It is metastasized in my bones. Since the age of fifteen, I have been involved in politicized arts and organizing. From early 2014 through late 2018, in my mid-twenties, my political home was the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100)¹⁷. As an active core member, the majority of my attention, energy, and contributions went towards co-founding and co-leading the *Healing and Safety Council* (HSC). HSC is the experimental “holistic Human Resource team” (BYP100, personal communication, 2015) of the organization, dedicated to imagining, establishing, and facilitating systems of harm-reduction, care, transformative justice, accountability, and other creative tools for community building. The work was emotionally laborious and often felt politically and socially risky (for example, our chapter received notification from leadership that BYP100 was on the FBI’s “Black identity extremist” watch list; BYP100, personal communication, 2015). However, undeniably, the experience was also lifesaving and life-affirming. My work in BYP100 positioned me and all my future work within a Black queer feminist embodied praxis; a lens that engages critically in political, gender-expansive, liberatory, and abolitionist practices. In addition to what I gained as an educator, facilitator, organizer, and scholar, I gained invaluable lifelong relationships. Through this work I have established lifelines with generations of freedom fighters, the children of freedom fighters, and the parents of freedom fighters; people unequivocally committed to a world where those most impacted by systemic violence are well-resourced, supported, and safe.

¹⁷ BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100) was founded in 2013. It is a member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people through a Black queer feminist lens. For more information on the Black Youth Project 100, visit byp100.org. For more information on the Movement for Black Lives visit <https://policy.m4bl.org/>.

I consider myself a community researcher and scholar-activist. I am committed to being *in practice*¹⁸ with the principles and guiding tenets of Black queer feminism, decolonial methodologies, and humanizing research (Hanson, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012, 2014; Patel, 2015). For my dissertation, I am honored to conduct research at the intersection of healing and justice, first and foremost, due to and because of relationships with individuals and communities within the movement. Therefore, my decision to center those living *out loud* at the intersections of Black and queer identities, politicized parenting, creation (objects, ideas, new systems), and healing is intentional. It is *on purpose*. It is impossible for me to disengage my research and scholarship from my community work. It is also important to note that scholars of color such as myself navigate unreasonable academic demands exacerbated by the identities we hold, such as being a multiply-marginalized student (woman, queer, first generation college graduate, lower middle class, and a single-income household responsible for dependent/s), which add to the complexity of being scholar-activists and community researchers. Nonetheless, I believe that in order to uphold and sustain a radical¹⁹ research praxis our methods should be interdisciplinary, critically reflective, and transparent. I believe we must be clear about our alliances to certain topics of study and communities. To that end, I am aware of how my own identities show up and mirror those of my participants and of the complexity and possible biases that relationship may provoke; therefore, I am committed to reflexivity and accountability throughout.

¹⁸ I italicize *in practice* here to distinguish practice from a “stagnant” action and emphasize “practice” as a continued cyclical orientation towards growth, learning, and being accountable to our participants, communities, and fellow scholar networks for the mistakes we will undoubtedly make as humans, especially those who hold power such as researchers, practitioners, service providers and others.

¹⁹ “After all, radical simply means grasping things at the roots” (Davis, 1990). Also, *radical*, as aligned with emergence, with upholding an abolitionist lens and always coming back to the core.

Lastly, I want to say that I tend to the work of healing justice as I would tend to *a living altar*. This dissertation is one of my offerings. It is an homage to *breathing life into* the textured intersection between praxis of healing, creating, and mothering within embodied expressions of queer identity and Blackness in this time-space reality. This research and these stories are not only in proximity to my experience, but also to my physical home. These stories live on my bedside and in the pages of my journal. The work sweats through my flesh and lives in my heart; I hope it is also expressed in my daily praxis and in the pages of this manuscript.

Research Design

This study surveys the work of Black and queer mothers, healers, and artists in Chicago, IL, through interviews, Kitchen Table Cyphers, and critical participatory observation. I employ the aforementioned methods to identify and examine the tools currently used by Black queer people in Chicago to understand, address, and mediate the impact of historical and contemporary trauma on Black people *and* the creative and embodied tools they use to activate praxes of healing justice, liberation, and possibility for themselves. My research design included 1) Ten one-on-one semi-structured interviews, 2) one Kitchen Table Cypher, and 3) critical participatory observation and auto-ethnographic journal reflections (Appendix K).

Participants

My participants draw from a network of Black queer people actively and/or directly adjacent to the social justice movements in Chicago. Suitable participants self-identified as Black and queer and associated with at least one or more of the following cultural-identity categories 1) mother (biological parent, community mother, chosen mother, other), 2) artist and/or cultural organizer, and 3) healer and/or healing arts practitioner. It is important to note, the respective identities of my participants, such as Black, queer, and parent (in particular non-partnered

mother) or Black, queer, disabled, and low-income are reflective of the term “multiply oppressed” first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (2013) which acknowledges the impact of holding more than one historically oppressed identity. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten individuals. I utilized a purposeful sampling process to recruit participants, including speaking with individuals in my immediate and personal social network (see “Recruitment” for more details). All of my participants had to be currently living in Chicago during the time of the interview to be eligible. Five of the participants are native to Chicago and the other five participants had moved to Chicago no less than five or more years before the time of the interview. My target recruitment age was 18 through 35, and all but one participant fell within this age range. One participant was 39 years old and the youngest participant was 25 years old at the time of their interview. All of the participants were asked to complete a brief pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix C) prior to their one-on-one interviews and the Kitchen Table Cypher. This survey gathered demographic information and obtained consent for participation in the study, including asking participants to indicate the level of anonymity they wished to maintain throughout the study and future publications. The options included: “I give consent for the following in the project’s website, collaborative book project, and academic research publications (please check all that apply): My full name to be used; Only my first name to be used; Only a pseudonym to be used.” All ten of the participants gave me permission to use either their full names or their first names. For consistency, I chose to use only the first name of each participant. The following cultural-identity profiles help to briefly reiterate the significance of mother, artist, and healer within the context of the study.

Mothers/Mothering: Parenting individuals, community mothers, and queer families are integral to the radicalization and queering of communities. Mothers, not as an identification of sex (meaning a “mother” does not necessarily suggest a female-bodied person nor is it limited to a birthing parent), but the action of *mothering*, community parenting and future generation rearing.

Mothers are generally connected to networks of other parenting individuals and invested in the care of their community and future generations.

Artists/Cultural Organizers: Toni Morrison wrote, “Artists are the only ones who can help us understand the incomprehensible.” Artists intuitively pull from toolkits of their radical imagination and creativity, tools that are paramount to the articulation of cultural phenomena, political disruption, and envisioning what is possible. This is especially evident in politicized artists who imagine alternative systems to current oppressive ones and seek to embody their conceptualization through forms like dance, theatre, or painting.

Healers/Healing: Healers have become integral to the well-being, restoration, and aliveness of those within social movements. For example, the unique and central ethos of the Movement for Black Lives political agenda centers self and community care, collective healing, and ancestral honoring. Healers provide an important lens to better understand how Black and queer practitioners are navigating historical trauma and supporting both the present and future seeds of Black generations.

Participant Profiles

The individual human, the person, the mother, the child, the dreamer, the researcher, living, breathing, is a critical ingredient to the storylines that lead to the greater composite narratives (for example, the *Movements* and the “Movement Archetypes”). As a Feminist researcher I attempt to utilize decolonial research methods. I believe it is necessary to honor and acknowledge the unique stories, experiences, and contributions of each interview participant. I see each of these stories as an intimate story within the larger socio-political time-space reality, where each person’s life is its own unfolding while still being inextricably connected to the whole. The following brief “Participant Profiles,” which I developed by integrating excerpts from the interviews, aim to celebrate and give agency to the unique essence of each person featured in my study.

Chazarhae (she/her) is a mystic, earthbound space being. Love is her deepest essence. Mother of one beautiful biological star child, and many other chosen seedlings and students, teaching and learning through a creative lens is at her core. A Chicago native, she proclaims “art saved my life.” Chazarhae believes Black people’s “light shines comparable to the sun.”

Chris (they/them) is their mother’s son. The essence of their magic is their intuition, the music they gift directly from their hands to the world and the cultural spaces they help to curate, which

they say are a “bridge for people to connect.” Chris believes queerness is knowing “there is always another way” and that blackness holds deep richness, like “soil so full of life.”

Sojourner (they/them) is a nature-loving, gender non-conforming fairy and space holder. They create containers “spacious enough for all of you to show up.” They carry with them, in their art and community rituals, the wisdom of many moons, generations of ancestors, and the trees. Sojourner believes “blackness is being born with an understanding of liberation.”

Raheim (he/they/Mama) is a light bringer, creatrix, god/dess, sun/son, and daughter who comes from a long lineage of seers. The oldest of 13, they helped mother most of their siblings. As a community healer, artist, and speaker they offer many gifts and tools for transformation. Raheim believes Black people are “bombastic, god dammit!” and that within queerness “there is no limit.”

Denara (she/her) is a youth educator, musical artist, and dreamer. Art has continued to be an important and therapeutic outlet and creative practice for her. When Denara fully stepped into embracing her blackness and queerness “it felt free.” She believes Black queerness is not a monolith; all it requires is to be loved on and nurtured.

Alyssa (she/her) comes from a strong matrilineage of grandmas and “mama aunties.” She’s a channeler of lost memories, especially through her dreams, her poetry, and her artwork, which centers community building. Her sweet spirited child provides many opportunities to reflect and evolve. Alyssa believes Black queerness gives us the framework to “dream outside of the systems that are presented.”

Johnae (she/her) is the mother of two incredible and kind little humans. A cultural worker, healer, and political disruptor, she knows a lot about the importance of home; not having a sense of home, making home, and creating place wherever you are. Johnae believes Black single mothers practice queerness every day, “holding time” and navigating the edges of their journey with their children.

Jade (she/her) is a “mad person, crip, chronically ill, shapeshifter, and churchy mystic.” Her community practice lives in deep conversation around soul health, getting out of linearity, and embodiment. Jade believes blackness is infinite possibility, evident in the way “Black people walk, brush, groom and sculpt their hair.”

Jenna (she/he/they) is an unapologetically Black queer non-binary abolitionist, pleasure activist, and cultural organizer who deeply trusts in transformation. Their community work creates systems of care through deep listening, play, and embodied theatre practices. Jenna believes one’s “Blackness is inside,” that it cannot be defined by others or taken away.

Sarah (they/them) is a non-binary genderqueer artist. Their magic is felt in the visceral way they love and are inspired by the divine. They use their art to time-travel, transforming the narrative and memories of events. They honor the everyday, the mundane, the quiet moments, especially “being horizontal.” Sarah believes queerness is a way of loving and lovingly questioning (everything).

Recruitment

In addition to the precarity of my participants who hold multiply-marginalized identities, this research was conducted amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The social uprisings in 2020 and 2021 ignited by the murder of George Floyd included heightened political and racial reckonings and the hypervisibility of state violence, including Covid-19, which disproportionately impacted Black and indigenous communities (APM Research Lab, 2021). I will also bring attention to the labor it takes as a researcher, both to recruit within these communities and simultaneously navigate precarity myself as a Black queer single mother parenting at the height of Covid-19, through homeschooling, zoom-schooling, then half-day in person schooling, et cetera. Alongside a recognition of and sensitivity to the conditions my research community was under, the following recruitment strategies were employed.

I used a purposeful sampling approach to draw from a personal and organizational network of contacts. I employed personal contact with comrades, direct email invitations, and engaging participants' networks through the interview question "What other queer movement worker would you recommend I speak to?" Additional recruitment methods included (a) a public social media announcement (Instagram), (b) a public Eventbrite recruitment page, and (c) recruitment through personalized emails to eight social justice organizations in Chicago serving predominantly or exclusively Black and queer communities (See Appendix F, Image 3). Despite these efforts to recruit participants outside of my network, nine out of ten of my interviewees were from my direct network. I had two phases of participant recruitment, the first ran from July 2020 to November 2020 and yielded six interviews, and the second from February 2021 to August 2021 which gathered an additional four interviews.

Data Collection

“Participatory Dreaming”

I am choosing to begin with a brief note on the critical “Participatory Dreaming” phase of my dissertation process because I want to be explicit that the dreams around this work began long before the submission of my dissertation proposal in the Spring of 2019 or the approval of my IRB application. This project is rooted in hours of conversations with fellow freedom fighters, in messages I received from my ancestors about the potential to hold rituals that provide healing from generational trauma, and in the deep embodied belief I hold for liberation, especially when I look into my child's eyes. I relied heavily on “comrade checks” with kin, former BYP100 members, and informal workshopping with colleagues, particularly my wonderful and spirited friend and Research Assistant, L Nicole Haldane. It would be disingenuous not to reveal that throughout this project I carry with me the memories of late-night musings and day-time cyphers with comrades about the conditions in our lives (past, present, future) and about tools that will create the most tangible and transformative potential for healing and freedom.

Phase 1: Interviews

I administered a brief pre-interview questionnaire (referred to as “survey”) using Google Forms in order to determine qualifying demographics and obtain participant consent for the study. The following information was gathered in the survey: electronic consent; determination of the use of full name, first name, or pseudonym; demographic information such as name, pronoun(s), age, gender identity, and “cultural-identifier(s)” (mother/artist/healer). The final two survey questions asked participants to answer “What Songs Does Black Liberation Sound Like? (1-2 Songs)” and “What Foods Are Healing to You? What Foods Does Black Liberation Taste

Like?” (See “Appendix C for the full survey). The participants’ answers were used to inform the menu (Appendix H), music selection (Appendix I), and final structure of the Kitchen Table Cypher (See “Phase 2” below). Additionally, participants were invited to upload images of their artwork. Submissions ranged from photography to images of handcrafted jewelry and multi-media video (Appendix G). The artwork was not used during this study but may be revisited for future analysis, with permission from the participants. One participant completed the “Pre-Interview Form” but did not schedule or complete an interview; their demographic information is not included in the Table (Appendix B). The ten semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2020 and August 2021. Upon receiving audible consent from participants at the beginning of each interview, the conversations were recorded using Zoom, capturing both video and audio.

I chose to use a conversational qualitative interview method. According to Hesse-Biber (2007), using a qualitative and conversation interview structure gives the researcher some control, but also leaves room for spontaneity. Queer artist-activist Nia King uses semi-structured interviews to compile her archival work of queer artists of color. Throughout her interviews King interweaves her personal experiences and reflections while responding intently to each conversation. In the foreword written by Toi Scott, Scott stresses that interviewing is a seamless tool to be used in documenting and archiving. He states:

The important task of curating those experiences, and [recognizing] the inherent power and healing in QTPOC²⁰ artists being able to tell their own stories without having to self-censor for the sake of straight white audiences. (2014, p. iii)

²⁰ QTPOC is an abbreviation for Queer Trans People of Color.

My approach was to maintain a professional, yet personable and relational posture. I attempted to be aware of my position of power as the researcher/interviewer, while also acknowledging and honoring my personal relationship to the majority of my research participants. Throughout all my interviews, there was a dialogic and conversational ease, including intentional pauses, reminders to myself to allow the conversation to move at a participant-guided pace, and occasional banter and humor between the participants and myself. I believe this allowed for deeper vulnerability, trust, and relationship building. I began and ended each interview by thanking people for trusting me with their stories and offering their time and gifts.

The interviews have been wildly informative, profound, and at times challenging, particularly during the conversations around Blackness, anti-Blackness, and historical trauma. After every interview, I felt exceptionally honored and grateful for the tenderness, creativity, innovation, and honesty of my participants. I intentionally began the interviews with the question “How are you magic?” to disrupt the tendency to align Black queer people and stories with damaged-centered lives or deficits rooted in harm. Participants’ initial responses to this question included, “Wow,” “I love this question,” “Dang, that’s good.” and “How am I magic? Oh, my goodness.” Other examples of questions that were particularly illuminating include “Can you tell me about how you understand your role as mother/artist/healer?” “Can you tell me about some of the most important places (sites) that have helped you understand your role as [mother/artist/healer?]” and “How does your practice of [mothering/creating/healing] engage possibility of the future?”

There were also points in the interviews that proved difficult for participants. One person answered, “This is like swimming through trauma soup,” in response to the question, “Can you tell me a story about one of the first times you recall using your imagination or creativity in

response to a social injustice or conflict?” Throughout the interviews, I reminded participants that they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and could end the interview at any time. This incident, and the subsequent suggestion from another participant to share the full interview protocol prior to the interview, provided essential information that helped me respond in the moment and make small iterative adjustments during future interviews. For example, with the abovementioned question, I adjusted the emphasis on “one of the first times” to move away from participants likelihood of drawing from a memory situated in their childhood (which is a significant phase in development and can sometimes be more laden with challenging or triggering memories). Instead, I either framed the question in response to a previously noted event within the participant interview or invited participants to share a story of an event that occurred in community or group setting.

Phase 2: Kitchen Table Cyphers

There are notions that Black-centered community dialogue, knowledge sharing, and critical insight occur most organically in spaces of familiarity like “the kitchen table.” In 1980, *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* was started by Barbara Smith after a conversation with her friend Audre Lorde (Jackson, 2021). Contemporarily, Robin Kelley reengages the notion of the “table,” “the corner,” and other familial sites of black discourse and information exchange (2002). Feminist scholar and fandango practitioner Martha Gonzales activates her community-scholarship and builds solidarity with woman and families through song-writing that happens in the kitchen (Gonzales, 2014). Cynthia Dillard remarks,

Dialogue and language are integral instrumentality (methods) between two or more holders of knowledge in experiences that has the potential to ‘transform or provide(s) a

new way to understand our reality and communal responsibility (as women researchers, teachers, scholars of color).’ (2010, p. 675)

Through their respective interpretations of “the kitchen table,” “the corner,” and dialogical exchange, practitioners and researchers have continued to position these sites as important political geographies for information exchange, debate, joy, and self and community care.

I draw from these lineages to inform my use of the term “Kitchen Table Cyphers,” an intentional methodological approach that centers conversational knowledge exchange, culturally specific foods, music, and ritual practices. I was intentional about the design of the Kitchen Table Cypher. For example, I ensured the location was accessible -- in a comfortable home space, child-friendly, with free parking, and with varied food options (vegan, pescatarian, et cetera) that were delicious! The menu was informed by participant survey responses and was curated and cooked by Black queer Afro-Belizean and white chef Tera Murray. The cypher was hosted in Tera’s home on the Northwest side of Chicago. Drawing inspiration from Alexis Pauline Gumbs work around “core Black feminist praxis” (2012; 2020), I asked myself “What are the healing practices Black queer folks utilize in community? What do the spaces include?” in order to design a method that actualizes tenants of healing justice. Additionally, I invited participants to bring their children and to invoke ancestors or loved ones into the space. These details are also informed by my experience facilitating and attending community spaces that center Black queer people.

The Kitchen Table Cypher was held on Sunday, December 12, 2021 from 1:00pm CST to 4:30 pm CST. Participation in the Kitchen Table Cypher was optional. Everyone who had completed an interview during Phase 1 was invited to attend. Participants were asked to stay for the duration of the cypher but were not required to. The entire Kitchen Table Cypher was audio

recorded, and portions of the session were captured through video and still image (photographs). I hired a young Black queer photographer to document the event. Both Tera and the photographer were paid a fair wage for their services. Four participants rsvp'd for the event, one could not attend due to last minute Covid-19 exposure 48-hours prior to the cypher²¹; therefore, three participants attended. One participant brought her six-year-old child. I also had my ten-year-old with me. The event began in the living room and in the common spaces. The adults then settled down at the dining room table, while the children played in the adjacent living room. I brought coloring material (books, crayons, paper, watercolors, and a couple books). The kids also had access to Tera's TV and Netflix. The following observational reflection written the day after the cypher (December, 13, 2021) offers some additional insight around the format and ambiance of the space.

[12.13.2021: *Reflections on Kitchen Table Cypher*]

there's a sort of ease that unfolds when you come to a place/space where you know you are with your people. Where there's an energetic resonance in others that matches in yours and all the pieces of who you are, [who you] were, the blood memory you share, begins to reveal themselves.

we all casually mingled, sat around speaking and playing with the kids, eating the first course appetizer (plantain chips and green sauce). After all folks had slowly arrived, we made our way to the table. I had brought a tea light candle for every living being in the space, including the kids, the photographer, chef, - i invited everyone to introduce themselves in whatever ways felt meaningful to them in that moment, what projects or areas they have been outfitting their attention into, what questions or dreams have been most exciting for them, there was a common theme of folks turning within, of not saying yes to things, projects, people, that were out of integrity or alignment with themselves.

[April 25, 2022, *on methods as BQF praxis (continued)*]

The Kitchen Table Cyphers inspire from the long lineage of life-giving exchanges and droplets of wisdom shared over peeling yams and braising greens. XX scholars

²¹ I did not require proof of a negative Covid-19 PCR or rapid test, as medical centers in Chicago were requiring proof of insurance at the time of the cypher, which was a barrier for some participants. However, the invitation included a notice requesting that participants decline attendance if they were exposed to Covid-19 or were experiencing any symptoms.

emphasize the importance of the kitchen counter, of the corner, of the stoop: these sites of black geo-cultural significance to the passing along of knowing, of remembering, of creating dreams into things.

My original proposal for the Kitchen Table Cypher included two-parts, first the conversation and dinner and then a “mapping workshop.” The intention was to activate the conceptual ideas that emerged during the conversation through the creation of visual maps and other embodied creative formats; however, the mapping component of the session did not occur. Our sit-down conversation and meal lasted the entire duration of the scheduled cypher (two and a half hours), leaving no time or capacity for the participatory and creative interpretation of these conversations. Nonetheless, the cypher was a supported format, and it encouraged activation of the theme that repeatedly emerged throughout interviews with participants: the importance of storytelling and being in dialogue with others in order to share ideas, resources, and forge a better understand of our collective needs and dreams.

Research Analysis

I utilize a feminist and decolonial (Bhattacharya, 2009) grounded theory approach (Hesse-Biber, 2012) to conduct an iterative data analysis of my interview transcriptions, Kitchen Table Cypher transcription, and participant observations (Bhattacharya, 2009). My observational notes include memos and creative/reflective journal entries (see Appendix K). For the first phase of my analysis I selected three interviews at random and individually coded the interviews. This process led me to develop a master code book (Appendix E). I then used this “master codes template” to conduct two rounds of coding for each of the ten interviews. The second round of coding generated sub-themes from the data and allowed me to inspect the interviews with more depth (Saldaña, 2015). The following questions inspired my journal entries (Hesse-Biber; 2012): What am I feeling? What surprised me about X event? What was challenging about X event?

How did the arts play a role in my data collection, analysis, and production? As noted above, these reflective questions allowed me to be attentive to my research design, including altering the sequencing of certain questions, offering participants the option to review the protocol before the interview (most participants chose not to review the protocol), and noting aspects of the methodological approaches that can be improved upon in future research. For my analysis of the interviews and Kitchen Table Cypher, I utilized color-coding to track the thematic codes, created word maps, and drew simple images and shapes (such as waves to represent “*Movements in Water*” or non-geometric shapes to represent a body; see Appendix N). During my analysis C.A.Q.E. provided me the opportunity to analyze “the spaces in between,” for example, the informal conversations between question and answer or the time between thinking through my work and analyzing themes. This is most apparent in the section “Participatory Dreaming,” (Chapter 1) which I wrote before, between, and after the structured interviews and the Kitchen Table Cypher. Through the tenants of C.A.Q.E. I am also proactively looking towards future plans to engage the findings of this dissertation in creative mediums such as exhibitions, workshops, and embodied experiments. Examples of potential arts-based methodology include incorporating photovoice and/or open-ended questions that invite participants to produce visual images.

On Wednesday, October 12, 2022, and Saturday, October 15, 2022, I hosted a “Participant Feedback Discussion” to present the findings and ensure participants felt both their personhood and their ideas were being actively represented. Five participants responded to a survey that was sent on September 19, 2022, to confirm their attendance. However, no participants joined on Wednesday, 12, and only one participant joined on Saturday, 15. Two of the five confirmed participants have requested to schedule a one-on-one session. The

presentation and conversation that occurred on Saturday, October 15 did inspire a discussion around future collaborations and research and what medium and creative iterations of the findings may be best suited for access, community facilitation, and application.

Limitations

My final study included ten participants. While these in-depth interviews produced robust conversations with a number of themes and implications that are not discussed in the scope of this dissertation, the small number of participant interviews is a limitation. In addition, I was only able to recruit one participant outside of my direct network, despite numerous attempts to promote the research study. In future research, I hope to have a more participatory approach, including collaboration around the methodological design and recruitment in collaboration with mission-aligned organizations. Time and lack of monetary compensation for participation are also important to consider. Multiply-marginalized individuals such as Black queer mothers and those under the constraints of what Rasheeda Phillips calls “time-poverty” (Phillips, 2022) are often limited in participating based on time and/or financial barriers. I did not receive institutional funding to compensate participants for their interviews and was not able to subsidize compensation through personal means; however, I attempted to mediate some of the above-mentioned constraints by, for example, providing a child-inclusive Kitchen Table Cypher and offering multiple options for interview slots and feedback sessions. Lastly, as noted previously in “Who Am I? A Statement on Positionality and Research Purpose,” there are potential challenges due to my close proximity to the work of healing justice, including my bias in support of the framework; however, I believe this positions me to ensure a well-integrated analysis and to be accountable to a number of audiences outside of the academy, most specifically the community

of healing justice practitioners and those impacted by the work generated from healing justices practices.

The Importance of Language

Writer-scholar Toni Morrison reminds us of the importance of language, saying its power “lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, and writers. Although its power is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie” (1993, p. 20). I have made intentional and decisive actions around my use of particular language, such as “participant.” I chose to use the term to suggest mutual engagement and reciprocity. Other terms such as “research subject” are not reflective of the type of more intimate research relationship I have and desire to both create and maintain with communities.

Black, when referring to Black people and/or culture is capitalized. Black is meant to encompass the multitude of histories, the varying tribal lineages, displaced and re-woven communities, and ultimately the collective blood memory that continues to inform rituals and cultural practices that honor African diasporic and continental experiences of Black people across time and space. It is about Black people *as a people*, not as a color, or as prescribed by an anti-black white superiority complex.

A second term I use often is **queer** and/or queerness. Queer is not limited to sexual orientation nor non-heteronormative gender identities, like gender non-conforming, trans, or genderqueer. Rather, within the context of my work, it also suggests a political orientation that questions dominant oppressive structures and strives to imagine and create ones that provide

support and care – for everyone. Queerness equally encapsulates non-conformity, as it does expansion and the willful belief “to be transformed in service of the work” (Hooks).²²

The third term is **praxis** - the act of theorizing and activating through reflection and action. Paulo Freire (1996) defined praxis as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126). When informed by a Black queer feminist lens for example, a praxis will likely be cyclical, multi-directional, and interdependent. My research seeks to illuminate the creative, critical, and imaginative potential of praxis, such as what it means to think through then actualize systems of safety and support for Black people that have *all* of our best interests in mind.

The fourth term is especially important given the precarity of its historical impact - **trauma**. Part of our work as healing justice practitioners is not to impose the language of trauma onto others. There is a lot of potentially destructive power in naming for others versus allowing people to name for themselves the impact of a difficult event. My participant Jade states,

I only call it trauma when I'm writing about me because I can name that for myself. I'm very hesitant to name it for other people. So I don't use the T word and in the work that I do like holding healing space for people. But in my own writing, I will say, you know, ‘this trauma that I faced or this whatever,’ *because* I think the power of naming your own experience is really important. So, I try to allow all the space for people to do that. But I do use words, you know, like wounding or, you know, harm or hurt. (Jade)

This passage clearly articulates the importance and power of language; highlighting the significance of reflexivity for those in a position of power, such as myself as the researcher.

The fifth and final term is “**holding space**,” meaning, witnessing – using your presence to welcome and witness another person’s experience; an orientation that distinctly differs from white supremacist healing models of, for example, guide versus guided or professional versus

²² This quote is pulled from “The mandate for Black People,” written by Mary Hooks <https://southernersonnewground.org/themandate/>

patient. The particular textures of “holding space” are closely synonymous to theorizations on witnessing. In her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Cristina Sharpe writes,

Across time and space the languages and apparatus of the hold and its violences multiply; so too, the languages of beholding. In what ways might we enact a beholden-ness to each other, laterally? [...] How are we beholden to and beholders of each other in ways that change across time and place and space and yet remain? (2019, p. 100-101)

In my work with BYP100’s as a core Healing & Safety Council member, we often spoke of “holding space” as in

We be holdin’ space. We be holdin’ meetings. We be holdin’ circles. We be holdin’ ... names. We be holdin’ naming. We be holdin’ time. ... We be holdin’ trauma. We be holdin’ grief. ... We be holdin’ joy. We be holdin’ each other. (Green, K. et al, 2018, p. 919)

It is evident that the intentional use of language, especially poignant or disputed terminology such as *trauma*, is critical, and that speakers (interviewee, participant, or scholar) should determine the language that offers meaning and clarity to their story, in their own words. I seek to embody the intentional use of these terms by upholding values as a researcher and community practitioner that are caring, conversational, authentically relational, and do not attempt to alter the integrity of Black and queer cultural linguistics. This is also reflected in my commitment to honoring and celebrating colloquial lexicon throughout my interviews, such as the frequent inclusion of phrases like “You know whatta mean?” or “You know?” In doing so, I hope to exhibit throughout my dissertation - including within the research process, my recruitment communication, interview protocols, and beyond - examples that adhere to and illuminate the principles and practices of healing justice. Arguably, this approach both reflects

my core values and commitment to creative healing praxis and actively disrupts the structural and aesthetic expectations of a dissertation and the academy at large. Again, my approach throughout my dissertation draws directly from my parallel and emerging experiences as a scholar, healing justice practitioner, Black queer mother, and artist.

The City of Chicago

Introduction: *Prologue*

The front cover of the April 7, 2016, Chicago Reader Magazine reads, “Queer women are shaping Chicago's Black Lives Matter movement: They're stepping to the forefront in a struggle once dominated by charismatic men.” This article highlighted several of my comrades and political allies who had established strong leadership in the Chicago organizing landscape. Its feature marked the three-year anniversary of the acquittal of George Zimmerman (in 2013) for the tragic murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin (in 2012); the event that set off the contemporary (2014 to current) wave of Black political movements in the United States, known as the Movement for Black Lives.

Meet Me at the Crossroads (Chicago as Elegua)

Chicago, Illinois²³, has a unique history of creative explorations of resistance and healing. Chicago is a city that demands your attention: to its visceral moments of cultural innovation; to its shocking contrasts of wealth and poverty; to its unapologetic commitment to movement(s), to its people, and to disrupting the conditions that leave any (and many) of its residents with less than enough. Chicago is also a historical hotbed for organizing, cultural renaissance, and

²³ Chicago is native home to the Council of the Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi, Miami and other Native American tribes and nations. For more history and information on the indigenous peoples of the Chicago region, see <https://interactive.wttw.com/playlist/2021/11/29/native-american-history-geoffrey-baer>

community creative placemaking, in particular among young community leaders of color and artists.

Canadian scholar and geographer Katherine McKittrick writes extensively on the significance of place and geography based on Black narratives, thought, expression, and memory; she refers to this as the Black geography. McKittrick's work (2011; 2021) provides a particularly compelling framework given Chicago's physical location in the continental United States¹¹. Three interview participants explicitly named the significance of Chicago's geographic coordinates that situate the city as the epicenter of the Midwest. Jade called attention to what these coordinates mean energetically.

I mean, we're in a crossroads space and the crossroads, the Lord of the Crossroads, the Orisha of the crossroads is Elegba/Esu and in the crossroads Elegba/Esu offers fortunes and misfortunes, and it's very... that's very Chicago. It offers all the possibilities, like there are all these doors. So I think too, just where it's physically located has a strong geo-spiritual significance as well. (Jade)

Elegua²⁴, Orisha of the crossroads, as a metaphor, as geographic coordinates, and as a geo-spiritual magnetic field, exists as a framing in many religious studies as well as African folk healing narratives (Mitchem, 2007).

In addition to Chicago's "very indescribable magnetic energy" (Johnae), practitioners and scholars have emphasized the city as a site for creative placemaking and community convening; it's a city that helps people form a sense of place and belonging. In their case study of Chicago, co-authors Marcus Anthony Hunter, Mary Pattillo, Zandria F. Robinson, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor emphasize notions of "black placemaking that privileges the creative, celebratory,

²⁴ Elegua is one of the Orisha of the Yoruba religion and divination system of Ifá. He is "God of the crossroads and choice" (Correal, T.M., 2003, p. 171) and of change and transformation. This reference and metaphor was first offered by Jade during her participant interview on August 2, 2021. I am grateful to her for this framing which has offered a significant lens through which I can emphasize the spiritual nature of this work and the geographic context situated in the city of Chicago.

playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being black and being around other black people in the city” (2016, p.2). Their study examines the role of Black placemaking as a form of embodied pedagogy in order to “counter the scholarship that contributes to unrelenting negative portrayals of Black neighborhoods” (p. 3) and instead highlight and interrogate the contention between dominating powers and forms of resistance. The authors explain, “Black placemaking refers to the ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics” (2016, p. 4). One of the cases featured in their article examines “The Spot,” a pseudonym given to a popular southside club that hosts a Friday night Gay and Lesbian event. Through qualitative interviews, the authors conclude individuals in the Chicago LGBTQ community create “shared leisure spaces as their own ‘urban commons’ – places to share affinities and resources and to sustain and expand networks in an effort to thrive and survive in the city” (2016, p. 6). Through social interactions and varying forms of **being in practice** that center Black creativity, play, pleasure, celebration, and politics, the article articulates the importance of Black placemaking as a praxis. They provide other examples such as the Black Little League championship as spaces that double as resources and refuge *and* fuel memory exchange and social interactions through storytelling.

These practices counter the rhetoric from scholarship that perpetuate and simultaneously romanticize a pathology of Black communities plagued by decay, violence, and brokenness. Each participant, whether native to Chicago or a transplant, echoed the sentiment that Chicago “changes you” (Chris). The three following sections briefly expand on these notions and provide additional context for the significance of Chicago as the site in which my dissertation study is situated, including a focus on (a) the impact of Chicago’s politicized systems and policies, (b) how these places support individuals in their understanding of self and belonging, and (c) the

ways the pervasive tension and hyper-militarization of the city impact how and where creative communities are formed. The passages feature excerpts from my participant interviews in response to the question “What has the city of Chicago meant for you?” They illuminate the distinct, challenging, and transformational elements of Chicago and situate the city as a site of survival, a playing ground rich with the potential for creativity (and creation), and a place where you are invited into community *and* to be *in practice* with community.

Pervasive (Hyper)Visibility: Chicago’s Textures of Systemic Oppression

The visual cues of Chicago’s ongoing racial, political, and economic oppression are undeniable. The polarity in Chicago clashes at the corner of expendable wealth and severe poverty. It’s evident on a daily basis when traveling from one block of a neighborhood distinguished as resource-worthy to the very next block that’s surviving extreme poverty and still carrying remnants of 2020’s uprisings, 2014’s uprisings, 1991’s uprisings, 1968’s uprisings -- too many uprisings to measure. The city's elders can be overheard orating stories of resistance from their lawn chairs, histories that have fallen just at the tip of their conscious memories. The cues include the maximum-security prison in the center of downtown to the hoopties²⁵ nestled loudly next to hybrids and Teslas – one car dodging potholes and the other pulling into cleaned and heated garages. The distinctions are visible; they are felt; they are visceral.

For many non-native Chicagoans who befriend Chicago and came to love it, learning about the city includes an introduction to the hyper-visibility and lasting impact of gentrification, racial segregation, redlining, and other formative policies of equivocal impact. Chris noted,

It was just so stark moving from this little white middle-class suburb to Chicago where there's just so much happening all the time. I don't think I ever heard the word “gentrification” before I moved here. Definitely, it changed me in ways of thinking about

²⁵ A hooptie is a car that is unreliable, often needs a jumpstart to run, or may have miscellaneous objects holding it together such as a hanger, duct tape. Or, as was the case with our childhood car, a wooden floorboard covering the exposed street below.

race, thinking about class, thinking about like redlining, gentrification, these sort of like visible cues around systemic racism. (Chris)

For those who have the opportunity and are able to access the resources to transform their circumstances, they can and do. Often people find this tension in the city is the seeding point for creation. Sojourner, a Chicago native reflects,

Taking the purple line to the [south] end of the redline, that just makes you question a lot of things. Makes you feel. Makes you see. I just really feel it in my bones and my cells [...] But there's something that's about possibility. I just feel like my imagination is so inspired here. I feel like when people come here and live here it's like impossible to not become politicized. (Sojourner)

Chicago distinguishes itself simultaneously as both a city of polarized and contradictory positions *and* a city of unified communities who are unwavering in their commitment to those least resourced in the city. Chicago offers to all its inhabitants an irrevocable invitation to shapeshift and deepen an understanding of the complexities we hold as humans living on earth.

A Place for Becoming

All of my participants reflected that the city offered them a place to explore their sense of self and stretch themselves into a fuller expression of their multiple identities. In the subsequent *Movements*, I will expand on the themes of *becoming* and *being* in relationship to blackness, queerness, mothering, and other forms of expressiveness. The immediate reflections provide context for how people's experiences of navigating the tensions and grit of the city can lead to personal transformation. Jade's reflections offer a simple illustration of the complexity that exists within sites of survival *and* what that can offer as potential activation for creativity and empowered change.

A beautiful part of Chicago or [the] Scorpio energy that I think Chicago has is, it's very transformative. Through that darkness, through that taboo, you can really name who you want to be and *how* you want to be. I think Chicago necessitates that you do that because here the politics are so sharp and so militarized. The military presence in Chicago and the

way that it feels is really unlike anywhere else that I've lived. Not saying that it doesn't happen anywhere else. It's just in my experience. And so Chicago makes you transform or be transformed. (Jade)

There were various experiences cited in the participant interviews that suggested the city offered experiences that were a source of transformation; ranging from conversations with organizers (Johnae), to informal house jams amidst groups of musicians (Sojourner), to entering college at pivotal developmental stages (Raheim). Alyssa shares,

This is the first place I moved after graduating high school. I came here to go to the Art Institute. I really became a person here, you know? I see myself having like a few different lives here. It was college and shortly after was this post-college time. And then my current [phase], becoming a mom and being a mom. (Alyssa)

What these sites all have in common is they offered individuals places to explore their own understanding of the complexities and beauty of the world, of their intimate communities, and themselves. Raheim enthusiastically explained,

Chicago helped me really get more connected to my blackness, to my magic, to my purpose. Understanding myself as a business person, understanding myself as an artist and like that the caliber of my work is the shit! It gave me love. It gave me support and really showed up for me in a completely different way. And that was community. (Raheim)

A Creative Cauldron for Community Building

Chicago has a deep history of a politically active art scene. It is a city where politics and art generate spaces that demand that we critically engage in challenging conversations that often lead to abundant opportunities to create and collaborate. As Chazarhae says, Chicago's "grittiness and grime" are also the ingredients for the creation of things "astounding and beautiful". She continues, "The art is so powerful [in Chicago] because there is always tension." The art community in the city is multi-faceted, ranging from grassroots collectives and home studio exhibitions to fine arts galleries and internationally renowned museums. The city's archives carry many waves of social and cultural movements and Black and queer histories. It is

also a city of many different communities of artists, many communities of urban farmers, of healing practitioners, of parents. Alyssa's reflection about her transition to Chicago includes a reflection of how significant it has been to find belonging in multiple scenes.

I think it's a combination of being so big and so thriving artistically and the social justice realm and community organizing and music, all that stuff. There's just so many scenes and so many divisions of those that there really is so many different places to fit in. And then at the same time, Chicago's very special because, at least the way that I feel and the people that I like to surround myself with [everyone is] very encouraging. Nobody's jealous of some other like group [...] It just makes us better and stronger. You know, it's all about connecting and lifting up and like respecting. (Alyssa)

The unique living conditions of Black queer Chicago-based artists, cultural workers, community healing arts practitioners, and those mothering vary widely; however, the political, social, and cultural context of the city of Chicago is a shared experience.

The complex, harsh, and bountiful textures within the city, and the communities who set them in motion, provide the background for profound questions (to consider in future research). How do the living conditions in Chicago influence the prospect for creative solution-based healing? What are the conditions for liberatory practice in some of the most polarized sites? What are the Black-queer imaginings that support the exercising of politicized systems that center care, creativity, and expansive identity expressions? How do creative spaces support individuals in their understanding of self and belonging? What is needed for healing justice and liberation in our *Movements*?



CHAPTER 5

Introduction: *Movements in the Body*

These stories are about what *is* possible - despite the pain - when we work together to build relationships with our physical and spiritual bodies. The interview excerpts in the subsequent passages elucidate the intricate and critical connection between strengthening the relationships we have with our bodies and working through a healing justice praxis in our social justice movements. The stories discuss some of the way's Black queer artists, mothers, and healers are building personal practices in their bodies and facilitating collective spaces to help others work with and remember information from their bodies. "Holding: Pain and Possibility in the Body" features conversations about the body as a physical vessel which can hold painful memories of trauma and collective wounding but also memories of ancestral wisdom and spiritual transmissions. "Healing: Intimacy and Autonomy in Our Body" discusses the physical body. I begin by detailing daily practices that help build intimacy and sensuality with one's body. This section also expands on how people are navigating and disrupting the labels and limitations others place on their perceived bodies or gender identities. Lastly, "The Body as an Energy Vessel" offers individual and collective practices that explore the embodiment of change and re-images what is possible through movement, for example, dance.

All of these *Movements* offer forms of healing justice interventions and expand our understanding of ourselves as material bodies on a physical planet. These stories describe how people caringly approach their bodies as transmitters and receptors of information from this lifetime, ancestral lives, and the beyond. Such as information that leads us to greater clarity, to more creative solutions, and to liberatory praxis within healing and justice. This *Movement* is about re-memory'ing ourselves. This collection of stories first begins with "Prelude: We Live in

the Body” to establish the physical and spiritual body as a messenger both to understand and transmute our pain and to explore possibilities outside of it.

Prelude: We Live in the Body

The body is miraculous. We navigate being in our bodies in various ways that extends our relationship of what it means to be in a vessel that has the capacity to move and that’s constantly changing. What it means to be still, to have flesh, to feel a pulse, to imagine the bone structure beneath our muscles. Our bodies hold extensive memories of our lives; of our artful celebratory moments, and of our hardships. Our embodied memories sound like “I remember like it was yesterday,” like “back in the day when I was young, I’m not a kid anymore”²⁶ like “when I’m an ancestor.” Memories of all the ways auntie affirms “you will always remember; I will be here still- like water waves when I’m gone.” It’s also (often) in our memories that we recreate the past. It be like that sometimes, not knowing which wounding from which lifetime you responding to. like a memory deep down in our bones, like our scars take longer to heal sometimes because the blood that spewed from the cut had stories to share but no place to put them. We also remember “it’s going to be ok, sweet baby girl.” Body memories that pour into love like wildfires that erupt into our celestial knowing. like the re-remembering of me, of she, of they, of soft honey-molasses sweetest taboo.

-

We are on the cusp of something so wild and it feels like a birth and a rebirth of something. And I'm really happy to have a center in my own physical vessel that can tune in and tap in to all of that. Because it feels like God is about to come back, and I think it's expressing through the femme, it's expressing through Black femme. It's also really scary too.

Chazarhae

²⁶ Inspired from the song “Back in the Day” by Ahmad A. Lewis, from the group *The Pharcyde*.

At the helm of “something so wild” we must search, like Chazarhae, for our center in our own physical vessel. Chazarhae – mama – artist - evolutionary, believes this rebirth that “feels like God” is expressing itself through Black femmes. Whatever body, gender identity, and vessel you carry, the stories in these *Movements* are about finding your center, meaning finding yourself in your body. The following excerpts help contextualize the body as a physical and spiritual vessel for holding, receiving, and transmitting information which is a fundamental concept on which the rest of this *Movement* is built. Chris believes,

There are all these ways that our bodies are much smarter than our minds. And I think it's so fascinating. But it's also easy to be disconnected from. So, it's easy to sort of like ignore what your body is trying to say. (Chris)

Chris, a musician, plant-lover, and self-proclaimed mama’s boy, affirms that our bodies speak to us in ways that are often more intuitive or “smarter” than our minds. However, it is easy to become disconnected from our bodies or ignore the information our bodies provide. Some of the reasons people so frequently disconnect from our bodies, such as physical pain, emotional wounding, or gender dysphoria, are further discussed in later sections. What Chris’s reflection establishes as a framework for this conversation is that we must listen to our bodies. They also acknowledge that there are a myriad difficulties and challenges in doing so. Provided that many of us are just beginning to learn, or *remembering to listen*, to our bodies more intently. Often it is the mind that overrides the information our bodies readily provide. Both Chris and Jade assert how much information we can gain from our bodies and that we begin to develop our capacity to draw resources from our bodies as we become less reliant on our minds for gathering information.

Jade, churchy mystic, interdisciplinary artist, and sensualist, emphasizes Chris’s point, naming that information retrieval, or this “remembering work,” *must* happen in our bodies.

It's just this remembering work I think that we have to do. And you can't just remember from your brain, like you have to *re-member* [original emphasis] in your flesh, in your body. And that, I think, is the thing that holds people back. (Jade)

The body, and the information it holds, *is* the vessel for the remembering work. Similar to Chris, Jade maintains that it is our body, not our minds or “the brain,” that we must tap into or listen to in order to do the work. Jade suggests that remembering “in our flesh, in our bodies” is how we disrupt being held back. We are disconnected from our bodies, not only because we are navigating pain or traumatic events, but also because we need to (re)build playful, intimate, and intentional relationship with it. Sojourner, Afro-futuristic multi-disciplinary artist, space holder, and performer, offers a specific practice.

When you tap into that sensation and you stay with it. This is a tool. You tap into whatever it is that you're feeling. Through meditation, we learn to return, and to refocus our attention from the minds and the stories of the mind and just honor the body enough to say that this sensation is important for me to focus on. (Sojourner)

Tapping into the sensations in our body, through meditation, or the act of refocusing our attention from our minds to our body, is a tool. Sojourner suggests it is a tool that gives us information and allows us to honor and hear from our bodies. It is a practice of intimate listening that tells us, “This sensation is important for me to focus on.” *Reader: Pause now and listen to your body. What is it saying to you in this moment? How you tend to the information?*

One

Holding: Pain and Possibility in the Body

The body holds memories. It holds joyful memories and also memories that are engraved with pain. Sometimes the pain memories are more pronounced. There is something Black people know about Black wounding that is attended to in our bones. It shows up in the moments we should probably go to the doctor, but our flesh curls up and our veins constrain when we walk through the front door (Etoniru, 2019). It sounds like, “we can’t breathe” (Passavant, 2015;

Davis, D. J., Chaney, C., & BeLue, R., 2020). Because we have known this sensation of asphyxiation before, outside of even having lived through it. *Reader: take a deep breath, touch an area of your body that needs tending to.* Most Black people in the United States can call into memory a very particular and shared story of the trauma endured by our ancestors (Jafa, 2013; Hartman 2016; Hartman 2022). Further articulations of trauma hold varying levels of nuance and complexity depending on the frameworks from which they originate, such as the medical field, which tends to focus on the impact on the brain and nervous system, or trauma from a cultural perspective, which investigates the impact on social identity and collective memory (Eyerman, 2001). What is commonly agreed upon is that trauma can leave a lasting imprint on people's nervous systems, physical health, mental and emotional psyche, and spiritual attunement all of which is captured in our bodies.

The conversations with participants highlight a particular attention to the emotional and spiritual impact of traumatic events on the collective Black body. This is also a conversation about the physical body as a vessel that holds information, wisdom, and wounding *and* has the potential to alter and heal those things. Spiritual scholar Dra. Rocio Rosales Meza suggests our bodies hold pain, “not just of our lives, but also of our ancestors, and of the collective” (Rosales Meza, 2022, online post). Sarah, multimedia artist and lover, and Raheim, seer, creatrix, and mama, offer two distinct narratives of how the collective Black experience of trauma has impacted them, both as it relates to the transference of pain between generations and through the contemporary objectification of horrific events by video. For Sarah, the emotional memories of trauma are felt in the physical body.

I see it mostly as a body thing. As my ancestors experienced pain, whether it be physical or emotional pain that then transferred into their children, that then transferred into their children, that's now transferring into me. And I live with the trauma that my ancestors experienced in a lot of like physical ways, I would argue. Like the memory of those

traumas are in my body. And the memories of the pain are in me in the ways that my ancestors were spoken to, or interacted with. [Which] informed how they spoke to and interacted with their children; how they spoke to their children. (Sarah)

Sarah states that the physical and emotional pain that their ancestors endured have been passed down through generations, impacted their parents' actions, and ultimately are now being held in their body. This pain is felt in ways that impact them physically. What Sarah implies is that there are also psychological impacts because of the ways their ancestors were spoken to or treated, which informed some of the ways their parents then interacted with them. Sarah emphasizes multiple times that the “memories of the pain” are held in their own body. Raheim also acknowledges a similar experience, stating,

I can't watch when these videos come out about police shooting Black men. I can't watch it because it literally does something to my body. And I know that if I'm activating that, then I'm going to draw that closer to me. And that ain't what I want. You know? (Raheim)

Raheim relates the physical reactions that occur when viewing traumatic events, such as the police killings of Black men and people. Raheim does not engage with material that depicts these events because he understands how doing so “draws that closer.” *That* being the physical pain that comes as a result of viewing an event and likely also the energetic transmission as the traumatic memory lingers in the body. Both Raheim and Sarah assert that traumatic events that occurred to other people impact their own bodies. They both also struggle to pinpoint the exact ways it transmits or is held in the body.

Jade illuminates one of the ways that our physical bodies most frequently hold trauma - by holding our breath. She suggests that the same tool is how we can prevent holding onto pain in our bodies.

Breath work for me is just foundational. Especially because we are going to end up talking about traumas. We're going to end up talking about hurts and harms and woundings. And so many of us have learned to take that into our body without releasing that breath. (Jade)

Jade establishes breath work, and the practice of releasing trauma through our breath, as a foundational tool to moving through our traumas. She admits that having discussions about the trauma that surround us is inevitable, but that learning to intentionally release the breaths that we take during those events, is also possible. This is a concrete tool to release the traumatic event from being held in our bodies. Because of the world we live in, and the work that we commit to as liberation avatars, we will be addressing wounds and the pains inflicted on those who are Black, queer, disabled, and so many other identities of oppressed people. The preceding passages grapple with the negative impact on our bodies and as a result, the harmful behaviors that are sometimes passed down through generations.

Of course, bodies hold more than just pain, they also hold wisdom. My conversations with participants suggest that our bodies do not only hold pain but also hold wisdom, ancestral knowledge, and otherworldly teachings. Sojourner's next excerpt further explores the **tension of living in a body that simultaneously holds pain** and so much wisdom **and possibility**.

Sojourner reflects on the experience of being in a Black body, which they believe intuitively connects to desires and practices that move us towards freedom. They assert that because Black bodies are so insidiously afflicted with pain, our approach to liberation must hold space for our wounds.

Whether I was consciously connecting it to me being a Black person, there's always been this calling to move towards freedom and liberation [...] For me in my body, it's this commonsensical thing that liberation means putting all of these different pieces together. Retrieving people and nature from harm in any way that we can. We are so connected to that because we live in this world that continuously inflicts trauma day after day after day on us, because we're Black. And so to be in this trauma, in this body. It's like being Black means that I have this very specific trauma body that does not get a chance to be in a place that can hold enough space for me to feel safe and grounded and connected and feel like I'm not going to be harmed. And so, you know, to me, being Black means understanding the importance of holding that space for myself and holding that space for other people. (Sojourner)

Sojourner speaks to the innate embodied calling to move towards freedom *and* understands that liberation work includes piecing back together that which has been disconnected, such as humans and nature, or humans and our own bodies. They also reiterate the challenge of navigating the world as a Black bodied person who is continuously impacted by trauma and is all too familiar with the pain the world inflicts. Sojourner's personal experience highlights the core principles of healing justice, which ask that we acknowledge our pain and the impact of historical trauma while simultaneously intervening in those systems (Hemphill, 2018). Sojourner's story suggests that a component of these active interventions is holding intentional spaces with others and creating moments that allow us to tap into "the common sensical thing that liberation means putting all of these different pieces together" (Sojourner).

As we sat down to enjoy our delicious meal during the Kitchen Table Cypher, I invited all of the participants to bring into the space whomever or whatever was present for them. Sojourner invited their paternal ancestor, Ms. Emma McIntyre, affirming that Ms. McIntyre was indeed very much living in Sojourner's body in that very moment body.

[I am] just grateful for my guides and my ancestors. I was just talking about Emma McIntyre, my great great great grandmother who just came into my field through my father from a community project. I was interviewing my father and he was like "Now I really feel her and I really feel her heart through you." I was like "Wow." And so just really grateful that she's very much in my body right now. (Sojourner)

Sojourner expresses deep gratitude for their great great great grandmother, and the conversation with their father that led them to connect to her presence in Sojourner's body. In their reflection, Sojourner acknowledges the generational link – their father - who felt Ms. Emma McIntyre's heart within Sojourner, and through that recognition, bonded Sojourner and their ancestor. While our living bloodline and lineage may not always be the ones to connect us to our ancestors - the heart, soul, and wisdom of our ancestors, even those we never met or previously had no

awareness of, are held in our bodies. Sojourner’s story offers insight into the **generational transference of memories** and the wisdom and the heart connection that live in the body.

"Holding: Pain and Possibility in the Body" offers context for understanding the physical body as a memory holder, pain decipherer, and possibility creator. In "Prelude: We Live in the Body," Chris and Jade remind us that our minds are often not the most reliable resource for remembering, for pulling below the surface to uncover that which can support us in the work of healing and justice. Sarah, Raheim, Jade, and Sojourner allude to the various ways that our bodies hold and navigate generational and personal pain. The stories also acknowledge the physical pain and generational trauma that continuously afflict the Black body. These stories suggest that despite all of those wounds, we continue to *breathe* (Jade) and survive, we explore and deepen our relationship with our ancestors (Sojourner), our bodies, and one another. For Black queer folks, many of these contentious moments of wounding also act as channels for self and communal healing, such as the acknowledgement of how trauma is held in our bodies alongside the affirmative commitment to shifting that pain into personal and communal practices that hold possibilities for liberation.

Two

Healing: Intimacy and Autonomy in Our Body

The interventions and preventions being activated and explored through the work of Black queer mothers, healers, and artists assert the fact that cultivating an intimate relationship is a practice of *being with* ourselves, each other, nature, our ancestors, and a non-linear time-space reality. It is a practice in which we begin to situate ourselves within envisioned systems of collective care and liberated environments. These new systems begin by developing an intimate and pleasurable relationship with our own bodies. Johnae, Jade, Chris, and Jenna each offer

practices that have supported them in doing so on their own, through intimate exchange, or in shared spaces. In conversation with Chazarhae, Sarah and Chris, I then explore various experiences through which folks have deepened their connections to themselves and claimed agency of their embodied gender expressions.

Johnae, political disrupter, artist, and mother of two, began one of those practices after an invitation from her therapist to embrace the simple things in life and to honor herself as worthy of pleasurable things and experiences.

When I went to therapy, she taught me how to take care of myself. Like to just thank my hands. Just do nice things to really adorn your life that are, you know, inexpensive, but just signals to you that you deserve beauty and that expression of self-worth.
(Johnae)

The simple act of thanking your hands is an accessible daily practice wherein you see yourself as worthy, deserving, and alive. What Johnae offers through this reflection is the idea that developing a relationship with yourself and your body can be comprised of simple daily practices. Jade's relationship to her body as a chronically disabled person has also demonstrated that affirmations of her physical embodiment are important to her self-regulation. Jade lovingly recalls the exchanges between her and her grandmother, which were her first introduction to the importance of touch.

Pleasurable self-touch, self-holding. I feel like that was a tool that was always important to me. [When] I grew up, my grandma always was like, "You have to have at least three hugs a day." And when I came over her house, she would ask me, "Did you get your three hugs?" And if I didn't, she would give me my three hugs. [...] Anointing myself, jewels and adornment. I really was just like a child femme queen. I just found so much power and beauty in arranging and adorning and femme expressions of sensuality. (Jade)

Jade's practice of building intimacy with herself emphasizes adornment and self-holding, an exercise she learned through the affirmation of her grandmother's insistence "to have at least three hugs a day." Jade continues by emphasizing,

Touch is important for us to be able to regulate our nervous systems. And it's something that I learned from my grandma's mother wit, and it's something that is scientific. (Jade)

Jade's "grandma's mother wit," means the intuitive knowing her grandmother passed down to her about the importance of touch for nervous system regulation (which is also substantiated through scientific research; Farroni et. al., 2022) was what guided Jade in continuing to build a relationship with her body through pleasurable self-touch and self-holding. Jade's affirming physical exchanges with her grandmother, the assurance of at least three hugs a day, laid the foundation for continued exploration of touch as a means to connect with her body both sensually and to sooth and regulate her nervous system. In building an intimate relationship with our bodies, we not only develop skills to regulate and mediate the transference of pain, but we also begin to affirm our liveliness, our active being. We disrupt the systems of harm that suggest that our bodies are not worthy of soft touch, pleasure, or care.

Chris's practices of connecting to their body are external. They seek out green spaces and plants in the midst of Chicago's dense concrete streets as a means to place themselves back in their own body.

Since I've been in Chicago, I've sort of understood, in a more visceral way, the importance of green space and having an actual tactile relationship with plants and dirt. I fill my home with plants, and I find that to be a very meditative and healing practice. The act of nurturing something gives me a lot that I can't really put a lot of words to, but it like places me back into my body when I sometimes feel outside of it. And helps me remember a connection to the outside world in some ways and how we are sort of like connected. (Chris)

Chris has found that surrounding themselves with plants and developing a meditative ritual of nourishing their plants has been healing. Specifically, in building a "tactile relationship" with plants and dirt they have been able to feel into their body *and* connect to the outside world. For Chris, the act of nurturing plants, and the physical relationship they build with the plants, has

helped place themselves in the body when they “sometimes feels outside of it.” Chris offers a practice of nurturing something outside of yourself to come back into yourself.

Sometimes we are able to build a relationship with our bodies through our relationships with other people. Jenna, pleasure activist, abolitionist, and facilitator, leads workshop series in community with adults and young people. In these shared spaces, the nuances of imagining the possible begin to emerge and become visible.

Here are the things that we can do as people to **hold space** together; to make sure that everybody is being seen, heard and felt and has access to the best of our abilities. This is a tool that is providing insight for people to be able to think deeper. So whether that be a particular way that someone can access information. Really, my practices are all about deep listening, creating systems of care, and doing that all with a queer feminist's radical viewpoint. I was holding space for workshops for people about exploring radical intimacy and what that could mean. The folks who were attending were people who had just graduated from high school and were like, “**How do I even hold space for my pleasure?** Right now, I don't know what pleasure means. We want to know what it means to **be intimate with ourselves and to hold space for love**. What does it mean now that I'm an adult and I'm about to be out of here in a way that I'm scared of? I'm an adult now and I still don't have an understanding of my needs and pleasure. (Jenna)

The young people Jenna works with express a curiosity to build a relationship with themselves and each other around intimacy, pleasure, and love. These inquiries are also tinted with fear, with the worry that they may be entering adulthood without a fundamental understanding of their needs and desires. While some people feel safe to explore pleasure in their bodies through intimate connection with others or self-exploration, for others embodied role play, dialogue, or journaling may be best or easier. Jenna offers these practices.

[The workshops integrate] conversation and dialogue, definitely. And also play. The tools that I use are role play. So, actually trying to have these difficult conversations and having them [speak] out loud to see how it might feel in your body. Of course, it's very different when you're in the moment. But I have the deep belief and understanding that once you practice these things, journal them, continue to write them down, practice on your friends. When that moment comes up and you're in a situation and you're practicing consent you will have a better chance of getting across what you want to say had you practiced it. (Jenna)

Jenna works with young people through play, dialogue, and story-sharing to explore their understanding of pleasure and develop language around their needs and desires. Jenna believes that practicing consent, writing down your desires for intimacy and pleasure, and speaking out loud to “see how it might feel in your body” will support people in better communicating those desires in real time. Their emphasis on the embodied practice of pleasure and consent supports what previous participants have suggested about the need to externalize our practices, such as taking care of plants, in order to come back into ourselves.

The spaces Jenna hold exemplify a version of what Chazarhae invites through developing intimate body practices together. Chazarhae builds a relationship with her own body by seeking to explore the “intimate crevices” that are possible when we are amongst others.

I think it's really important to have body practices together, like developing intimacy that doesn't have to be sexually activated. I think finding ways to dig into these really intimate crevices of each other to pull out spirituality and love and just building practice and ritual. All of that. I think [that] would really fuel our revolution. (Chazarhae)

Chazarhae proposes that some of the tools necessary to “fuel the revolution” can be revealed through exploring “body practices together.” These intimate crevices that exist in non-sexual exchange are places where we may find sustenance like spirituality, love, and ritual. There is an intimacy, a curiosity, and a liberatory approach to being in relationship to each other that acknowledges the physical vessels that we are in and builds more opportunity to revolutionize everything. Chazarhae continues, reflecting on her journey towards identifying as queer, suggesting that another way to build intimacy with yourself is through safe, consensual, and affirming bodily explorations with your peers.

As a child, like as a young person in my adolescence, exploring sexuality and pleasure happened amongst my girl folk, my female folk. And that was the most authentic, pleasurable experiences I had. And then, in high school, I started fucking on boys. And it was just so dick centered and so different from the actual exploration of myself and my

body and my person and my sexuality that I was doing with my girlfriends. And it took me a very long time to get back to that. (Chazarhae)

Chazarhae's first explorations of her body amongst her "girl folk" invited safe exchanges where she learned what felt pleasurable to her and began to build a relationship with her body.

Chazarhae admits that her sexual journey went through stages of intimacy with "boys" where the exchanges were "so different than the actual exploration of" herself. These stages helped her redirect future exchanges with others, and intimacy with herself, so that they centered her body or her pleasure. Chazarhae's story speaks to the intersection of intimacy and autonomy, emphasizing the power of reclaiming and centering herself in the processes of learning what feels good and exploring her queerness. Her relationship with her body has also continued to evolve as she continues to explore her queerness.

Queerness I would say, I'm still trying to figure that out. I am mostly in community with women. I have very, very intimate, affectionate relationships with women. You all are my sisters, like my sister-wives. And then I also have attraction to male body, male energy, male mind. (Chazarhae)

Chazarhae's relationships are centered in communities of women, her "sister-wives" but also expand to include an attraction for men and masculine energy. For Chazarhae, queerness is an embodied practice where she has been able to explore her relationships – platonic - affectionate, sexual and **disrupt** the structures or boxes of heteronormativity. The intersection of being in the body, exploring sensuality, and expanding queer identity are evident in Chazarhae's vulnerable reflections of her adolescent and adult relationships. Queerness, as a sexual orientation and as a political framework, is one praxis from which we activate the principles of healing justice which ask that we intervene and disrupt systems of harm and create, imagine, and center a praxis of care (pleasure, intimacy, etc.).

In the final two stories in this section, Sarah and Chris provide insight into some of the ways they have claimed autonomy of their identities and built relationships with their bodies through navigating their queerness. Chris has navigated their perceived identity in a world that is not safe for Black woman, nor Black trans non-binary people. Chris's experience brings attention to the ways in which building a relationship with oneself is complicated when we are also governed by others *and* societal norms. They reflect on the role their mother took throughout their gender transition. Chris says,

[Queer expression] was always sort of complex and expansive in my mind. However, you know, as a trans person, as a young person, I remember being pushed to the more feminine. And then ironically, when I started the process of medically transitioning and became more feminine because I was able to sort of let that part of myself out and feel more comfortable about that I then got a similar push from my mom to be more masculine [...] There's always been this desire to protect me, and I think once I no longer lived under her roof, there's just sort of this pervasive fear. It's scary being a Black woman in the world. But when I was a woman, I was like a masculine woman. Now that I live in this body that is seen as masculine but exhibiting more effeminate traits that then in a misogynist world becomes dangerous in its own way. (Chris)

Chris's story speaks to the previously noted concept of being in a body that simultaneously holds memories of pain *and* possibility. It also calls back Chris's and Jade's caution not to over-rely on the mind. While Chris's story highlights the embodied experience of their transition and queer journey, it also suggests that the idea of "queerness" is "expansive in [their] mind." Chris describes the push and pull of external perspectives from their mother and society. Their experience further highlights the internal negotiation of navigating one's external appearance; for example, being perceived as a woman and being expected to exhibit feminine traits or medically transitioning and being expected to therefore exhibit more masculine traits. This binary and the limiting tension it produces is situated within an embodied queer identity framework that Chris perceives as "complex and expansive." Not wanting to fit themselves into a prescribed queer identity, Chris resists doing so as a non-binary person who is "seen as masculine but exhibit[s]

more effeminate traits.” Chris’s story illuminates the complexity and risk of being in a queer, changing, and gender-expressive body. While their mother’s fear stems from a desire to protect her child in a world that is indeed uncaring or even dangerous to women, gender non-conforming, and trans people, it also speaks to the ways our families and intimate circles can contribute to this harm. Nonetheless, Chris’s journey has continued to help them position themselves inside their body.

Queerness is very much about sort of coloring outside of the lines and reimagining what it means to just be a human in your body on this Earth. (Chris)

Chris’s definition of queerness speaks to their approach to navigating and expanding their identity in a gender-queer body. Similar to other comrades featured in this project, Chris views queerness as one of the tools to “reimagine” what it means to be human, in a body, on this earth. This practice of reimagining our relationship to our humanness, our bodies, and being in right relationship to the earth directly engages the core principles of healing justice, as it relates to reimagining (or imagining beyond our current vision) new ways of being, for example, care systems, accountability protocols, and mutual aid.

For Sarah, identifying as gender-queer has also been about expansion and gaining **autonomy of their body.**

Gender-queerness for me is very much about autonomy over my body *and* an ability to have autonomy over my body. Being understood as a woman or even as a girl, I just realized more and more it didn't sit right with me, especially in a heteronormative world. I use they/them pronouns, right? Which is an opportunity for me to decide how I want strangers to interact with me or how I want people around me to understand me that works outside of a binary of either masculine or feminine. [...] You know nothing about me, but you've just decided to place a gender on me. That shit is kind of wild to me. [...] Gender-queer identity is very autonomous. You know what I'm saying? I get to decide what my body means to me. And then you come along with me or you not and you can do you, boo. Just don't try to ride with me if you're not going to listen to what my train is saying, listen to how I've decided I see myself. (Sarah)

Sarah identifies as gender-queer, which for them is an expansive identity outside of the masculine/feminine binary that gives them autonomy over their body. In claiming how they identify through the use of they/them pronouns, and how they present themselves to the world, to strangers and comrades alike, Sarah has freedom over their body and the power to express “what it means” to them. They do not expect everyone to “ride the same train.” However, their decision to disengage with those who do not has fortified their ability to move autonomously in their body.

Black queer folks are activating this work in innovative and tangible ways through rituals, storytelling, and workshops in community and through personal practice. All of these tools are concrete, accessible ways to begin to deepen our relationship with ourselves as spiritual beings in a physical human body. Chazarhae, Chris, and Sarah’s stories offer us textured and intimate insight into their varying journeys through embodied queerness. Their practices point us towards ways to strengthen autonomy over our own bodies as well as refine and clarify how we self-identify and present ourselves to the external world. Johnae, Jade, Chris, and Jenna offer concrete and physical practices to affirm self-worthiness, regulate our nervous systems, and explore what it means to “come back into our bodies” (Chris) if and when we are challenged to feel into its quiet whispers. The following and final section explores how to build a relationship with ourselves and each other as we relate to our bodies as vessels for spiritual and energy transference.

Three

Transmuting: Energy Work and Shapeshifting in Our Body

Our bodies are the physical vessels that we have been gifted and the container through which Spirit, ancestors, and possibility speak. This *Movement* is about how to tend to the body as a powerful energetic vessel and how to learn from Black queer practices of shape-shifting to re-imagining our world through the information that lives in our flesh and in our spiritual bodies. Our bodies are the vessel from which we, for example, share stories, practice rituals, hold space, and heal through movement. Our bodies have the capacity to explore new shapes that can lead us to new possibilities for our personal lives and for our collective healing justice work.

This is a practice that demands that we surrender or tap into a state of *being* in our bodies where we are open enough to “change the shape of our bodies” (Sojourner), for example through dancing, stretching, or tumbling. This also requires that we “get weird” (Jade). As Jade poignantly told me, “I think though, honestly I feel, people don't want to get weird” (Jade), meaning, in our communities, in our social justice organizations, even with ourselves - sometimes we are unable or unwilling to contort, to change shape, to stretch our bodies into unfamiliar or uncomfortable shapes. Arguably, sometimes our bodily constraints exist because we are unsafe, unable, afraid, or uncomfortable. The work of creating and holding containers that welcome this process of “changing shape” is a component of our collective work together. It is our collective duty to disrupt those limitations, and explore what becomes possible when we change our relationship to our bodies and explore the information that arises from the various shapes it can take.

Developing an intimate relationship with ourselves and creating collective spaces where we feel at ease enough to “get weird” (Jade) can be difficult. Sojourner admits their body is the

place where they feel the safest to do that work, but that this “is a privilege [because] a lot of people do not feel safe inside their bodies” (Sojourner). In order to tune into the often quiet and subtle whispers through which information is given, for example, messages from our ancestors or instruction from our body about our body's needs, we must learn to integrate new ways of relating to our bodies. All of these tools help us discern how to move towards our liberation. The format and scope of this section extends beyond the former two to offer more substantial insight through a staged dialogue between Raheim and Sojourner (who happen to be close friends in life), followed by longer excerpts from my conversation with Sojourner.

Both Raheim and Sojourner seek to expand what it means to be in a body in this world. Both know about being in their body as an approach to change. For them, exploring the possibilities of what this means or looks like is an artform and spiritual practice that begins by tending to the sensitivity in our bodies.

Raheim: It's a **sensitivity of the body**, of the being, of the vessel. When I do ritual work it's the same thing. It's like, how are we creating an environment? When I dance, I'm healing. It's **healing in motion**. How am I channeling this energy through my vessel and sending that out to the people for them to also experience that through seeing me, through feeling my emotions that I have in my own vessel? It's like mirror neurons fucking galore [chuckles].

Sojourner: I'm still working on, “how do I hold this space for movement that is really accessible to all, to everyone?” And also **pushes people's edges into a new shape**. Because I think that we've been so trained in these shapes in our body. Like sitting, standing, walking, laying down. So to be able to be fearless and like taking new shape and seeing how it informs and guides you and gives you wisdom. When Spirit is speaking through us, it may need us to take a new shape and take a new form in order for the message to be communicated. So really just kind of all of that stuff is just what I experienced as I created artwork over the years. **If you take the shape of a different you, take a different shape than your everyday shape, then you become a different person.**

Raheim: I had a teacher [redacted], she was amazing, motherfucking tough as nails. Probably like 80 something or some shit. I was the only Black person in my entire graduating class and in the entire graduate program. I was the darkest male in the entire dance program at [redacted]. And that was really a fucking thing, and I was feeling really

insecure. We had to do this one exercise where you're dancing and you have to follow the initiation of what you're moving. And so I was doing it... And she's like, "Shut it up! Do it again. Now use it" and I'm fucking sobbing and shit. But it was the best time I had ever done it. I felt it and everybody saw it. **Something unlocked. That I was holding onto that needed to move, right?** So like movement as my vehicle of transformation through embodied motion, moving myself, moving in space and then moving the space around me. I think of dance as moving. I'm manipulating space. **It's not just me doing this thing, this is changing.**

Raheim relates an experience of using dance to change shape, to manipulate space, and to move energy. He explores the sensitivities in his body through dance and movement and explains how to use the healing energy he channels through his vessel during performances to transfer into feelings that those around him can feel into and mirror. Similar to the stories that substantiate the experience of the transference of pain, wisdom, and heart connection in "Holding: Pain and Possibility in the Body," Raheim believes in the transference of energy. His story positions the body as a "vehicle of transformation through embodied motion" wherein the feelings that come up through his body are experienced by those viewing his performances.

We have been so trained into specific and standard shapes in our body such as "sitting, standing, walking" (Sojourner). How we receive information from our bodies that rely on the same shapes it takes, mirrors how we rely on the same harmful systems of oppression. Changing the shape of the individual body at the micro level produces a ripple effect in the macro level structures. Meaning, the structures in which we participate are in fact affected by our individual shapes and movements which can either align to them or create friction with them. For Sojourner, who is a dancer and theater practitioner, the creative, ritual-based, and interventional spaces that are facilitated in community offer practices that help take on new shape. These practices also shift our understanding of how we are inspired to do our work (through spirit), how the work and process unfold (in a non-linear way), and where the artform can or is housed

(in the body and beyond). Sojourner's reflection speaks to the need to take on a new shape in order to "become a different person" (Sojourner).

The remaining excerpts feature my conversation with Sojourner regarding their work and detail a specific practice that explores the body as a spirit-led vessel for change and possibility.

Ife: How do you build a sensitivity to the body? And how does building that **awareness** and tapping into Spirit allow us to take on new shapes?

Sojourner: The more that you stay with the feeling, you notice that as you bring breath there, **as you bring your attention, it actually starts to shift.** Which says a lot about our state in the world right now. If you would just give some attention and focus to this situation, it will change. You know, like this situation of Black liberation, of Black trauma it will change. You just need to focus on it for just a moment and it will start to shift, right? So, the same thing in a sensation in the body, it starts to speak. The more that you start to activate the way that your body and spirit connects to you, the more that sensation will start to speak, even if it's just in you noticing. That is a wisdom. That's all the wisdom you need, but it can also give you images and it can also bring up ancestors and memories.

Ife: I'm curious if you'd say that in your work and in your role in creating these spaces, you address trauma? If so, can you describe some of the tools that you think help mediate or maybe decentralize some of the traumatic or historically traumatic stories and experiences that come up for Black folks?

Sojourner: You know, I don't know why with that question, I felt like a **wave of tears**, and I can't tell if it's sad or [pauses] ... I mean, I work with the body, and I'm asking people to tend to their bodies and their feelings and their emotions. Like in *Stillness* and any other ritual space that I hold, almost always, if not always there's a question posed **"How was your body in resonance with that question?" What's the answer in the form of sensation in your body?** So that automatically will bring people to the very real answer. You know, which a lot of the times is painful, and sometimes it's not. ... So, **imagine a place that you're stuck.** And you actually take the shape of that place. You just allow your body to get into the shape of that stuff so it can be like this, or it can be like this, or whatever the shape. You **hold the shape and feel the wisdom of the shape.** You hold the shape and you feel it. And then the next part is to get in the shape and allow your body to just very naturally start to move out of the shape into a new shape. So, from here, you **breathe and you just imagine.** You just let your body, without thinking, start to move into a new shape. So, like very naturally, this is my new shape. You know, and then you go from this and you just repeat that and just repeat it until you're like, OK.

Ife: Hmmm. Hmmm.

Sojourner: And so in repeating it, you can notice, “**Where does the impulse to move begin?**” **That's information.** Maybe you actually notice it begins in your feet. Maybe you notice your shoulders are starting to open. Maybe it's just the sensation of the space around you that causes you to move. But you get all that information in repeating where you're stuck and then the journey. And again, it's not to say we're trying to fix this, it's just to understand that **the nature of things is to shift, to change.** It's not sustainable to stay in one place, like it's not possible. And to then start to ask “what is this place?” To create this dream. What could this possibly be? What does it feel like? I don't know. I'm not there yet, but I can actually feel it in my body, you know. And start to do things that may be invited into my life.

Ife: Thank you so, so, so, so, so much.

This conversation illuminates the process of listening to our bodies as vessels for spiritual transmission. This listening expands our understanding of ourselves and of what is possible for the systems that best support us. It also expands how we relate to the supposed linearity of creating, healing, or dreaming ourselves into the future, in ways that reflect our most unapologetic desires for how we want to be. Sojourner suggests that being in a more fluid and shapeshifting relationship to the unavoidable “nature of things” (which is to shift and change) is a healing justice tool for dreaming towards what is possible (outside of the shape/s we currently hold). Raheim and Sojourner both affirm in their own ways, that this creative and energetic process of shifting into new possibilities, in our physical bodies and in our environments, is activated when we connect to the sensitivity in our bodily vessel and to Spirit.

Conclusion

As we begin to be in practice with our bodies (over our minds) as a physical and spiritual vessel for possibility, our collective potential to change shape also increases. In “Prelude: Movements in the Body not the Mind,” Chris and Jade remind us that our minds are often not the most reliable resource for remembering. Rather, that our bodies are a powerful source for pulling below the surface to uncover that which can support us in the work of healing and justice. This requires that we hold space for all of the information our bodies hold, such as the memories of

both pain and wisdom. Of course, how we are able to navigate pain and possibility varies based on the relationship we develop with our bodies *and* the traumas we have withstood. “Holding: Pain and Possibility in the Body” offers context for understanding the physical body as a memory holder, pain decipherer, possibility creator. Within the featured excerpts in this *Movement* Sarah, Rah, and Sojourner also acknowledge the physical pain, generational trauma, and the transference of pain between bodies. “Healing: Intimacy and Autonomy in Our Body” speaks to the practices of being in relationship with our bodies, the ways that can happen in community, and the powerful journeys of reclaiming autonomy over our bodies. Nonetheless, all of it is information we can learn from. These stories suggest that despite all of those woundings, we continue to breathe (Jade) and survive, and we explore and continue to deepen our relationship with our ancestors (Sojourner), Spirit, our bodies, and each other.



CHAPTER 6

Introduction: *Movements in Water*

The human adult body is 60% water (Mitchem, 1945). The brain and heart are composed of 73% water; the lungs are approximately 83% water (Mitchel et. al. as cited in Water Science School, 2019); over half of every thought, word, and action we take is water. Human thoughts are water thoughts. Human words are water words. Human actions are water actions.

“*Movements in the Body*” named the memories our bodies hold. “*Movements in Water*” is a story about what participants learned from building a relationship to water and how they found water to be one of the most powerful media for healing the residual effects of our memories and activating visions for our future livelihood. The stories about water in the subsequent *Movements* (Four through Six) trace our connections to this element back to the roots of our relationship to the Universe, to one another, and to our own bodies or to our own bodily vessels. These stories explore in subtle ways the importance of focusing on healing, visioning, and caring as we (re)build a relationship with water. These stories examine what it means for us to build liberatory practices with water that shift how we immerse ourselves in, learn from, and mindfully consume it.

“*Movements in Water*” explores Black queer folks' relationship to and practices with water. The three *Movements* illustrate the role water plays in 1) locating our wounds, 2) releasing pain and built-up energy, and 3) visioning. “Wounding: Calcified Grief in Water, Finding Survival” reminds us of Black folks' complex relationship with water, as a site and element which is layered with traumatic stories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the ways nature has been turned against us. “Releasing: Wailing at the River” speaks to the powerful role water plays as a force that moves with and through us in the form of tears and how the act of crying honors

all that can be released. “Visioning: How to See Clearly in Water” is a series of magical and Spirit-infused stories about time-traveling into our future selves with the support of water. These featured stories expand on ways to further relate to ourselves, others, nature, our environment, and the unknown through the lens of history, rituals and ceremony, and every practice. These stories also illuminate the power of water as an energetic element which moves through us beyond time, not only passed down through generations within our lineages and but during our own life span. In various ways, these stories speak to a) what water holds (for example, memories of wounds and injuries, protection and guidance from our ancestors) and b) the spaces water creates (for example, rituals for community offerings at the water's edge). In essence, “*Movements in Water*” foregrounds water as a principal tool for healing justice and liberation.

Prelude: Everyday Rituals as Movements with Water

To set the stage for these *Movements* I first provide this prelude which offers examples of some of the ways Black queer folks practice daily with water as a means to connect, ground, and explore themselves and their environment. (Re)building a safe and reciprocal relationship with water begins by continuously committing to play in, lay in, drink, and be with water as a daily practice. Jade, Jenna, and Chazarhae offer reflections around some of the ways they incorporate water into their lives; consciously deepening their relationship to water and honoring its elemental and essential tools for their own healing. These examples highlight how Black queerness finds joy and freedom in the pure essences of how to casually, yet intentionally, relate to water. Jade jovially shares that we witness this with Black folks at leisure.

I grew up in Southwest Philadelphia. [...] I just think it's important for people to know, like I'm just block parties, Southwest Philly, water ice. That's also important to me, Black folks at leisure, Black folks being able to live and thrive and learn. (Jade)

For Jade, sipping on “water ice” at block parties in Southwest Philly is an ingredient that informed her identity around Blackness. Water is an element worthy of naming in the process of creating spaces of leisure where Black folks are able to just be, “to live, thrive, and learn.” Growing up in Southwest Philadelphia with water ice is a part of her story and how she relates. Similar experiences resonate for those growing up in Chicago; we can imagine Black people playing in open fire hydrants or wading knee deep in clean freshwater lakes. Jenna describes her daily morning ritual that incorporates water.

So I have a ritual every morning that includes not looking at my phone immediately. When I wake up in the morning, I have a 30-minute meditation that I do, it's a guided one. And then that's followed by a little bit of movement that's similar to like yoga or a flow. And then I drink some water and I pull a tarot card for the day. (Jenna)

Included in Jenna's morning ritual is consuming water. As a mindful and simple act, drinking water accompanies Jenna's morning ritual, which includes meditation, movement, and divining. Jenna continues, sharing that these series of practices are a means to find grounding for the day and to recenter after awakening from their dream space. For them, taking the morning “to chill and get centered” is really important.

I've had very intense dreams my entire life. And so morning rituals [are] really important for me because it helps me be grounded after coming from that dream world and like getting into the day and then also just gets me into the mindset that I want to be in when I go and live my day to the best of my abilities. (Jenna)

Jenna offers examples of rituals that can help us find grounding and set intentions for our day ahead. Their morning ritual is also a means to support them from the intense dreams they navigate regularly and to set mindful intentions to “live [their] day to the best of [their] abilities.” These practices are crucial to the emotional and spiritual work of healing justice and self/community care which demand a meaningful level of grounding and intention setting.

Jade talks about using rose water as one daily ritual among several that helps her embody, honor, and stimulate her feminine expression and essence. For Jade, connecting and honoring “the Divine avatar in me that is femme” is “not about the clothes [you] wear or what you do, it's more your attitude. Your being, your seeing of yourself.” Her rituals include “rose bath, working with a lot of honey-based products, [and] drinking a lot of things with honey in it” (Jade). The daily rituals Jade integrate provide examples of working with water-based products (honey and rose water).

Like Jade, Chazarhae also associates her first memories of water to her childhood, reflecting on how those initial interactions informed her relationship to water as an adult. She utilizes baths as one of her primary tools to create a safe space and reset when/if she experiences traumatic events. In reflecting on the rituals and practices she uses for her own daily wellness, Chazarhae shares,

[The] most important one is connecting with water. That's always been very, very important to me and it's been a safe, safe space for as long as I can remember. Whenever I've experienced trauma, I would get in the bathtub. And sometimes it doesn't have to be a trauma. Whenever I'm just experiencing overwhelm or anything, I'm getting in the bathtub. And that could be like six times a day. (Chazarhae)

The bathtub is a contained and curated body of water, which for Chazarhae, guarantees safety in the face of difficult or turbulent moments. While the regularity of her baths may be inaccessible to some, what she describes in this practice is a way of relating to water both as a means of **grounding** after overwhelming or traumatic events and of **re-connecting with herself**.

Chazarhae’s story emphasizes the significance of finding an accessible and routine practice.

Drawing from memories of her childhood when she first began building a relationship to water, Chazarhae reflects on how being in water is also a way to connect to her ancestors. This expansion of Chazarhae’s story further illuminates the practices which are created by water:

And now I'm understanding that even though I was doing it (going to the water) without knowing, what I was doing in my younger years, I think that has been my way of connecting to my ancestors and being held by thousands of hands. Even of those I don't know their names. And for so long, I've been really, like, saddened to not know the names of my ancestors. I don't know names past [my] great grandparents. So I think that's been my way of connecting. (Chazarhae)

For Chazarhae, water is the container through which she has been able to commune more deeply with herself and her ancestors. Going to the water is a tool to strengthen her connection to the ancestral support system and be “held by thousands of hands.” This story affirms how intuitively guided we are, especially when we tap into our younger child selves. Chazarhae offers a tender and subtle glimpse of the emotional and powerful practice of connecting with the unknown, such as the ancestors whose names we do not know, by connecting to water. Chazarhae’s rituals could also be adapted to the intimate/collective sphere. For example, bathing can be adapted to group bathing in public waters after a traumatic event has impacted a relationship, family, or community. Or doing a ritual near water and calling upon our ancestors (known and unknown) to heal ourselves and our community. This practice could also look like simply cupping cold water into your hands, or praying over water then pouring it over your head. Chazarhae’s story provides affirmation of what water holds and its potential to help guide us into our own healing and to connect to our ancestors and others.

As a consumable element, water is a necessary resource for human life. As suggested in the previous stories, the importance of water for drinking, cooking, bathing, purifying, and other things is apparent in Black folks' cultural and social practices. However, water is also a source of calcified wounding. In the United States, the communities most impacted by climate change tend to be in Black, brown, and low-income neighborhoods (EPA Press, 2021) and on the coasts, such as near the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Seas, and the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean. These same communities are seeing an disturbances in living conditions caused by natural disaster

(EPA, 2021) and an increase in multi-risk conditions such as political unrest and Covid-19 fatalities (Hariri-Ardelili, 2020). Systemic poverty often locks communities into geographies that cannot physically or financially withstand the force of water's more monstrous impacts - hurricanes, floods, drought, waterborne disease outbreaks and other calamities - due to chronic governmental under-resourcing, inactions, and other policies. Of course, most of these conditions are caused by racialized human action (or inaction). Many communities continue to fight against the polluting of their water sources and are surviving continued inaccessibility to clean water. In this calamities, people re-member how the force of water has been used against them for destruction (without malice in nature and often with malice in human society).

In their reflections, Chazarhae, Jenna, and Jade offer intentional water rituals that remind us of the constant support we can tap into for our own connecting, grounding, and self-honoring. These examples of how we interface with water are especially important because they allow us to explore and reclaim indigenous practices and disrupt systems of oppression and cis-heteropatriarchy. These intimate and daily personal practices are a joyful playground for intuiting and experimentation that can be expanded into collective practices. Because of systems that value separation, control, and production (exemplified through white supremacy culture) over connection, trust, and interdependence, many people become more distant from leisure, play, pleasure, spirit, and intuitive relating as they grow older. Similarly, it is human manipulation and misuse of water which deprives communities of its elemental qualities (such as nourishment, quenching, evaporation, raining, streaming, cleansing) and its innate and life-giving teachings (such as the ability to take on any/new shape). Intentionally integrating practices that bridge the separation from these moments with water of playfulness, pleasure,

spiritual connection and other, is part of our work towards disrupting harmful systems and centering healing ones.

Four

Wounding: Calcified Grief in Water, Finding Survival

Black folks' relationship to water is complex. Many Black Americans begin the story of their relationship with water at the Transatlantic Slave Trade where enslaved Africans struggled to reestablish roots on unceded settler-colonial continents (Averett, 2015). The traumatic collective historical memories that Black folks hold *about* and *in* water is a calcified wound in the minds, bodies, and Spirit of many Black people (Wardi, 2011). Anissa Janine Wardi reminds us of “the specificities of African American history, in which bodies were jeopardized and threatened in waterways. The African American expressive tradition construes bodies of water as haunted by the bodies of those who lost their lives in the currents” (2011, p. 3-4). Meaning, for many, this distant (yet very tangible) memory of the abuse of our enslaved African ancestors, is cemented into trauma-responses and blood and flesh memory (Hartman, 2022), and also intuitive knowing of Black people to this day. What do we do with the friction of water on Black skin that has been used as force, causing skinned knees? How do we work with and honor water like the wave’s ancestors poured themselves into to find freedom amidst Yemoja²⁷? Water that is fundamental to life, that baptizes, that teaches us how to live undrowned (Gumbs, 2020).

²⁷ Yemaya, also spelled Yemoja and Yemonja, is one of the Orisha in the Yoruba pantheons. Yemaya is “Goddess of the sea, the full moon, and motherhood” (Correal, T.M., 2003, p. 174). Originally associated with the Ogun River in Yorubaland, with the adaptation of Orisha worship in the “New World,” Yemaya became associated with the Atlantic Ocean and all oceans/salt waters due to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While several books have been written in the last half century on this ancient Yoruba tradition and the Orisha mythology, many of these stories remain secured and protected between those who are practitioners. The stories are transmitted by elders through oral history, which I have the blessing of receiving as a practitioner of Ifá/Lucumi. During a WhatsApp conversation between “spiritual siblings” within our Ile (Ile Oshun Muyiwa) we discussed the connection between Yemeya, protector of the Atlantic Ocean, salt waters, and children and Drexciya, a mythological people originating from the

Stories from Chris, Chazarhae, and Jade explore these imprints as one source of past and continued wounding, speaking to the principle of water as a vessel that holds time while also expanding it. During the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans traversed thousands of miles through the salty waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Many chose to be engulfed by the tumultuous waves rather than face uncertainty and abuse on the shores of unfamiliar lands. Chris's reflection speaks to the connection between many Black folks' aversion to swimming and how it may illustrate a cross-generational memory of water as death or enslavement.

I think that intuition in general is this really, really interesting thing. Because it can be so visceral, especially like if you're tapped into it. I think about how a lot of Black folks don't want to swim. Or they never learned how to swim. And like how connected that is to the Middle Passage. (Chris)

Chris suggests Black folks fear of water is rooted in our history of trauma during the Middle Passage. It is important to unpack the ways in which intuition versus trauma response differ and, at times, work together or complicate one another. Chris asserts Black people's recurrent choice to distance from water is not necessarily a learned or explicitly socialized behavior, but rather an intuition. Their example also suggests there is a generational imprint (or calcification) of the wounds held in water. Chazarhae considers how remaining stagnant in the history of these traumatic events is counterproductive to our survival. Rather, she offers insight that suggests this history can be altered to trigger practices that support our survival.

pregnant enslaved women who chose the waters over the horrific conditions of slavery. The stories of Drexciya offer further mythology that connects water and the domain and protection over the unborn children of enslaved Africans. The myth says that "the unborn children were still in their mothers' wombs in amniotic fluid, so they were able to be birthed and live underwater" (Iyawo Obatala, personal communication, August 15, 2022 and August 16, 2022). For further research on Yemaya and the Orisha see Mason, J., & Edwards, G., (1998). *Black Gods: Orisha Studies in the New World*. Yoruba Theological Archministry. 4th Edition. For further research on Drexciya see Scales, H., (2021, January 25). Drexciya: how Afrofuturism is inspiring calls for an ocean memorial to slavery. *The Guardian*. Also see Barnes, M. (2020, October 19). *Mysteries of the deep: How Drexciya reimagined slavery to create an Afrofuturist utopia*. MixMag. <https://mixmag.net/feature/drexciya-history-interview-feature>

Growing up and learning more about our history. And how much water is involved in our plight and also our survival. It makes a lot more sense to me as to why I use that as a tool to engage with my own survival ... going to the water. It is so fucking charged with energy. (Chazarhae)

Water and the histories it carries is “so fucking charged with energy.” For Chazarhae, this solidifies the importance of going to the water to learn about survival. Alongside the story that Chazarhae shared in the prelude about communing with her ancestors at the water’s edge, this excerpt expands upon reasons behind which water rituals help soften the build-up of wounding that can be held in water across generations. Developing practices with water is a complex negotiation of alchemizing the wounded memories and lived experiences within her. Ideally, collective healing justice practices would support water healing to provide new associations that see, feel, and are in relationship with the immense energetic gift and healing potential water offers. What Chris and Chazarhae suggest is that for Black queer people water contains a nuanced and complex memory of collective wounding while simultaneously being a part of our survival.

Jade’s reflection of her personal relationship to water emphasizes this point:

I particularly like water. Having a relationship with water and water immersion. And I think about even in the past, how they tried to turn that against us with the water hose right or with taking us across the [ocean]. It's just this remembering work, I think that we have to do. And you can't just remember from your brain, like you have to re-member in your flesh, in your body. And that, I think, is the thing that holds people back. (Jade)

Jade’s emphasis on building a relationship to water through immersion as a practice of *remembering* “in your flesh, in your body” is particularly important to consider. Her emphasis helps us further unveil the critical importance to healing justice tools focused on our own body sensations (as indicated in “*Movements in the Body*”) because of how they connect us to the bodies around us (other people, trees, healing circles). Her reflection speaks to how we reclaim our relationship to something, in this case water, *and* simultaneously disrupt the ways “they tried

to turn that against us.” Jade expands on this point, explaining that this is a learned response. Over the centuries, Black folks in the United States learned not to “catch the spirit,” speak to our *ancestor trees*, or have a reciprocal and life-affirming relationship with water, because there was a time in our history that practicing our indigenous traditions was punishable by law, or death (Raboteau, 2004).

There was a point in time you could not practice, you know, without having some serious legal ramifications. And so I think we've learned that's the rule, but it's decontextualized. We need to put that into context and then embrace what it is that Blackness can offer us, which is connection. Connection to each other, connection to the spirits of the earth, of the water, of nature. (Jade)

What Jade offers in this story is a reminder of the practice and power of connection. In fact, there are multiple connections activated when we are in harmonious communion with traditional aspects of Black culture. As she points out, for her, those connection are especially poignant in water. Jade's points reiterate one of the tenets of healing justice, which is to acknowledge the historical trauma held within the bodies and minds of oppressed people, while providing active intervention that increases, improves, and transforms their lived experience (Hemphill, 2017).

Scholar and anthropology professor, O.B. Lawuyi, discusses the traditional use of water within the Yoruba of Nigeria and Xhosa of South Africa. He distinguishes the properties of water *in motion* versus *stagnant* water and emphasizes the respective potential for healing versus illness. Lawuyi writes:

Not all water is regarded as having healing power. So, for example, rain water has no curative power. A stagnant pool is similarly inefficient and is therefore not regarded as sacred. Only rivers and seas are different. They are characterised by motion, and hence they are not just sources of healing. They have been raised into 'deities' and are endowed with special powers. [...] motion is critical, since any body of water which is restricted to

a confined space is not just considered polluted but is also, as a result of its stagnancy, non-curative.” (Lawuyi, 1998, p. 186)

Lawuyi’s distinction between the use of *moving* water (rivers and oceans) versus motionless water (rain water or a pool) is important to consider when envisioning the use of water for collective healing practices. While neither Jade, Chazarhae, nor Chris make any explicit distinction, it can be assumed that Lake Michigan is their source of water, which is a freshwater sea (EPA Press). Gaining insight from appropriately culturally situated ancestral traditions is best practice.

These stories from Jade, Chazarhae, and Chris speak to our ancestral, innate, and spiritual relationship to water. The memories we hold, however devastating or hardened, and the knowledge we gather from these memories through our relationship can also be healed and transformed by the same substance itself. The stories offer reminders of the importance of reclaiming and relearning various ways that we maintain a life-affirming relationship to water as an energetic source which we can tap into through our intuition and by tuning into the embodied memories of our multiple time-space realities. As these conversations suggest, these are flesh memories, ones that exist in our bones, in the texture of our muscles, as well as through our human-spirit connections with our ancestors and Spirit. In addition to being immersed in water, going to the water, drinking water, or adorning ourselves with water-based solvents, we can also access the water in our body which flows through us and gives us the potential to transform our past, future, and lived conditions.

Five

Releasing: Wailing at the River

This story is about crying; of holding in or holding onto something versus letting it go in order to evolve into something new. These stories from Denara and Raheim speak to the

powerful role water plays as a force that moves with and through us in the form of tears (which are made up of oils, water, and mucus; Van Haeringen, 1981). They are stories that honor the act of crying as a tool to release that which would otherwise be held in (our bodies). It is a delicate and vulnerable dance. What we learn through these stories is that Black people, regardless of sex or gender, are not often permitted to cry, to grieve, to openly mourn or wail from their losses (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018). Black people's bodies are heavily policed - from the hyper-surveillance of Black communities (Sewell et. Al., 2016; Henning, 2022) to the over-sexualization of Black femmes (West, 1995) to social situations where people often police the expression of Black people's emotions. Denara's and Raheim's reflections suggest that the avoidance of tears is sometimes self-imposed, rooted in cultural shame and guilt or a learned behavior based in societal expectations. Similar to the spaces of wounding in water discussed in the previous section, within these stories, Denara and Raheim emphasize that the practice of being in relationship to water in our bodies through the release of tears often includes navigating grief, hardship, or traumatic events.

Even in our increasingly queered and gender-expansive society, Denara acknowledges that her childhood environment and upbringing did not encourage crying or offer her a safe space to cry.

I hate crying for some reason, I don't know why. It's gotten better since I was a kid. But when it does happen, I try to let myself do it and not feel bad for it, which I'm still working on. A lot of times, if I'm really down about something from the past, I used to feel guilty or be mad at myself for like feeling something too deeply or nagging over something because it's [taken] a while to get over. I realize it now, but when I was younger, it was just like, "Why can't you get over this? What's wrong with you?" (Denara)

With time, care, and attention, Denara moves through feelings of guilt, shame, and anger in her relationship to the act of crying. This includes the importance of identifying the root of her

relationship to crying and the conditioning against crying or being emotive, which originated “when I was younger.” In this story we witness Denara beginning to build a new relationship to crying that she no longer feels bad about. In the following excerpt, we hear how Denara has created a new relationship with her tears, which has transformed her ability to move through wounding. She describes building a practice with herself that allows her to sit and be with all that is present, therefore releasing and transforming what would otherwise likely become stagnant and callous in her body.

That was kind of validating. That like, OK, I'm going to feel this when I feel it. For a while, I'm just going to let myself feel this and unpack where it's coming from. So trying to be more cognizant of my emotions. But I also just allowed myself to actually deal with it and like, feel it. So if I'm having an off day, I'll take off work, I'll just sit. I'll sit in it. I'll wallow, you know, and then the next day, I'm usually OK. (Denara)

Denara’s relationship to her tears completely transforms over the course of this short story; from ignoring or shaming herself for crying which began as a child to the present where she has shifted by honoring herself in order to be able to cry. Denara now has a relationship with the water in her body, her tears, that offers the attention, care, and time for her to become cognizant of her emotions, and “wallow.” What a powerful practice to give oneself and others permission to wallow, for a moment, in their wounding. It is also critical to name that self-work such as this is labor - emotional, spiritual, and physical labor. The healing justice framework expands the work of self to the work of the collective, therefore requiring that we integrate time for care and recovery for all those contributing their labor. This story offers a lens into healing justice that suggests that the spaces we create for release should not be pre-determined by a restricted time, or at the very least that those spaces should be governed by those whose wounds are being tended to.

Raheim's experience of navigating professional dance school as a young Chicago transplant in New York City exemplifies the power of tears flowing through us. Raheim's story speaks to crying as a portal into creation that moves energy and moves our body into new and dynamic formations. Raheim recounts,

When I was in undergrad, I had this fucking crazy dream about my brother being killed. And I was just like, it was so vivid. I was fucking mortified. It was also my first time moving away from home. And, you know, being first generation and undergrad is really real. Like people also don't understand that too is traumatic. So we were in dance composition class and my teacher was like, "Use it, use it to create something." And I was crying. But I made some beautiful, heart wrenching shit. And I was able to transmute that energy into something else so that when other people also saw it, they felt that too. It unlocked something in them that needed to move. (Raheim)

Raheim transforms an experience, in this case a horrific nightmare, by allowing themselves to be in intimate relationship with that moment. They were fully embodied in the movement facilitated by them physically crying and the uncensored emotions related to their nightmare and other difficult conditions, like being in an unfamiliar environment. Water, or the fact that Raheim was crying, is not necessarily central to this story. However, the presence of water in this story, in the form of tears, is evoked symbolically by the release, transmutation, and movement of the emotions Raheim was holding. Raheim's experience was one that both supported them personally in moving through their own nightmare *and* impacted those witnessing their dance. "I was able to transmute that energy into something else so that when other people saw it, they felt it too." Similar to Denara, Raheim's tears facilitate an experience which leads to a release - "it unlocked." In Raheim's case, they are engulfed in tears and use dance as a means through which they create new ways of relating to the memory of the nightmare of their brother's death. They transform all that they were holding into something new - dance and movement - that even those witnessing are impacted by. Raheim's story offers insight into the reciprocal and interdependent

relationship between our bodies, the tears our bodies produce and our surroundings (people, environment, stressors et cetera).

Raheim and Denara’s stories illustrate praxis of care and model a “value [for] emotional labor” (Hemphill, 2017), a core principle of healing justice. The healing celebrated in these stories implies the importance of individually and collectively mourning (wailing, wallowing, crying, dancing, moving). Emphasizing the importance of releasing in our bodies and through the water that flows inside of us. How that frees our bodies to *feel*, and then feel something else. Something new, something different. Water allows us to consider what is possible within elemental energy transfer through movement that shifts and creates new spaces. Crying and releasing in public has the added impact of being witnessed and initiating release in those witnessing, which has the powerful potential to be a tool for collective social and political movement through the water in tears. Denara and Raheim’s intimate stories illustrate what it takes to be in the difficult practice of politicized healing with yourself and in relationship to a larger community. *Reader: What practice with water are you called to incorporate today?*

Six

Visioning: How to See Clearly in Water

This story begins deep underwater, revealing to us the power of a vision conjured at the bank of a river. The water here holds the freedom dreams of Black queer people and prophetic possibility. In folklore and many Black archival narratives, the water’s edge holds a significant role in sourcing visions for liberation. The Mississippi River hosted sites of refuge alongside the Underground Railroad. The Combahee River was the site where Harriet Tubman received her revelations from God on how to escape slavery and lead others to freedom (Combahee River Collective, 1983). These flowing bodies continue to support Black diasporic people in moving

themselves from the past into the present (and future). For Jenna, water is a place where they access information and activate Afro-futuristic visions:

My dreams have been giving me a lot of information, so I like to think of places that *are* [and] things that *aren't* really in this realm. That helps me a lot with my Afro-futuristic understanding. Last night I had a dream I was underwater. And underwater is another place where I go. I love to scuba dive, where I literally get the most brilliant insights when I'm deep in the sea. I think for me, it's just seeing something bigger than what's in front of me. For me, that's been easier to access in my dreams and it's easy to access when I'm in water or nature. (Jenna)

Jenna speaks to their capacity to tap into important revelations both while dreaming of being in water and/or physically immersed underwater. These sites offer them the opportunity to better understand Afro-futurism. For Jenna, their dreams and water both provide "the most brilliant insight" and a place to explore all that is and is not "in this realm." Their seeing "something bigger than what's in front of me" is one of the critical components of the praxis of healing justice, particularly the work of imagining and centering alternative approaches to harmful systems outside of the ones we presently navigate.

The gift of seeing beyond that which is presented to us is sometimes a gift passed down through generations. Raheim shares a story of their childhood gift of "seeing," which they were able to honor and refine thanks to their grandmother, who also had this gift. This story presents us with another one of water's powers: to facilitate the transmission of vision, prophecy, and knowing at critical moments.

Now, when I was growing up, I was seeing Spirit, hearing Spirit, visited by Spirit. And on my mother's side, they call me crazy because they like, "you talk with yourself all the time." But on my father's side, my grandmother was also a seer. She had her very first vision when she was seven years old. She was in Belize off the Keys with her mom and they were walking down a path. She had this vision when she was seven, but she forgot about it until she was 11. She said she was walking and she saw this woman kneeling down by the water, holding a baby, and they were just fully glistening in all of this bright light. And she told her mom after she remembered when she was 11 and her mom told her, "Yeah, that was Mary and baby Jesus." And then from that point, she always had visions and she had prophetic dreams and all kinds of stuff. (Raheim)

The family of seers Raheim comes from emphasizes the poignant gift of being connected to a lineage of Black folks who commune with Spirit and receive visions from a young age. While Raheim's retelling of their young grandmother's vision of Mary and baby Jesus simply occurs at the water's edge, not necessarily in or concerning the substance of water, there is something significant about including this detail of the vision. Raheim's account celebrates the intimate relationship of being with water, prostrating in its midst, succumbing to the destiny it leads you to, all while convening with Spirit. Raheim's and Jenna's reflections portray the significant power of water in its ability to birth visions of liberation. The power that water has to help birth visions towards liberation indicates the crucial importance of healing our relationship to water itself.

What is possible collectively, when we come to the water? Chazarhae offers a practice on how to commune with water, in order to learn from it and see collectively what insight can be gathered.

I try to do it every week, like going collectively to the water and putting flowers in. I mean that in itself, by literally placing an object in the water you can listen to what the water is saying. By watching the way that [and] the direction that the flowers are flowing. There's so much here to see and learn and understand. I think that is something we can do as a community. We can make offerings. (Chazarhae)

This practice begins with a flower offering. In making collective offerings, we practice reverence, honor, and reciprocity in our relationship to water. This practice is also about listening to the water. It is about noticing the direction the water moves. Chazarhae emphasizes the abundance of what can be seen, learned, and understood when we meet collectively at the water's edge and begin to build a relationship with it. How one person or a group interprets the information that presents itself after making an offering will vary. Perhaps the offering is one that is rooted in the request to heal a community's memory of a site, such as 31st Street Beach in

Chicago wherein during the summer of 1919, known as “the Red Summer of 1919” a young Black boy was murdered for drifting across the invisible racial line in the water (Jones, 2021). Perhaps the offering is simply done as a gesture that honors our relationship to water.

Chazarhae, Jenna, and Raheim each offer unique but closely related narratives that situate the activation of Black queer Afro-futuristic rituals in an intimate conversation with water. In each of these stories, water serves as the site and source of visions and visioning. Clear intention, trust, and interpretive discernment are practices that support water visioning. These are practices that deepen our relationship to multiple (non-human) forms of guidance and support, and a practice that softens past, present, and future memories or embodied experiences of water as a source of trauma.

Conclusion

“*Movements in Water*” discusses how we can learn from and in water in our attempt to implement practices for healing justice and towards liberation, from incorporating water-based rituals into our daily practice, such as baths or praying into our drinking water, to making collective offerings at the water’s edge. The stories in “Wounding: Calcified Grief in Water, Finding Survival” ask us to consider the ways in which water is used, and/or can be used as a source of healing the individual and collective wounds related to water itself in our history as Black people. Chris and Chazarhae offer insight into the ways we intuitively and somatically tap into the waters which are “so fucking charged with energy” (Chazarhae). Jade reminds us that in the same ways our woundings exist in the memories of our flesh, we must also build a relationship with water in our bodies (through water immersion, for example). “Releasing: Wailing at the River” speaks to the power of releasing the waters that we hold within our own vessel - our tears. Denara’s story humanizes the intimacy and potency of building a new

relationship to crying. Raheim suggests that physical movement that sometimes come after “sobbing” is energy work that manipulates space, unblocks things inside of us, and can impact those witnessing the work. Jenna, Raheim, and Chazarhae invite us into Afrofuturistic visioning with water – seeing visions near water, receiving visions underwater, learning from visions through how water moves. These stories invite us to think more deeply about the collective impact of these practices and the healing potential of being in collective practice.

There are those of us whose work it is to future-cast into a time where we are thriving, thrive, be thriving, under water. To imagine and create the apparatuses that allow Black folks to breathe. Much of this work is experimental. It is expansive, leading us into new shapes and systems that we have yet to imagine, to receive vision for, or to accept. For many people, new shapes are uncomfortable, even scary. Water is a container, a vessel, that transcends space and time. Water is both expansive and absorbent. It both transmits and contains memories, stories, visions, insight, guidance, and ancestors. We know this when we believe that the unborn children of enslaved Africans are still nestled under Yemoja’s care, having survived living underwater so that we may continue to draw inspiration from water immersion and uncover “the most brilliant insight” (Jenna). These stories are about reclaiming our right relationship to water and gaining from it all that it offers. “*Movements in Water*” is one of the *ancestor trees* in our sacred grove: its roots, trunk, branches, and leaves are the ways that we find justice and healing.



CHAPTER 7

Introduction: *Movements in Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers*

The three *Movements* in this chapter considers the dynamic essence, “the soul,” of cycles, circles, and cyphers, as a metaphorical, physical, and vibrational (spiritual energy) shape that mirrors Black queer folks' cosmology, practices for healing and survival, and interpretations of being, such as gender expression. This *Movements* is about the roundness of Black queer folks' living cosmology, seen in three incarnations – 1) a non-linear time-space reality that takes shape from the cycles of nature, 2) “circling up” and peace circles as an important social structural shape in our communities, and 3) the cypher as a symbol of feminine and gender-expansive energy portals. “Cycles: Understanding Nature to Move towards Liberation” explores some natural cycles, such as life and death (or sleep and wakefulness), as teachers from which to build a deeper and more intentional relationships with ourselves, one another, and the natural world. In “Circles: An Architecture for Resolution, Celebration and Creation” I discuss the circle as a critical **shape** (vessel) within which we are able to connect, resolve conflict, and create things, ideas, or systems communally. “Cyphers: Honoring Goddexe Portals, like Gold-hoop Earrings” explores how we can honor the subtle teachings of **being with the feminine and the gender fluid** and its relationship to circles, cycles, and “the cypher”²⁸ - the transference of words and movement and energy that happens in a vessel. As in all of the thematic movements, the participants' reflections also explore questions of Black queer **being/ness**; meaning, “how we want to be” (Jade), how we show up for ourselves, how we navigate our existence in time-space

²⁸The word cipher derives from the Arabic sifr, which means “nothing” or zero (Rubenstein, & Schwartz, 2000). Cypher, associated with hip hop culture, is both a space of freestyled exchange (verbal and movement) and energy exchange.

reality and how we are present as discussed in the following “Prelude: Circularity in Time and Space.”

Prelude: Circularity in Time and Space

A Black queer cosmology that honors the work and reaps the harvest of learning from cycles, circles, and cyphers includes awareness of the current and future expressions of ourselves. The story of these journeys moves us to honor every **point** of our being in time and space - our current being, ourselves as altars to our pasts, ourselves as manifestations of our wildest imagined futures. In conversation with participants, non-linearity presented itself as a lens that deeply informs how they live in the world. Jade expresses this notion, emphasizing the ingrained usage and implications of non-linearity in Black lexicon. She discusses language as a tool which simultaneously speaks to the present moment and anticipates/affirms Black futurity. Jade says,

For me, the whole ethic of Black people and security is like, Black people will be. And whatever that is, we will be. You know? And I love that, because we do that in our language- like this ever-present being. If I say: *‘I be at the store. I’ve been at the store. I be there.’* You know, I’m probably there right now and I’m going to be there in the future. And so, I think it’s just understanding that Black folks will always be. (Jade)

How Black folks play with language is one example of how we interpret and navigate our position in the world and affirm the worth and humanity of our being or belonging. Despite everything Black queer folks face that suggests we are not meant to “be” - alive, safe, thriving, free, fully expressive and so much more - and despite the systems that do not support our being, we are here. Have been here. Will continue to be here. Black queer cosmology, which includes but is not exclusive to the praxis of non-linearity as a core tenant, honors the fact that Black folks “will always be,” that Black queer folks will survive into the future. Raheim eloquently reflects on their personal experience of living themselves *into* the present-future.

I'd say I'm a reflection of the healing process. I know where the fuck I came from. I was not as colorful. I was not as bright. I was not as *free*. (Raheim)

Raheim pays homage to the past expression of themselves who was less colorful, bright, free. They unapologetically celebrate that who they have become a reflection of their commitment to a healing process. A journey from which Raheim has moved through the points of their dimmer past expression and can now celebrate a more expressive embodiment of their current and **future being**. They continue,

What I desire to offer through my practices is this same level of freedom, comfort and expressiveness that I feel in my own being. When they say, “be what you wish to see in the world” - I am fucking that, I am the future. I'm a reflection of the future, right?! (Raheim)

Raheim’s commitment to their healing process informs their community practice. They see their present life as one that reflects what they “wish to see in the world.” They also see themselves *as* the future and as an unapologetically colorful, bright, and free Black queer person living *into* the future. In Raheim’s present and fullest expression, they draw back into the past to pull themselves into their present-future self.

Reader: I invite you into a brief activity to help illustrate the circularity of the Black queer cosmology and time-space reality depicted in Raheim’s story.

Please take out a blank piece of scrap paper and a writing utensil. Follow the four steps below:

1. Draw three points in sequential order.
2. Draw three points in any arrangement.
3. Without lifting your pencil from the paper, connect the three points from Step 1.
4. Without lifting your pencil from the paper connect the three points from Step 2.

You now have a line on your paper. You now have a shape on your paper, perhaps a triangle, an obscure shape, or something that resembles a circle. Regardless of the space between the three points arranged in sequential order, the shape connecting the points becomes a straight line. Regardless of the space or arrangement between the points you arranged in non-sequential order, the shape is contained, it becomes a vessel. You have a shape that holds and was created by all of the points. Circles, their **physical manifestation** (such as a lake, a body, a bowl of water) and their **energetic representation** (through cycles and cyphers) are vessels that hold multiple time space realities. Rather than moving from one point in time to the next and to the next, Raheim's perception of his existence is that his past, present, and future selves are all in active expression right now; they can't be separated. In Raheim's story, his **past** self, a moment in time where he was less "bright, colorful, and free," is one point. His **present** expression, which embodies a "level of freedom, comfort and expressiveness" which he desires to offer to others through the healing practices he facilitates, is another point. His **future** self, yet another point, is right now and beyond. As Raheim proclaims "I am fucking that, I am the future. I'm a reflection of the future" (Raheim). Raheim's sense of self and their being/ness is a physical and energetic representation of the circularity of Black queer cosmology, a life whose points make up the vessel from which we live into the present-future.

Seven

Cycles: Understanding Nature to Move towards Liberation

The cycles that humans move through in our lives in many ways mirror the fluid circles and cycles in nature and the cosmos. Mother nature herself demonstrates life cycles in myriad ways. Nature's patterns exist in humans, such as circadian rhythms, seasonal moods, and menstruation. Raheim's story in "Prelude: Circularity in Time and Space" suggests time and

space are a circular form, multi-directional and multi-dimensional. This section seeks to concretize the practice of surrendering to and being in right relationship with the cycles in our lives in order to better understand the most free and natural ways of being. Meaning, these stories from Johnae and Sojourner explore the subtlety of how we learn from life's cycles to create more purposeful shapes for liberation within our own lives and in healing justice.

Many things that we believe or have learned about how to move in the world, with healing and freedom at its center, requires practice. Many of these practices are not easy given that we navigate activating these tools under continued settler colonial gaze and harmful systems. As discussed throughout this dissertation, particularly in "C.A.Q.E. - Afrofuturistic Time-Travel" the essence of this oppressive and settler-colonial gaze is constriction, disconnection, and control (Ani, 1997). Therefore, to counter this is to be in flow, for example to trust the sequence of things even when they occur out of order (non-linear events). For most people this requires an attentiveness and decisiveness that can be difficult. It also requires an intentional decision to **embody cycles as a practice**. Johnae discloses her past tendency to resist the flow of cycles in her life.

I have struggled with it because you know, you want, I want, things to be linear. I want [my life] to be a straight line and literally, my life is so cyclical. And I resisted so much. Like I'm not even supposed to be in Chicago. And then I end up moving to Chicago. I'm like, "Oh my God, another circle. (Johnae)

In her reflection, Johnae acknowledges her desire to lead a linear life path. She admits that even in times when she has resisted certain life directions, her life has continued to take shape and reveal itself through circles. She submits to the constant reminder of the cyclical patterns of life by accepting "another circle" and moving to Chicago. Continuing in her reflection, she speaks to Chicago as the site for both her personal growth and transformative community work. Johnae

discusses her participation in a project working with mothers and the lessons she has learned about time and **generational life cycles**.

I'm thinking about time in a non-linear way. I'm just really, really excited about this project I'm doing with these moms who are mothers of folks who have been wrongfully convicted and tortured here in Chicago. Being able to work with them and tell their stories. I have learned so much about the Chicago Police Department from like the seventies and the eighties. And, you know, I don't think it will surprise any of us that it's very similar to what they're doing in the 2020's, you know? But just to be able to, through that work of interviewing them, see the arc of what's been going on [...] I think being able to connect the past to the present is something that is really beautiful and not only exclusive to, but very present in my experience with mothers; is to be able to connect things to their moms and their mom's moms and their brothers and their now children. So just seeing mothers as the site of like beginning and end and like before and after. I'm like astonished by mothers. And so, it helps me feel really proud and confident in my motherhood. Somebody asked me the other day "What keeps you motivated?" I was like "Being a mom." Because you like, hold time. You know, you hold time in your life. You are a direct link to what has happened before and to teaching these young people and shaping what they're going to do in the future. And so, I feel like there's like a sci fi novel in that, like there's some Octavia Butler in that somewhere. Where we are just at the nexus of time, you know? Yeah, I love moms. I love moms. (Johnae)

Through the archival work and interviews she has conducted with mothers, and by becoming a mother herself, Johnae bears witness to the impactful role mothers play "at the nexus of time" by connecting the past to the present (through "moms and their mom's mom") and the future (through their "now children"). Johnae emphasizes the position of mothering as a site of beginning and ending, before and after. Here, the **act of mothering** and the **practice of holding space** (and "holding time") illustrates the role of motherhood as a direct link to the past (through one's ancestors) and the future (through one's children). Johnae's story speaks to the multiple generations of life cycles and the deep care work of mothers fighting for the freedom of their loved ones impacted by wrongful conviction. Mothers are arguably one of the most prominent social archetypes of praxis of care, or those most often identified as the model for performing the emotional labor of care (Davis, 2016; McClain, 2019). What we learn from this story is both the

critical role mothering provides in the family sphere and community but also how this care role links us the natural cycle of birth and lineage.

In our next story, Sojourner shares lessons that can be learned from surrendering to a different natural cycle – sleep and wakefulness. In their community work and play, Sojourner facilitates rituals that frame wakefulness and rest or sleep as an embodied emulation of the life and death cycle. Sojourner states,

There's just so much in that, you know, death and rest are super super connected. When you go to sleep, you don't stop breathing. But it's the closest space we get to death in life; is when we go to sleep every night. A really important space, that dreaming space, you know? And that's what I'm wanting people to go into, that space of rest. Because in that space Spirit is communicating. You can hear and see and feel things that you can't feel when we're awake. In these grooves that have been really, really created for us it's hard to even get out of the groove because it's so deep, you know? But in that space of rest, we're not actively perpetuating the groove, you're just laying on the Earth, you know? You're just with your breath in that moment. I think that dreaming a future for me is more about really being present with what's happening and what's needed right now. (Sojourner)

The necessary cycle of **being active** (movement) and **being still** (rest/sleep) is vital. Mimicking the natural cycle of sleeping and waking allows Sojourner and her practitioners to capture the creative power of the unconscious and use it to improve their relationships to themselves and to Spirit and to improve their abilities to imagine the future. For Sojourner, intentionally allowing ourselves to surrender to a restful state - particularly dreaming - is a critical space to “hear and see and feel things that you can't feel when we're awake” (Sojourner). It is also an important practice for disrupting the wakeful tendencies, or “grooves” that we easily fall into. Whether that happens while sleeping, connecting to Spirit, in our dreams, or fully surrendering to Spirit in a wakeful yet restful state, they emphasize that being with your breath and on the Earth empowers us to more deeply communicate with Spirit and open ourselves to what is “needed right now”. Sojourner understands the work of dreaming about Black queer futures as work that is actually about being present to what is happening in the moment. Sojourner emphasizes that the pathway

to "dreaming a future" and reimagining the systems that impact our lives is activated by our natural cycle of wakefulness and sleep. If sleep is "the closest space we get to death in life" then sleep (or rest) could be the "space Spirit is communicating" most clearly. Their approach is a unique lens that invites us to consider the practice of rest as a channel to better understand the cycle of life and death, or perhaps **what needs to die** or **be let go**. Sojourner asserts that practicing intentional rest teaches us how to "not actively perpetuate the grooves that have been created for us." Those grooves include the oppressive systems such as the carceral system, production over process, punishment over restorative and generative accountability - systems that are most harmful to Black queer people and people of color.

Through Johnae and Sojourner's personal and community experiences, "Cycles: Understanding Nature to Move towards Liberation" illustrates two stories that reflect the practice of surrendering to the cycles in our lives. Both of these participants reflect ways of being that lead us to be in better relationship to our natural cycles in order to better understand how to move towards liberation and create more free futures. Their stories explore, in subtle ways, the lessons we learn from our own personal cycles, generational life cycles, and the cycles that we observe in Mother Nature.

Movement Eight

Circles: An Architecture for Resolution, Celebration and Care

Circles have been a format for being in community for centuries (Anku, 2000). The way Black people circle up into spherical formation is intrinsic to a culture whose survival is historically tied to the rhythm of drums (Price, 2013). It is celebratory. It is nourishing. It can also be about our survival. You can see circles everywhere in Black life, such as breakdance

battles, bembé²⁹ in Ifa, the sway of ‘call and response’, as well as how Black folks spontaneously circle up at a party to celebrate one another (often as strangers) on the dance floor. More specifically, the architecture of circles informed by indigenous and Black cultural politics are both site and medium for the act of transformation. This may look like creating resolution within an interpersonal or community conflict, celebrating and strengthening our connections to others, or creating art and dialogue through freestyle or dance. In the context of healing and justice, circles possess multiple significant traits. “Circles: An Architecture for Resolution, Celebration and Care,” is the shape that supports resolution, celebration and transformation; meaning a vessel which effectively holds and transfers energy between participants and beyond. The utility of being in a circle, to release tension, resolve conflict and to connect meaningfully with others is expounded upon in the following reflections from Jenna and Johnae. Then Jade, Sojourner, Sarah and Alyssa offer stories about circle keeping that speak to its utility as a shape to hold space for learning, exchange, and community building.

We begin this story in the middle of a rough and tumble mosh pit, a space of wide elbows and wild erratic gestures. A space with anarchist roots and caring rules. Jenna reflects on attending concerts in Chicago at a young age. Mosh pits at the ska punk concerts served as the circle through which Jenna learned to surrender their body, release tension, and be held by those around them.

So, releasing tension and like going around in a circle and like pushing each other, but then like picking each other back up. So, having these moments of release and conflict, but like it being rooted in love and care. But I'm still able to get in there and you know, throw some bows. But like, there were just rules, right? You don't hit people in the face. You're just in this mosh pit bouncing around. I remember young Jenna probably being the only femme person in the mosh pit at every mosh pit because I just loved so much how it felt to have my body just be like, ‘Oh, bang, banged up, but it still be from love. It was such a release. (Jenna)

²⁹ A bembé is a traditional Yoruba drum ceremony. It is a party for the orisha where they are praised, saluted, and invited to join the festivities by ‘mounting’ a priest or priestess.

Surrendering our bodies and minds to the “mosh pit,” a physical space, is a practice. Jenna reflects on the act of “going around in a circle” as a cathartic embodied practice of both “release and conflict” not unlike the work of being in community and navigating moments of tension and care in the struggle for liberation. For Jenna, these spaces were their first introduction to **abolitionist politics** and to a community that was radically pushing against the norm while still centering a **care praxis**.

[I am] remembering having conversations with people about, you know, “fuck the system” kind of thing. And at that moment, it was very much coming from a cis-white perspective of “fuck the system.” But it was a really cool moment I was in. I was so in love with these bands and everything that these bands were talking about. Which was like, you know, ‘we don't want to be another casualty of society. I don't want to conform. I want to do my own thing. Forget having brown hair, I'm going to dye it green.’ So then having that music come to life and seeing the band perform live and then the whole crowd also be in that energy of like, ‘we're raging against the machine.’ That was the first time in my life that I had ever heard people talking about abolition in any way. (Jenna)

Ska concerts and running around in circles in mosh pits are two of the first spaces where Jenna began to build a relationship to new systems and ways of being. These spaces created strong containers which held the energy where the crowd was “raging against the machine,” which for Jenna later translated into forming an explicit abolitionist lens. Being in circle became the shape through which Jenna connected to a larger community both within a praxis of care and a lens of disrupting current systems.

Circles as portals have the potential to open up a lot of multi-layered and complex topics. It is exceptionally important to hold a space where people feel comfortable enough to express their full selves. This is part of the work of healing justice. Johnae’s experience of using the circle format as a Restorative Justice Coordinator at a local high school and middle school exemplifies the importance of both the architecture of a circle and holding the energetic space

with young Black girls to talk through difficult topics, such as the impact of patriarchal sexualization and their identities.

I was a Restorative Justice Coordinator in [redacted]. That was some really powerful stuff because these girls at 12 were telling me stuff I was like, “What?” You know, and it was just so passionate. It's like, ‘Yeah, you know, ‘one of our friends had a train ran on her the other day, and that's crazy. She would let them do that to her.’ And I'm like, ‘Wow, we got a lot of things we need to talk about right now.’ We talked about consent trainings and we talked about, you know, trauma. The thing that has really astounded me is just like how you're talking about all these multi-layered issues in a sentence, in a passive way, in a way that disparages your sister. You know what im sayin’, there are so many layers to this thing. We got to really hash this one out. So really just wanted to spend some time with some Black girls. (Johnae)

While Johnae does not speak directly to the shape through which these conversations occurred, we can assume they took place in a circular format, because restorative justice and community conversations typically take place in a circle (Coates, Umbreit, & Vos, 2003). For these young Black girls, a circle was the physical arrangement that created a feeling of safety and allowed them to talk through critical topics, like consent, trauma, and sisterhood. Johnae suggests the space she held for young people is one where they “really got to hash” things out. Her story emphasizes the circle as a space to resolve conflict, discuss difficult topics, and connect.

Jade uses a virtual-circle format with her clients, whom she calls “e-cousins”, as a gathering space to learn from, share resources with, and connect to other Black femme healing practitioners. She explains,

For some of you, this is just your portal to ask questions, for some of you it's just [to] be in the background. Like, ‘Aye!’ as people get their healing. [Either way], it's a portal and you get that image of like the circle, right? We do this. Black people love this. Whether it's ‘ring shout’, whether it's at the club, we're going to make a circle and let you have your time and then they come out and then somebody else, right? (Jade)

Jade makes explicit reference to circles as **portals**. She expands on the varying ways people may choose to engage with the circle, for example actively participating in sharing or by asking questions. Others choose to learn by being a witness to the exchanges. Jade's use of circles as a

virtual learning platform emphasizes their usefulness to personal exchange, to healing spaces, and to celebration with others.

Sojourner expands on the use of circles in holding space for difficult and transformative conversations. In conversation with a group of my participations during the Kitchen Table Cypher, Sojourner introduced the practice of asking prompting questions amidst familial people, like family members, through the format of intentional circles.

You know, it's like a circle, you know, [a] peace circle [...] It's the intentional question. It's so beautiful to pose the question to your family. As they think they know everything. You know them and all that. "What's your biggest fear?" [or] something like that. The first time, I was with my aunt and every single question, she was like "awwwwch". It's just so interesting because it's so vulnerable. So it's like the first reaction, it's uncomfortable. I have to share this with my family. Thought you knew everything about me, you know, but "what's your biggest fear?" And then you start doing that with each other, you know, and then you invite other people you know to expose you to different stories. That's like the power of circles, the power of stories. (Sojourner)

Sojourner offers the circle, like peace circles, as a place to pose intentional questions with your family. They emphasize the vulnerability required in order to be in deep relationship with people and the time it takes to learn new things about people, such as their biggest fears. They also reflect on the power of circles and stories as a combined process. Within this framework of sitting in circle and telling stories, there is healing. The ability to be vulnerable and the act of care and deep listening are necessary for all and any liberatory praxis outside of our current systems.

Connecting with others in intentional spaces like peace circles is also a way to deepen our spiritual connection to God or whatever denominational reference we ascribe. Sarah has found that Bible Study is essential to their healing.

One of the more recent practices that I'm very appreciative of is, I started a Bible study with a group of friends. To just like study the word together, particularly the New Testament, which is where Jesus shows up in physical form. That is a practice where I'm able to heal myself in relationship to God and gain wisdom from God and really explore

what Jesus was about. What Jesus does for our lives. I pray a lot. That practice and developing a relationship with God is really important for my healing. (Sarah)

Sarah provides examples of the powerful practice of intentionally connecting in a space where you are in dialogue with yourself, your peers, and a higher power. For Sarah, this space magnifies their healing potential through their “relationship to God” and the wisdom God holds. The circle is the medium providing Sarah’s access to the text and to their God. It is also clear that the practice of being in a community and deepening a spiritual practice alongside others is an important ingredient. The space that is created becomes the circle that holds everything, including interest-specific activities such as Bible Study.

Similar to Sarah’s, Alyssa’s story reflects the importance of carving out the spaces you need in order to be with kindred community and cypher on topics or ideas that connect all the members.

I’ve done a few projects. I did this one gathering nearly three years ago, which was called ‘We, Family.’ It wasn’t specifically for mothers of color, but you know, it ended up that it was mostly mothers of color there. I wanted to create a space where people could speak to and commune [around] the experience of being a mom in the arts and how that was different than just being a mom not in the arts and, you know, different than just being in the arts. Some of the people that came to that are still connected with each other now, which is so cool to hear [that] these connections still happening and like people speak about each other or collaborate with each other. I think because we were able to enter the space without putting that part of us aside. We could vent about it and talk, but it’s like it actually kind of streamlines you to connect with people. You know, when you know that they understand at least some part of your experience. (Alyssa)

This story exemplifies the power of entering a space where you are invited to be present to and connect with all your “parts” or identities. Alyssa proposes that because mothers who are artists and people of color could show up “without putting that part of us aside, they were able to connect meaningfully and continued to be in conversation and collaborate on future projects.

Alyssa’s story illustrates how circles both provide the space to commune around shared identities

and generate connection that moves us towards continued collaboration - more spaces, more projects, or more relationships to meaningfully expand and create with.

The introductory stories in “Circles: An Architecture for Resolution, Celebration and Care” provide lively and tangible examples of the textures within the architecture of a community circle. Through their respective experiences, Jenna and Johnae speak to the power of going in circles/being in circles (either physically in the mosh pit or verbally in the restorative circle) as release, resolution, care, and connection. They describe circles as playgrounds for exploring abolitionist politics, consent, and praxis of care, all of which help us embody and center the labor it takes to move collectively toward healing justice. Jade, Sojourner, Sarah, and Alyssa offer approaches to building spaces for learning, exchange, connection, and collaboration, emphasizing the vulnerability circles call forth as well as the care required in order for a facilitator to create a welcoming space. Communing with ourselves, one another, and Spirit in circles is “beautiful” (Sojourner), “powerful” (Johnae), and “healing” (Sarah). Within these stories we both begin to understand the importance of the circle as a physical shape and its powers of energy activation and momentum towards healing and justice.

Movement Nine

Cyphers: Honoring Goddexx Portals, like Gold-hoop Earrings

“I think just my being here is me being magic.”

Jade

As indicated in Jade’s opening quote, the very existence of Black queer folx is a story of those whose survival and well-being is frequently and systematically threatened. Our survival, is magic. *Reader: You, my beloved being, are magic.* In this story, we honor the feminine, the teachings within her roundness, and the many ways those lessons are reflected in the energetic cyphers in life. The cypher is both a shape, a vessel within which energy is created, held, and

shared, and it is an action - to cypher or cyphering - through which we exchange words and movements. “Cyphers: Honoring Goddexx Portals, like Gold-hoop Earrings,” is a story about uncovering the goddess/xx moving within all of us. The word goddexx derives from the terms god/goddess to suggest a “deity who is non-gendered, gender neutral, and/or nonbinary [...]” (Xsomeone27, 2019, May 31). According to Paul Watkins and Rebecca Caines (2014) a ‘cypher’ is “a gathering of rappers, beatboxers, and/or breakers in a circle, extemporaneously making music together. In recent years, the cypher has also grown to include the crowd and spectators who are integral to maintaining the energy of a given cypher.” (para. 2). The verb to cypher means “to borrow and to lend, to playfully freewheel through whilst taking an exacting care for each word and carefully considering all the sounds, meanings, and interpretations.” It is also “to fight back [...] claiming your own voice” (Watkins & Caines, 2014, para. 2).

This story begins with the image of hoop earrings. Imagine gold hoops are portals that hold the knowledge of all the ways we migrate(d) across time, future to past to present and right back to beyond, beyond this lull, beyond white- voyeuristic desires for gold hoops and juicy lips and Vitners Crunchy Kurl potato chips but no real alliances. Consider gold hoops as portals to Black girls dreaming themselves alive with flowers blooming under their feet as they walk, portals to Black queer folks living out loud just as they are: loud, soft, wild, sensual, full-bodied goddexxes, tender-headed, nappy headed “which yo big dollar store bamboo-hoop-earrings” lovely headed. Consider gold hoops as culture worn on their flesh.

Jade presents gold hoops as a symbol of the junction of the “past, present, and future” and the relationship between non-linearity and healing justice. Through her lens, Black queer folks are invited to explore the question “how do we want to *be*?” and what does it mean to circle

back/future-cast into the present moment (and imagine the future) as we draw inspiration from wearing circles *and* how we live as part of the cycles around us. Jade suggests,

The question now is, how do we want to be? And that, I think, is where we can do some future mapping and some future imagining around, like, how do we want to live into our being? As of course we're fighting these systems. But somebody [still] has to future cast, somebody has to do that work of understanding that the past, the present, and the future are circular and that one impacts the other right. Getting out of linearity. I think about Black people and hoop earrings. Right. How we *love* a hoop earring and just that sphere, that circle, getting out of linearity. Understanding the past, the present, the future, they're all together. I would say [this is] my image of black futurity. (Jade)

Jade uses the image of hoop earrings and Black folks love for them, as grounding symbols of a lens through which we can understand Black being as circular, non-linear, and existing all together, an understanding she experiences as important pathway to envisioning Black futurity. The image of the hoop earring, adored and used as adornment for many Black ³⁰, provides a visual entry point to discuss the relationship between circles and the feminine.

Throughout my conversations, participants' descriptions of feminine energy or "femmeness" revealed interpretations of the close relationship between the feminine and circularity. In the following stories, Raheim and Jenna expand on the feminine as "round" (Raheim) and circular, exploring the two as interdependent. In the context of working towards healing and justice, the energy of circularity in the feminine is also appreciated for its qualities of holding the ever-present (a non-linear time-space reality), expanding what is possible, and offering guidance in "how we want to be." Raheim defines feminine energy as,

Absolute radical joy. Unbounded. Uncontained. Spilling over, laughing, hugging, touching, intimate. It's very intimate. It's close. It's round. It's, to me, really colorful. It lives out loud. (Raheim)

³⁰ *Femme* is being used to refer to and encompass all gender expressions that embrace feminine attributes in life. It is not meant to be limited to socialized "feminine attributes" such as "acting like a girl" or physical elements, such as those who wear dresses, but rather all that which is in reverence of the feminine within all of us.

These descriptive words connect feminine energy, or goddess portals, to that which is expansive and cyclical; the feminine as “round,” “uncontained,” and “spilling over.” For Raheim, the feminine encompasses qualities tied to **intimate** and **expressive exchanges**, such as “close, hugging, laughing, and touching.” These and other related ways of being are integral to adopting and activating the principles of healing justice, including creating and envisioning imaginative and transformative systems that draw from a “lives out loud” energy. The energy created and held within a cypher also allows us to explore and actively intervene in the actions of deeply engrained and oppressive systems, such as binary thinking. Raheim, who identifies as gender non-conforming but is often perceived as male, reflects on the limitations of the binary gender system within American culture in the United States.

My femmeness lives out loud. I celebrate it by wearing dresses that hug my body, that give me some flow and some movement. In American culture, you know, like wearing a dress is so radical. But in other countries, it's just like, bitches been wearing shit similar to that they whole fucking lives. It's not a thing. The way we gender things here, it's just so binary. It's just so goddamn binary. So unfortunately, the only way that I feel I can speak about it is from that binary perspective, right? [Feminine] is opposite of masculine. (Raheim)

Having grown up in an American context, Raheim feels frustrated and limited in the perspectives and language that they can access. Nonetheless, Raheim celebrates their feminine expression through an intimate physicality and wardrobe, often associated in the United States with being a woman or having what is perceived as a woman's body. Raheim disrupts the limiting binary perspective which has historically led us to define feminine as opposite to (or less than) masculine, limiting binary placements that might otherwise have deterred them from wearing a dress. However, Raheim also admits to the challenges of defining the essence of femmeness from within a binary worldview. Instead of seeing masculine and feminine as opposing points on

a range or line, through roundness we can explore multiple points of time or genders expressions, for example.

Circles invite us to think about the relationship of the masculine to the feminine, not as contradictory or opposing, but as relational, cyclical, complementary, and joined. Both qualities are necessary, for example, for caring for oneself, one's family, and community (gendered as feminine) (Chatzidakis et. al, 2020) *and* for disrupting oppressive systems (which reflects characteristics often associated with masculinity or gendered as masculine). What is true about the goddess is that her energy exists in everything and everyone, regardless of sex, biology, or gender expression. Jenna also shares how they have come to embrace their feminine energy as a gender non-conforming person. Like Raheim, Jenna investigates the societal contradictions and limitations of positioning the feminine against the masculine.

Thinking about feminine energy, there's just so many layers, historically, spiritually ancestrally. What femme energy really is, right? There are people in certain traditions that will be like femmes are actually the hunters and gatherers on the contrary to how modern society is saying that like the masculine energies, [are] the hunter gatherer. It's very interesting because I am someone who believes that time is not linear, right? So past, present, and future are all living inside of all of us at all times. However, when we're talking about these things like femininity, like femme, it's like, where am I defining this word from? Am I defining it from the present moment, the future, or the past? Even though all those things flow in and flow out. [...] It's only recently that I've embraced my non-binary identity coupled with being femme as well. And for me, all that I can say is where I'm at with that understanding is that I feel like a goddess. Like, I feel like I have goddess energy inside of me. (Jenna)

Jenna experiences their femininity as an honoring of the goddess within them. For Jenna, the feminine encompasses layers of information that come through ancestry, spirituality, and history. They are also left questioning how to navigate holding the “past, present and future [which is] living inside of all of us at all times.” Jenna acknowledges the time stamps that words or ideas are given in society and our lives. In this example, they bring attention to how they have come to define femininity and feminine energy and give distinct meaning to their essence. Similar to the

internal challenge voiced by Raheim, Jenna's experience of exploring the feminine and masculine polarities, Jenna is examining how they can honor their inner goddess within a femme-presenting gender non-conforming body. They also seek to honor non-linearity (or the "flow in and flow out" of all time) while acknowledging their relationship to feminine energy and how they have defined the feminine likely draws from specific historical processes, moments, and experiences.

Briefly circling back to Raheim's interpretation of feminine energy, he presents ideas around the distinct shapes of the masculine and feminine.

Again, [feminine energy] feels more round. Masculine energy feels like it takes up space in a very direct linear way to me. Right? It's like, this is the *thing*. Versus feminine is like, *this* is the thing and *all* the things and all of it's possible, you know? There's just more space of possibility. (Raheim)

Raheim experiences masculine energy as synonymous with a straight line. The feminine, which they describe as "more round," contains "all the things within its roundness." In contrast to masculine energy, which moves or sees things in one direction, the feminine expands into many non-linear spaces of possibility. While Raheim's distinction between the feminine and masculine appears to ascribe to a binary perspective, there is nothing inherently wrong with binary or polarity. In fact, it is a natural and universal occurrence. The question is whether the binary is actual/essential or imposed. Raheim's former excerpt on his gender expression suggests the binary is imposed when it comes to how you dress and what you wear, for example. This binary is harmful and restrictive. The polarity between masculine and feminine energy however is distinguishable and essential outside of an imposed value, for example, equating weakness to femininity and strength to masculinity. It is not inherently negative or constrictive. If and when our gender worldviews move away from extremity and towards balance the energetic essence

and physical expression of the masculine, feminine, and gender expansive can all enrich the work of healing and liberation.

Tobe Melora Correal, a priestess of Yemaya and author, provides context for the universality of polarity in discussing how to work with ancestors who may have lived in darkness during their life and find light in the spirit realm. She says there is “the dance of polarities that governs the universe- hot and cold, light and dark, opposing sides forever and intimately bound with one another” (2003, p. 101-102). For her, it is not the distinction of supposed binaries that causes harm, rather harm is caused if and when polarities become bound in unbalanced ways or through methods empower one at the cost of disempowering the other. This is when these polarities begin to hold binary energy that enables oppressive systems. When one pole is valued over another or the two polarities are out of balance, meaning for example, when the masculine is given power over the feminine and the two are not in right relationship, the universal intimacy of the two is distraught. Our current systems incongruently value and support actions, tendencies, and ways of thinking that draw from masculine energy. Such is also the case in humans' relationship to the land, wherein after centuries of human-led land extraction we are now suffering the consequence of climate crisis from being out of balance with nature and the organic cycles in nature.

Raheim, Jenna, and Jade all suggest a Black queer cosmology drawn from a multi-directional and multi-dimensional time-space reality. Through their lived experiences, the participants interpret and bring meaning to their various expressions of the feminine and gender-expansive Goddess characteristics. They create practices that activate its meaning, such as rocking hoop earrings or unapologetically wearing dresses that hug your body. These explorations live within each participant as unique expressions of their sense of being (whom

they want to be) while simultaneously disrupting limiting beliefs about what the feminine contains. Just like the cycles in Mother nature, such as - menstrual cycles, or life and death cycles, or cyphering (dialogue) about the changes, shifts, and expansion of your gender identity, these reflections simulate Black queer folks' interpretation of a time-space reality where the "past, present, and future" are existing all at once. These stories honor gold hoop earrings as portals where we hear ancestors whispering, *'these portals are an extension of your crown.'* As they whispered, *'you will always be witness/ed.'* *Enter this portal; it is round. You black-eyed being, magic being, are welcome.* Cyphers as a metaphor for the non-linearity of gender make it possible to honor both the polarity and non-binary inclusivity that is the full essence of liberatory praxis and healing justice.

Conclusion

There is visceral truth in our knowledge and application of a praxis of care (for ourselves, our intimate systems, the community, and beyond) that honors the cyclical patterns in life. We witness it in intimate conversation with Black folks' spiritual traditions and philosophies that honor non-linearity (Ani, 1995). For Black queer folks, it exists as a mechanism that supports our ability to heal from the past, be present to the "right now," and imagine ourselves *into* the future. Such as Raheim's story of "being a reflection of the future." It is illustrated in Jade celebrating hoop earrings as a portal to always be with, explore, and imagine Black folks existing. In "Cycles: Understanding Nature to Move towards Liberation," Johnae and Sojourner provide lived examples that remind us of life's cycles' challenging yet critical interventions. Their reflections speak to what we learn from surrendering to and aligning more intentionally with the cycles in nature, such as the communication we can receive from Spirit when we rest or honor stillness within our active lives. In "Circles: An Architecture for Resolution, Celebration and

Care” Jenna and Johnae provide reflections on circles (and circle keeping) as a physical shape that aids in releasing tension, discussing complex topics, and practicing community care. Jade and Sojourner share examples of their experiences as facilitators in circles, creating spaces for learning, exchanging information, and healing for oneself and alongside others, such as family members. Sarah and Alyssa speak to their personal practices of holding space to connect more intimately with others based on shared identities (mother artists) or interests (Bible Study). All of the stories in *Movement Seven* through *Movement Nine* offer invitations to consider being in circles to dialogue about "how we want to be." Through Raheim’s and Jenna’s evolving relationships to the concept of cyphers as a femme energy portal, *Movement Nine* invites us to live in the roundness/circularity of the femme in order to envision great possibility, all that is “spilling over” (Raheim). All of the stories in *Movement Seven* through *Movement Nine* offer invitations to consider being in circles in order to cypher about “how we want to be.” The ability to apply these perspectives is necessary for the work of healing justice. It is necessary for the demanding task of engaging people who are visioning imaginative and transformative alternatives to harm (Hemphill, 2017) and bringing these interventions (and ones yet to be imagined) from the margins to the center of our work (Hemphill, 2017). The labor and care of healing justice requires that we embody a non-linear time-space reality in all that we do, in the ways that we draw information from our cycles, that we rest into communication from Spirit, or that we expand into our full queer expressions. The non-linear reality can be celebrated through our language, as in Jade’s unapologetic claim that “I be at the store” means I was there, I’m there now, and I will be there later.



CHAPTER 8

“There is a big difference between learning about trauma and learning a practice. There is a big difference between learning a practice and actually making that practice become a practice. I’ve been doing this kind of work for years and years and I am only now having a daily practice. What would it look like if we shifted organizational culture so that people were supported to engage in daily practice, to take it seriously within the place where they spend so many hours every day?”

Autumn Brown³¹

Introduction: *Movements in Collective Praxis*

During a phone call this past August 2022 with one of my most beloved conspirators, co-facilitators, and friend, Je Nae Taylor, Art Director and Cultural Organizer at the Highlander Education and Research Center, Je Nae said, “girl, our work is a playground!” In that moment we solidified the “terms” of our approach to the work³² - facilitation, teaching, learning, and embodiment - and even more, our intentions behind the practice of healing justice and liberation. Together, we understand that we are creating as we go; we are experimenting; we are finding *pause*; we are playing cards with these hard, stagnant, deeply ingrained systems in order to wiggle them out of their cells and form new (much better) *silly, care-free monster shapes*. In our **work**, we spend hours dreaming, strategizing, researching, practicing, gracefully failing, and practicing again. In our **work**, we fight for pleasure and play.

Our *Movements* in healing justice in the “Body, Water, and Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers” demand collective praxes that center Black queer people - politicized, disabled, mystical, quick-witted, tender-headed, unapologetically adorned, non-birthing mama’s, folk who are seers (of Spirit, non-human beings, land whispers), creators, disruptors, dreamers - of everything that we

³¹ Autumn Brown as cited in Raffo, S. (2017). Healing justice is more than just words on a page: a report by Susan Raffo. Nexus Community Partners. Leaders of Color Collaborative (LOCC). https://www.nexuscp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Healing-report_for-print-FINAL-6.19.17.pdf

³² I will be so bold as to say *our* collective approach as radical Black queer creative abolitionists.

imagine as possible and all that we have yet to imagine. While most of the stories in these *Movements* offer intimate explorations at the individual level, we know that behind each story of self is the story of we. The *Movements* featured in this study are situated in Chicago, a city at the cross-roads of rivers and lakes, trees and cracked sidewalks. A city of “magnetic energy,” (Johnae) textured with a complex social and political history including insidious over-policing of Black, brown, and indigenous communities. A city that also overflowing with powerful creative disruptions, unyielding community mutual aid, and spaces for everyone. Note that the specific environmental, political, and cultural context of each respective ecosystem wherein healing justice work unfolds is important to consider. The speculations and imagined realities that sprinkle the pages in this dissertation speak not only of rumored or imagined theories about the potential impact of healing justice, but also speak of the applied rituals, storytelling, and practices through which healing justice is given breath. Chapter 8 concludes this dissertation with a discussion of the theoretical implications and practical possibilities of healing justice and its *Movements*, wherein they become most active for us as a collective people. The discussion is not meant to be stagnant nor provide prescriptive steps, but rather to enrich the conversations around healing justice and offer emergent and malleable praxes.

In order to formulate and expand upon collective movements within the praxis (theory + action) of healing justice, I have organized the chapter in two parts (with some “space in between”). “Part 1: THEORY” presents the theoretical implications of this study. “Part 2: ACTION” offers reflections on the practical contributions to the collective practices of healing justice. I introduce “Part 1” by suggesting we must expand the existing theoretic framework of healing justice to include “A Politicized Black Queer Spiritual Cosmology.” Beginning with the non-linear realities of Black queer time and space discussed throughout my dissertation, I recall

shortened excerpts from the interviews, draw from the literature, and highlight connections made throughout the chapters to clearly define a theoretical contribution I call “Sankofa as Liminal Time and Space.” This section highlights Black queer conceptualizations of Sankofa as a non-linear and liminal space which holds every increment of time simultaneously (past, present, future) and offers an important framework that augments the current one of healing justice. In “Ecology Spirals Backward and Forward between Me/We” I discuss the implications for healing justice from an ecological standpoint. I argue that holistic frameworks such as healing justice that seek to provide transformative interventions at the collective level must equally center practices that build self-intimacy and autonomy at the individual level. Lastly, I underscore the importance of spaces where Black queer people can “*Get weird. And Be Magic,*” which highlights the invitation to include the mystical traditions of Black spirituality and Black radicalism.

In “The Space in Between” Parts 1 and 2, I draw from definitions of the mother, the artist, and the healer to briefly reformulate their distinct identities and broaden their respective associations with caring, creating, and holding space. I suggest that within the collective work of healing justice these identities and roles are unique while simultaneously integrating and fusing into the following “Movement Archetypes:” One: *The Time-Traveler*, Two: *The Shapeshifter*, and Three: *The Architect*³³. The “*Movement Archetypes*” and the theoretical implications presented in “Part 1: THEORY” inform the collective praxis and applied principles for healing

³³ The three Movement Archetypes that I have outlined in this discussion draw explicitly from the naming of these archetypes within the interviews. Likewise, I seek to expand scholarship and societal implications which historically associate mothering, artists, and healers with caring, creating, and holding space, respectively. I understand and know from experience, that these identities and roles are often interwoven and multifaceted. I present The Time-Traveler, The Shapeshifter, and The Architect as an introductory and non-exhaustive list of the many archetypes that help activate the principles and work of healing justice and social movements.

justice discussed in “Part 2: ACTION.” “Healing Justice: A Ritualized Black Queer Embodied Meditation” seeks to answer what we learn as a collective by integrating the *Movements* in the body, in water, and in cycles, circles, and cyphers. I discuss how the three *Movements* help us better understand healing justice both as a framework and as everyday practices of ritual, prayer, storytelling, and embodied movement/stillness.

Part 1: THEORY

Healing Justice: A Politicized Black Queer Spiritual Cosmology

Prentis Hemphill tells us healing justice is the *HOW* of our social movements. “– it’s the texture, the experience, and the vision that guides us. It’s our effort towards transforming ourselves, our ways of building relationships and our institutions to support and sustain Black aliveness that has carried us forward” (2017, para. 4). In the introduction of “Chapter 1” I propose that social justice work is worldmaking and that imagination is critical to visioning and building new systems. I also suggest that those working within the framework of healing justice and in particular organizations working through an abolitionist lens cannot separate our political work from our spiritual work. The *Movements* in this dissertation provide witness to this bold statement. Audre Lorde asserts that

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings (Lorde, 1984, p. 56).

Incorporating a healing justice praxis demands that we believe in what appears (im)possible and that we expand our principles to include notions of Afro/futurism and Sankofa, mystical traditions of Black spirituality, and the audacious invitation for Black people to be weird.

In many ways healing justice is a mystical tradition situated in a contemporary moment. It is a 21st century framework with deep roots in the lineage of Black spiritual traditions, radical resistance, and counter-narratives applied to violent and damage-centered ones. Healing justice is as much about recognizing and intervening in existing systems of harm and oppression as it is about the creation of new ones. Because Black queer folks continue to survive and create wonderous lives despite the complexity of being perceived as and sometimes embodying multiply-oppressed identities, we are aptly positioned to navigate the existing systems while practicing healing justice principles. Meaning, those most impacted by the history of and current renditions of violent and harmful systems have lineages of know-how and strategies from which to resist and disrupt these systems. We also have the tools to imagine safe, inclusive, fluid, and holistic systems because it has been necessary for our survival, and because, as Jade said:

The fact of my being here [is magic]. I mean the data suggests that I should not be. Truly like as a Black, queer, disabled femme. And a survivor of domestic violence. And a spiritualist. And a shapeshifter. And a seer, you know, a mad person, and a [crip] person, and a chronically ill person. I think just my being here is me being magic. Particularly in a world that systemically engineers everything, [that] has foundations being built upon subjugating folks like me. I don't mean this unintentional like, 'oh, because I'm here,' I really mean the magic of knowing the ways that my ancestors have survived. The magic of understanding that I deserve to be on the planet that I was born on. Knowing that in my soul, like deep down in my soul. And my ability to apply those things and innovate on those things for this time context so that I can be here. So that I can continue to be here for as long as the divine wills it and for as long as I'm able to pull from those sources of strength. (Jade)

Clearly stated, Black queer folks have a special anointment -- we are divine avatars whose cosmological underpinnings include, among many things, an innate connection to the divine, the imagination of possibilities over impossibilities, being magic, being free, exploring our cycles, our waters, and our bodies, and being present (as difficult as it may sometimes be) to the textures of our aliveness. As I will discuss in the subsequent three short sections, this requires that we embrace the liminal space that holds everything (especially death and rebirth); it asks that we

commit to transforming ourselves “in service of the work” (Hooks, 2016) and to building deeply seeded relationships with our intimate systems (comrades, neighbors, family, organizational peers) in order to sustain institutions that support us into the future.

Sankofa as Liminal Time and Space

The **space in between** is unpredictable, endless, boundless. It is about spilling over and into ourselves and each other. “Movements in the Body,” “Movements in Water,” and “Movements in Cycles, Circles and Cyphers” all provide strong evidence of the theoretical grounding of non-linearity and/or Sankofa within healing justice, Sankofa being the concept that any given moment holds all aspects of time and space (past, present, and future) and that therefore wounding, the memories of wounding, and the healing of wounds (past, present, or even future) can occur in the present. Stephanie Y. Mitchem writes:

Healing is possible on many levels, even beyond the human world. Such a view of healing indicates the sense of being in relationship: with human, plant, animal, or spirit life. Being in relationship includes natural elements, such as water, and specific animals. Spirits of the deceased are part of this relational world and another place where healing may be needed. Divine being are intimately part of this cosmos able to interact, to offer healing, or to be in a relationship that needs healing. These are African-derived perspectives with an interdependent view of life, understanding interconnections between all beings. (Mitchem, 2007, p. 91)

As Mitchem suggests, healing occurs at multiple and can be accessed through intimate relationships with non-human beings and spirits, human and ancestor connections, and within multiple time-space realities.

In addition to the concept of Sankofa appearing in the practices of spiritual resistance and healing featured throughout this dissertation, the participant interviews all made strong arguments about the disfunction of binary, polarized ways of thinking and/or being. My conversations with Chris, Raheim, Sarah, and Jenna for example, encouraged genderqueer expressions and gender non-conformity. Arguably, Black queerness in general and Black gender-fluid expressions in particular, offer a conceptual framework that illuminates the possibilities of embracing liminal space. Raheim explains

I think I exist in that space in between the known and the unknown. And that's who I am. I'm just everything and nothing, all at the same time. (Raheim)

Liminal space is both the space in between everything and nothing and includes all increments time -- past, future, and present. Liminal space is the darkness of wombs that leads to birth and the death (or letting go) that leads to transformation. Concepts of non-linear and expansive time-space realities appeared throughout the dissertation, such as the naming of ever-presence (Jade) future-casting into the now (Jade, Raheim, Sojourner), and visioning collective practices that allow us to experience freedom as an embodiment of the current moment (Denara, Sarah, Raheim).

The ability to be present to tend to our past wounds and imagine our liberated futures is critical to sustaining the work of our movements in healing justice. Incorporating this understanding leads us to trust that when we intervene in systems of harm within our own families and organizations, we are also intervening in past and future iterations of harm. When we center and support those most equipped to address trauma (healers, trauma-informed practitioners, rootworkers) and we acknowledge the emotional labor of creating systems of care, we can trust that this work will impact generations behind us and ahead of us. Healing justice through the explicit lens of a politicized Black queer spiritual cosmology honors the spaces in

between in order to create moments of aliveness (Hemphill, 2017). *Reader: witness the space in between your in-breath and out-breath* -- that is the liminal. As Sojourner suggested in “Chapter 6” the space of rest is the space where Spirit communicates most clearly. During a guest speaker presentation at the Block Museum in Evanston, Illinois, Prentis Hemphill expressed, "Spirit is the domain of the possible, it's where I take my questions" (2022, in-person notes). These expressive and spirit-filled liminal spaces are critical moments to receive and retrieve messages about what is next for healing justice within ourselves and for our communities.

Ecology Spirals Backward and Forward between Me/We

Healing justice is an applied framework that centers the creation of collective practices that can “impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts, and minds” (Hemphill, in-person notes, 2018). It is a liberatory community level praxis that therefore requires that we commit ourselves at the individual level to be present for and accountable to our own transformation. One topic not previously presented in the *Movements* but integral to the question of the healing justice ecology is that of being “the only one doing the work,” a theme that emerged during the Kitchen Table Cypher. This illustrates the tension, the opportunities, and the interconnection between doing the work alone and finding collective spaces to do the work together. Sojourner notes,

I know that the people who show up in these spaces are the ones in their family. My family is small. I really feel like I'm the only one in my family that's going to do this work, that's going to hand it down to the children in the family. If I don't do it, it's gone.

Chazarhae adds,

There are 24 of us from my grandmother's offspring, I am the only person doing this work. It feels burdensome. It causes me to have internal friction when I'm around the whole family. I'm learning to enjoy them in the present. But then it's also this overwhelming sense that what we're doing right now is so beautiful, where is the glue?

Alyssa reflects on Sojourner and Chazarhae's challenges and experiences and suggests,

Through the queer community too [...] This idea of like thinking outside of our immediate families and that if we're supporting each other in that work, that's just as important as someone else in our family. And encouraging other people who maybe are interested or there's nobody in their family yet, and they're like, 'Oh, this is interesting to me.' They come to one of our things and they're like, 'Oh, this is so cool.'

As the conversations during the Kitchen Table Cypher illuminate, often those doing healing justice work do so alone. However, the spaces where people are most likely to explore, to take on new shapes (Sojourner), or to be accountable to their mistakes is amidst their closest circle of comrades and friends. Sojourner admits “the only people that hold me accountable are my close close people -- who’s in your pod?” They mean, “Who are the folks that you are willing to get messy with, to play with, to be radically honest with.?” Healing justice as a holistic and ecological container (for holding, caring, disrupting, etc.) must include dimensions that emphasize our relational responsibility to the collective and find more intimate experimental spaces to **be in practice** amidst the context of transforming ourselves.

The group emphasized that we have to make an effort to be known – to go into the “intimate crevices” (Chazarhae) and the deep waters (figuratively and literally) where all of our relationships can be tended to. We have to keep holding spaces for each other where we are invited to reveal our most authentic selves. Deep relationships are a tool (for liberation and healing justice); committing to depth is also a lot of work! Part of the vision of healing justice *is* that the collective practices that we imagine and the systems through which our practices are given texture are radically inclusive. We dream that our transformed systems completely dismantle those founded in anti-Blackness, anti-queerness, and the insidious infection of settler-colonial invasions. We dream that people feel welcome into full expressions of their most liberated and unapologetically free selves. Healing justice as an ecological praxis must simultaneously center intimacy with the self *and* expand outwards to develop and transform the

relationships with our most trusted circle(s) of people. As healing justice practitioners, we do this because we believe that our social systems are reflective of our intimate systems, which in turn are reflective of the relationship we each hold with ourselves. In that way, we must make intentional decisions to keep turning both inward and towards each other.

“Get weird.” And *Be Magic*.

The third theoretical concept that I believe healing justice must explicitly and continuously incorporate is the idea of “getting weird.” This is iterated in subtle ways throughout my conversations with participants, most explicitly when Jade notes “honestly I feel, people don’t want to get weird.” More indirect examples include Sojourner’s stories about guiding people into taking on strange and unfamiliar shapes in their bodies and Jenna reflecting on the nuance of holding space for young people in order to become comfortable enough to ask questions that center their pleasure and sexual intimacy. Prentis Hemphill repeated a similar sentiment during the talk they gave at the Block Museum, stating, “Black bodies need space and room to be strange” (in-person notes, 2022). If and when collective spaces are created for people to safely and caringly “get weird,” our ability to both develop more playful and meaningful relationships with ourselves *and* those around us strengthens (Alyssa).

Sojourner, Alyssa, and Chazarhae each offer suggestions around how to create spaces where people can get weird and expand their capacity to do so. They acknowledge the need for these spaces and suggest that the invitation to “get weird” becomes more acceptable when people are comfortable and when the spaces are rooted in “open mindedness” (Kitchen Table Cypher, in-person notes, December 12, 2021). They recommend: kindness (meaning spaces of non-judgement and spaces where people are given permission to fail and/or ask questions), experiential exposure (meaning spaces where people are given access to experience something

new beyond their perspective), and lastly, they emphasize self-awareness (meaning building an individual understanding of how you are perceiving something).

Being unapologetically weird is a magical way of being. Alongside the courage to be weird lives the audacity to embrace our magic. I began each one-on-one interview with the question, “[*Reader*] *how are you magic?*” Raheim answered:

How am I magic? Damn, that's good. I am magic through my embodiment, also through the joy that I bring. It's been a really long journey in order to tap into my magic, my magic is a reflection of my queerness. My magic really manifested in a very clear and potent way when I started to acknowledge and embody my queerness, understanding that I am a reflection of all the spaces in between. That's my magic, the space in between. (Raheim)

Raheim relates his magic both to the joy he expresses and to his **embodied pedagogy and praxis** of queerness – his resistance to being dimmed in a world tainted with so much violence and harm. His commitment *to be strange*, to be joyous, to be queer, is in itself a kind of mysticism. As Raheim and others suggest these “spaces in between” that hold the strange and the magical simultaneously are spaces where we tap into an embodied sense of self and retrieve guidance from Spirit and our ancestors. Creating the spaces to get weird and/or to play outside of the oppressive confines that constrain us in rigid forms of ourselves is transformative work. We need spaces for ourselves and each other where connection (versus trauma and disconnection) is not only possible, but is central to how “*We be holdin*” (Green, et. Al. 2018, p. 919).

“THE SPACE IN BETWEEN”

Cuando vives en la frontera
 People walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
 You're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat
 Forerunner of a new race,
 Half and half —both woman and man, neither —
 A new gender; (Gloria Anzaldúa)³⁴

“Possibilities you imagine become wider-- when you integrate your full self ... you are also more likely to challenge spaces, for example spaces where children are not welcome, and you voice ‘this isn’t working for me,’ and push for something different.” (Alyssa)

—
Black queer mothering, *caring* for 13 younger siblings (Raheim)
 “holding time” (Johnae)
 imagining better futures for your seeds, and their seeds, and their seed’s (Chazarhae)
 seeds
 seeds
 seeds

as in the ability to trust what's possible outside of what you see or have ever experienced

“Black/mothering like really intentionally trying to break the chain
 of being oppressed and colonized
 [as in] intentional practice of trying to do some stuff that I've never done before
 like collectives of mothers” (Johnae)
 seeds, planting.
 planted.
 seeds,

—
Black queer artists, *creating* time-capsules
 and “memory: a rotoscope animation of a memory I had” (Sarah)
 breaking cycles of grief and harm through music and song (Denara)
 pourin' lyrics into cyphers that move energy along
 and into
 Seeds

“making films that make the world a lot smaller in some beautiful ways
 Because if you can see it, then you can be it.” (Chris)

³⁴ Anzaldúa, G. (1996). To Live in the Borderlands Means You. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17(3), 4–5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346863>

art and visions as the most powerful tools, dang we resourceful—

seeds, planting.
 (the) seeds (are)
 planted.

—

Black queer healers, holdin' space/s

caring/carrying lineages of medicine folk and tree whispers

for *Stillness* and meditation (Sojourner)

as in the work of “just meet people where they're at,” and hold space for folks to set intentions
 and light a candle for their ancestors (Jenna)

Black churchy mystic healers as in “new world retentions of Black folk healing arts have to call
 back to their roots of community”

planting.
 seeds.
 seeds.
 seeds.
 planted,
 seeds.

—

BLACK QUEER *MOTHERING*, ARTISTS, HEALERS

ALL be holdin' SPACE, CREATING, AND CARING.

holdin' + creating + caring = *Movement Archetypes*

—

One: *The Time-Traveler*

[those who move through time and space]

“Trauma is **time travel** (without choice) and travels across time (transfers between us/between
 bodies). trauma fractures our sense of safety (on earth) and belonging.”

(Prentis Hemphill)³⁵

“We get off of this timeline in the portal of feeling” (Prentis Hemphill)

We can also time travel to (choicefully) retrieve ourselves (for healing)
 and create spaces that protect us as we unravel

The Time-Traveler movements are the praxis of Sankofa

[those who care, those who create, those who hold space]

³⁵ Prentis Hemphill (in-person notes, May, 12, 2022).

Two: *The Shapeshifter*
[those who commit to changing]

“And if I **shapeshift** knowing that insistence is still there, even as I shapeshift in and out of genders, in and out of sensualities, in and out of sexualities, in and out of relationships, insisting that that diversity be honored,
insisting that those possibilities be honored.” (Jade)

“I guess my lowkey intention is to really activate the **shapeshifters** in our life in the world.” (Sojourner)

“*Shapeshifting* describes how young Black women living in the United States engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle, and expose the material impact of systemic oppression. **Shapeshifting** is an act, a theory, and in this sense, a form of praxis that- although uniquely definitive of and defined by Black girls –reveals our collective vulnerabilities.”
(Aimee Meredith Cox)³⁶

The Shapeshifters movements are the praxis of taking on new shapes
[those who care, those who create, those who hold space]

Three: *The Architect*
[those who imagine and build new things (out of old things)]

Ife: What is your role as an artist or healer in that work? What do you sense is the collective work that we're doing?

Chazarhae: My short answer is that we are the **architects**. Especially moving into the future where we're building what the future looks like and birthing.
We are birthing what the future looks like.

Architects building structures for
“a gathering of people who are not welcomed to gather anywhere else. A celebration of a life that the rest of the world *does not* deem worthy of celebration.” (Malcolm Rio)³⁷
systems that honor that history
and create ritual for healing that mediates, alchemizes
the memories of that place (to reimagine its future use)

The *Architects* movements are the praxis of creating caring systems of the present-future
[those who care, those who create, those who hold space]

(Reader: Which *Movement Archetype* are you?)

³⁶ Cox, A. M. (2015). *Shapeshifters: Black girls and the choreography of citizenship*. Duke University Press. P. 7

³⁷ Rio, M. (2020). Architecture Is Burning: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture. *Thresholds*, (48), 122-132.

Part II: ACTION

Healing Justice: A Ritualized Black Queer Embodied Meditation

This discussion seeks to answer what we learn as a collective by integrating the *Movements* in body, in water, and in cycles, circles, and cyphers. I review how these three *Movements* help us better understand questions of healing justice as a framework and point us to possibilities for **intentional, every day, collective practices** for spiritual healing. As the theoretical emphases in “Sankofa as Liminal Time and Space” and “Ecology Spirals Backward and Forward between Me/We” suggest, the varying forms of healing resistance presented in this research should be understood as integrative and cyclical and as a continuous process that begins and ends with the individual but often happens amongst an intimate collective, *while also* ideally supported through a larger community vision for healing justice and liberation. Part II begins with a brief discussion with Jade around organizational-level challenges and opportunities for integrating spiritual healing pedagogies and practices. Here they offer solutions to better equip groups of organizers to do the work of healing justice. I then conclude by harvesting the creative, critical, and imaginative potential of the praxes in body, water, and cycles, circles and cyphers. These praxes enliven collective pedagogies of memory, identity, and place and emphasize practices of vulnerability, tension/release, and death/transformation.

Interlude: Collective Challenges and Possibilities

“Individual and collective healing, one doesn’t happen without the other in any sustainable way but it all starts with individual healing. I see lots of organizations being run by wounded people who are doing their best to do good work. [...] Conflict avoidance and passive aggressive behavior show up when historical trauma starts to show up in the room. [...] It takes time to break old habits and embed new habits. It’s a long-term commitment, a discipline, and it doesn’t happen without the individuals within the collective.”

Suzanne Koeplinger³⁸

³⁸ Susan Koeplinger as cited in Raffo, S. (2017). Healing justice is more than just words on a page: a report by Susan Raffo. Nexus Community Partners. Leaders of Color Collaborative (LOCC). https://www.nexusecp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Healing-report_for-print-FINAL-6.19.17.pdf

Jade suggests in the following reflection that learning about and listening to the wisdom of our communities helps us collectively build new structures of care and intervene in current systems of harm. She asks us to consider,

What would that look like if spiritualists were able to *teach* [original emphasis] activists. Like, here's how you bind things and people. Here's how you hear your ancestors. Here's how you astral project. Here's how you gather information. Here's how you do divination so you can figure out how you need to move, where you need to move, *and* who in your organizing coalition really ain't there to be there, to be helpful. You know, like those are the things. Everybody doesn't have to be proficient in the spiritual arts in the same way, but having some understanding of it can really, really help movement work maintain. I much rather it be that than what's happening now, which is folks get burned out completely beyond their capacity. And now they want to come and do the energy healing and the, you know. And it's not that it's too late. It's just that like, what if this was also a part of the ways that we organize together. (Jade)

Jade's approach and her emphasis on the importance of activists and organizers having foundational knowledge of and access to spiritual arts practices illuminates the essence of healing justice. The pedagogy of integrating specific spiritual practices like consulting ancestors or performing divination when strategizing and campaigning on behalf of the entire community is a significant *how* of this work. As I highlighted in the introductions of "Chapter 1" and "Chapter 8," spiritual practice, or as Jade calls it "spiritual fortitude," and social justice movement work are inseparable in the context of healing justice and Black queer liberation. Jade suggests that having access to a spiritualist and taking advantage of the informed practices within the spiritual arts is a key component of movement work. It is also a practice that intervenes in capitalist models of work and production that very often lead to activist burn-out.

—

Collective *Movements*

All three *Movements* (Body, Water, and Cycles, Circles, and Cyphers) point to a common set of tools: ritual, prayer, storytelling, dreaming, and intentional practice. Not surprisingly, other

scholars name the use of similar tools within traditional African forms of healing resistance. Mitchem's (2007) substantial research around "African American folk healing" suggests that folk healing

Encompasses word, action, story, ritual, and practice. Black folk healing encompasses not only the individual but links between a person to community and cosmos (p. 27) [...] overlapping of the past into the present; a focus on ancestors; and the use of dreams, words, or actions to access power to make changes. (p. 100)

In the three *Movements* we see concrete examples of all these elements. Chazarhae illustrates **ritual** when she gives collective offerings to water/in water. Jade describes **prayer** when she facilitates virtual sessions with her "e-cousin" that open and/or close with a prayer. Sojourner illuminates **storytelling** when she holds a family circle where everyone responds to a prompt, and Chris is storytelling when he gives artists a platform to tell their story through film. Raheim and Sojourner use **embodied pedagogy** in collective practices of movement and/or stillness.

The *Movements* give us specific *Body* practices for navigating the tragedy of historical trauma and resituating the impact of these wounds through practices in the body such as with breath (Jade) and meditation (Sojourner). As we begin to be in practice with our bodies (alongside our minds) as physical and spiritual vessels for possibility, our collective potential to change shape (shapeshift) increases. The body practices explored throughout these *Movements* are accessible -- they can be adapted and molded to center the needs of those most vulnerable and can be practiced in community. However, as healing justice practitioners, holding space for these collective practices **requires that we be prepared to mediate and support** people as they uncover all of the information their bodies hold. This includes being trauma-informed and having

multiple levels of support to ensure those who are holding space are also held. The information that comes up during *Movements* may include memories of pain and/or ancestral wisdom. Of course, how we are able to navigate pain and possibility varies based on the relationship we develop with our bodies *and* the traumas we have withstood. Mitchem suggests

Spiritual values and meanings are reflected in the body itself. One expression of this idea is that differently shaped bodies, sometimes deemed a ‘deformity’ in Western eyes, might instead be considered spiritually meaningful, depending on the African tradition. The body signals something about the spiritual life, encompassing the personal, familial, and communal in the present moment. More than that, the body connects the person to the ancestors and a new birth in a family may signal the return of an ancestral spirit.

(Mitchem, 2007, p. 35)

We all are born into bodies. We all have ancestors. One of my spiritual teachers, Erwin Thomas, an Ifa priest and community elder once said “If you have a belly button, you have ancestors” (personal notes, April 11, 2020). What *Movements in the Body* offers for collective pedagogies and practices within healing justice are opportunities to uncover and deepen our intimate relationship to self within the human and spiritual cosmology of the natural world.

Collective rituals and practices in “*Movements in Water*” also tend to the calcified wounds of painful memories and the possibilities of renewed relationships with movement and healing amidst this element. Lawuyi’s (1996) previously referenced work with the healers and practitioners of the Yoruba and Xhosa people respectively offer insight around some of the roots of African spirituality and its relationship to water *and* illuminate possible lineages for contemporary and African-diasporic healing relationships to water. Toni Morrison offers reflections on the relationship to our bodies, our memory, and water.

They straighten out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding’ [...] Still, like water, I remember where I was before I was ‘straightened out’. (1987, p. 99)

Our collective work with water is memory work, it is the practice of remembering ourselves, our traditional ways of being in harmonious relationship with the natural world and the spiritual world, and each other.

Afrofuturism urges Black folks to intuit visions for themselves that center their own safety and protection and that affirm a renewed relationship to water as a source for visioning, be it visioning a time before the Middle Passage when Africans had not internalized a fearful or broken relationship to water *or* visioning a future where Black folks find pleasure in playing in water and being leisure at the ocean. In regards to collective *Movements in Water* within healing justice, we are led to consider practices that invite movement within water that is in motion, to heal amidst the rivers and seas that have been raised into ‘deities’ and offer us sacred healing.

Movements in Circles, Cycles, and Cyphers are as much about teaching, connecting, resolving, and unraveling inside of the architecture of a circle as they are about drawing from the energy that the shape itself holds, transfers, and transforms. It is within the infinite possibility of the space in circles and the *space in between* that we innovate collective transformative systems

within community practice and movement spaces. In the power and magic of circles, we can discuss “the how,” questions such as “What does it mean to think through then **actualize systems of safety and support** that have *all* of our best interests in mind and center Black queer people?” Through circularity, we work through iterations of this practice, meeting again and again to identify patterns and offer *reflection*. We build on the concept of C.A.Q.E. by returning to our practices, asking ourselves “Which elements of our experiment are leading to a transformed system for our people. Which are not?” We continue cycling through **embodied collective practices**, sometimes leaving with more questions than answers, such as “How are we activating what we’ve learned from our theorizing?”

Creative Afrofuturistic Queer Ecology is a conscious reminder of Black queer worldview and cosmology, of our ways of knowing, being, and doing. Alongside the foundational work of healing justice, it is a framework that simultaneously theorizes and practices what it means to reimagine the impact of racialized, gendered, and place-based trauma and to create sites of memory and practice that center healing *and* justice. It also draws attention to how and what we learn when community practice and scholarship center and care for those most impacted by oppression, settler-colonial violence, and anti-Black and anti-queer rhetoric and policy. Despite the odds against Black queer people it points to the resilience, creativity, and unwavering commitment to possibility that emerges within these textured experiences. In practice, C.A.Q.E offers a framework for healing justice practitioners, community organizers, and scholars committed to incorporating healing justice within their work and scholarship. Ultimately, C.A.Q.E is a lens for all those committed to exploring and expanding the capacity for our systems to address harm in non-harmful ways and to creating more opportunities for care and connection.

Particularly, scholars within the fields of Community Research, Women and Gender Studies, Black and American Studies, and other applied fields such as Social Work and Sociology are invited to consider the ways in which C.A.Q.E., as an extension of healing justice, requires that we integrate creative, Afrofuturistic, Black queer, and ecological praxis and methodology. Such as leading empirical studies that exemplify how and what it means for our work and research to be Afrofuturistic. For example, naming that something is *eternal* when it is intergenerational and/or that time is non-linear when we document, articulate, and practice the ways we connect to our ancestors and to the dreams we have imagined into the future. Again, these beliefs are not only ideas, they are ways of knowing, being, and doing that therefore impact our embodiment (“the repetition of behaviors and actions that eventually become habitual and therefore embodied” (Hemphill, 2022) and impact how we practice within community and movement spaces, our institutions, our homes, and for ourselves. The elements of C.A.Q.E. contribute to the framework of healing justice and not only articulate the expectations of Black futurity, but also map various ways to activate and apply its principles. Examples of the ways this can be articulated exist in our moments of *pause* (let’s time-travel to spaces and systems that center at its core Black people at leisure and embody what that means for how we work and play right now). They exist when we build spaces that become markers of belonging within place and safe havens within our environment (let’s build an intergenerational community center that operates through the principles of pleasure, play, and care). They exist when we hold sacred space for Black queer people to slow down, to rest, to turn inwards in order to expand outwards.

All of these praxes of care, creation, and space holding demand we rethink Blackness, queerness, identity, and the ways we connect to the work of dreaming, visioning, and healing justice as ways to liberation. The bedrock of Black anti-colonial resistance, spiritual resistance,

and healing resistance includes an expansion of the frames of Blackness and Black queerness in our own communities, not just in response or opposition to what is being imposed by oppressive non-Black systems, but as reclamations and proclamations of our own choosing. As Shawn Ginwright claims, healing “involves reconciling the past to change the present while imagining a new future” (2010, p. 11). Imagine the power of being present as you heal backwards into generations past, plant healed seedlings that future generations reap. Imagine this is happening to a child being held in the womb of their *mother*, who is being held by the warm water of a birthing pool, that is situated in a room full of beloved chosen family and friends who are all holding the energy of the cypher. **Imagine, Ase. And so, it is.**

Conclusion

“I like to observe children, all they want to do is discover. Uncover. So open. Imaginative. And they also have hard no’s. It’s like ‘yes yes yes yes yes’ until something feels in their gut, ‘absolutely not, I’m not going for that.’ I want to play with that practice more. Be with each other, over and over again— then you create a huge playing field in which you can go anywhere.”

Chazarhae

I invite you to draw your attention to the words “play with the practice” and “over and over again.” The intentional practice to play with systems of healing, justice, and liberation and uncover ourselves within the collective *is* intentional **work**. In our *Movements* we are literally and figuratively (carefully) playing with objects, ideas, and people, and exploring new ways to be in right relationship to one another and *all* that surrounds us. We commit to the often difficult, but always worth it, work when we remember that *mothering* is about play, that *artists* create through the lens of pleasure, that *healers* tend to the work of building and holding space, so that we can pause together. As we move towards softening into our fullest selves and collectively imagining the worlds of our freest selves, I invite you to practice in the spaces of *pause*, *pleasure*, and **play**.

Closing Activation

the ancestor trees are root/ed/ing for us
be here.

your ancestors are talking to you, listen.
before you wake up one day having only heard the rumors of fake news-
they tellin' you 'you aint shit'
they be lying!

(instead)
hear, your breath
you are alive
gently touch yourself, you are soft
flesh memory inside (us)

let the moving waters carry you
cuz the goddexxes portals heal ("goddamit!")

pull up to the circle, all of you is welcome
we be holdin'
we are dancin'
swayin', wailin' stompin, playin'
gettin real weird
cuz the energy is real charged,
feel into it cycling through
past times and now's the time and future-casting into life times

mama said come home (into yourself) before the street light go on
before the graffiti artists go out at night and paint colorful dreams in wildstyle letters
on the
white walls of the white house

hold yourself.
(it will change you)
be held.
(it will change us)
settle. yourself. into a deep rest.
so that one day you (me/we) wake up
feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, sensing ...
(spirit)
knowing

ourselves as (only/always) being

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Participant Profiles

Chazarhae (she/her) is a mystic, earthbound space being. Love is her deepest essence. Mother of one beautiful biological star child, and many other chosen seedlings and students, teaching and learning through a creative lens is at her core. A Chicago native, she proclaims “art saved my life.” Chazarhae believes Black people’s “light shines comparable to the sun.”

Chris (they/them) is their mother’s son. The essence of their magic is their intuition, the music they gift directly from their hands to the world and the cultural spaces they help to curate, which they say are a “bridge for people to connect.” Chris believes queerness is knowing “there is always another way” and that blackness holds deep richness, like “soil so full of life.”

Sojourner (they/them) is a nature-loving, gender non-conforming fairy and space holder. They create containers “spacious enough for all of you to show up.” They carry with them, in their art and community rituals, the wisdom of many moons, generations of ancestors, and the trees. Sojourner believes “blackness is being born with an understanding of liberation.”

Raheim (he/they/Mama) is a light bringer, creatrix, god/dess, sun/son, and daughter who comes from a long lineage of seers. The oldest of 13, they helped mother most of their siblings. As a community healer, artist, and speaker they offer many gifts and tools for transformation. Raheim believes Black people are “bombastic, god dammit!” and that within queerness “there is no limit.”

Denara (she/her) is a youth educator, musical artist, and dreamer. Art has continued to be an important and therapeutic outlet and creative practice for her. When Denara fully stepped into embracing her blackness and queerness “it felt free.” She believes Black queerness is not a monolith; all it requires is to be loved on and nurtured.

Alyssa (she/her) comes from a strong matrilineage of grandmas and “mama aunties.” She’s a channeler of lost memories, especially through her dreams, her poetry, and her artwork, which centers community building. Her sweet spirited child provides many opportunities to reflect and evolve. Alyssa believes Black queerness gives us the framework to “dream outside of the systems that are presented.”

Johnae (she/her) is the mother of two incredible and kind little humans. A cultural worker, healer, and political disruptor, she knows a lot about the importance of home; not having a sense of home, making home, and creating place wherever you are. Johnae believes Black single mothers practice queerness every day, “holding time” and navigating the edges of their journey with their children.

Jade (she/her) is a “mad person, cripp, chronically ill, shapeshifter, and churchy mystic.” Her community practice lives in deep conversation around soul health, getting out of linearity, and embodiment. Jade believes blackness is infinite possibility, evident in the way “Black people walk, brush, groom and sculpt their hair.”

Jenna (she/he/they) is an unapologetically Black queer non-binary abolitionist, pleasure activist, and cultural organizer who deeply trusts in transformation. Their community work creates systems of care through deep listening, play, and embodied theatre practices. Jenna believes one's "Blackness is inside," that it cannot be defined by others or taken away.

Sarah (they/them) is a non-binary genderqueer artist. Their magic is felt in the visceral way they love and are inspired by the divine. They use their art to time-travel, transforming the narrative and memories of events. They honor the everyday, the mundane, the quiet moments, especially "being horizontal." Sarah believes queerness is a way of loving and lovingly questioning (everything).

Appendix B: Participant Profile Demographic Table

Participant First Name	Gender Identity	Participant Self-Identified Cultural Markers	Chicago Native (Lived 0-16)	Custodial Parent (1+ Child/ren)	Age
Chazarhae	Cis Gender Female	Mother, Community Mother, Queer Parent, Artist, Healer	X	X	
Chris	Gender Non-Conforming	Cultural Organizer, Artist			
Sojourner	Gender Non-Conforming	Community Mother, Artist, Healer, Healing Arts Practitioner	X		39
Raheim	Gender Non-Conforming	Mother, Artist, Healer, Healing Arts Practitioner	X		
Denara	Cis Gender Female	Artist	X		
Alyssa	Cis Gender Female	Mother, Queer Parent, Cultural Organizer, Artist		X	
Johnae	Cis Gender Female	Mother, Artist, Healer		X	
Jade	Cis Gender Female	Cultural Organizer, Artist, Healing Arts Practitioner			
Jenna	Gender Non-Conforming, Other	Community Mother, Cultural Organizer, Artist, Healer	X		
Sarah	Gender Non-Conforming	Cultural Organizer, Artist			25

Appendix C: FREEDOM DREAMS CHI Pre-Interview Form Questions

Name _____

Pronoun(s) _____

Email Address _____

Phone number _____

May we contact you through call or text message? (Yes/No)

If not, what is the best way to contact you? _____

3. Do you identify as Black and/or Black mixed race? (Yes/No)
4. To which gender identity do you most identify?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Trans Female
 - Trans Male
 - Gender non-conforming
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
5. Are you between the ages of 18 and 35? (Yes/No)
6. What is your age?
7. Do you currently live in the City of Chicago? (Yes/No)
8. Do you identify as one or more of the following?
 - a. Mother/community mother/queer parent
 - b. cultural organizer/artist
 - c. healer/healing arts practitioner?
9. What songs does Black liberation sound like? (1-2 songs) (These answers will help develop the playlists for the kitchen table cyphers)
10. What foods are healing to you? What foods does Black liberation taste like? (These answers will help develop the dinner for the kitchen table cyphers)

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Script
<p><i>Peace, I would like to begin our time together by expressing deep gratitude for trusting me to share your story as I hold your practices, medicines, and visions sacred. As you know, I am conducting research for my dissertation about the role of cultural organizers/artists, healers/spiritual practitioners and individuals mothering our community to explore how we are mediating historical trauma, supporting our communities, and visioning the future. The purpose of this research is to document and cultivate the practices, creative works, and stories of Chicago's Black queer movement. Your participation will involve one interview that I anticipate will last between ninety minutes to two and a half hours. There are no known risks for this research. Telling and sharing our own stories and practices will help to inform the current and future work for Black freedom, which work to benefit both researchers and participants/community. Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy with your permission. If you prefer that your name be included, please let me know. All notes and recordings created during this interview will be stored in a secure encrypted digital storage system. You can opt out of answering any questions I have, and quit the interview at any time. As a point of reference, I've printed out a copy of the study (note: COVID-19 screen share as necessary) for you to review and a copy for you to keep. Please look it over and ask any questions you have.</i></p>
<p><i>Due to the constraint of COVID-19 and social distancing, I am using secured zoom meetings to audio and video record our time together. May I have your permission to record our interview? Saying no to video recording will have no effect on the interview. Receive confirmation of audio/video preference.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>I'd like to begin by asking about your personal background and journey, and how you are defining the container of blackness, queerness, and the feminine</i></p>
Identity
1. To start, how are you magic?
1a. Who are you? What are your roots?
2. "Can you tell me about how you understand your role as mother/artist/healer?"
-Probe -What has been their evolution around holding the "role of" [mother/healer/cultural organizer]? Who helped shape them?
3. How do you define Blackness? What does that look like for you in practice?
3a. How do you define queerness? What does that look like for you?
3b. How do you define "the feminine"/feminine energy? What does that look like for you in practice?
-Probe- how and what practices do you create that celebrate your feminine energy?
<i>Thank you so much, we are just getting started. I would like to now begin to ask about your connections to historical site and space</i>
Memory + Site
4. What is one of your first memories connected to being Black/queer?

5. “Can you tell me about some of the most important places (sites) that have helped you understand your role as [mother/artist/healer?]”
-Probe for physical sites and organizations, or other influences.
5a. What has the city of Chicago meant for your personal evolution and your work?
<i>Thank you. I would now like to provide some context for the following questions around site and historical trauma. As Black people, I believe we share a mental download (+ blood memory) of collective sites and events in Black history. Some of these events have been joyful, some of resistance, others of violence and harm. I am curious to explore the ways in which we, as Black people, work towards healing from past community trauma through our practices of healing, creating, and mothering.</i>
6. Will you please share with me how you define historical trauma? What do you believe is impact of historical trauma on Black people?
6a. Do you address trauma in your work with the community? If yes, can you describe <i>how</i> and <i>what</i> “tools” you use? How have you observed or experienced any of these practices?
<i>Thank you for sharing some of the solutions to the healing that needs to be done to help support Black people. To close, I would like to ask about your healing practices and your visions for yourself and our community.</i>
Possibility (Afro-futures)
7. Can you tell me a story about one of the first times you recall using your imagination or creativity in response to a social injustice or conflict? Please detail the story.
8. What rituals do you practice that contribute to your personal healing? -Probe for where and what these practices are rooted in. “What has been your evolution around healing?”
8a. Can you detail some of the practices you engage in and create that contribute to the (Black) communities healing?
9. “How does your practice of [mothering/creating/healing] engage possibility of the future?”
10. What else would you like to share.
11. What other Black movement worker in any of the three containers would you recommend I speak to? Who should be included in the kitchen table cyphers and collective conversation?

Appendix E: Master Code Template

Master Codes	Sub-Themes	Participant Interview Excerpts
CREATIVE (HEALING) PRAXIS		
LINEAGE/ROOTS		
MAGIC		
MOTHER/ING		
HEALING		
TRAUMA/WOUNDING		
BLACKNESS		
BE/ING		
QUEER/NESS		
SITE AND PLACE/ CHICAGO		
SPECIAL TERMS/IDEAS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods • Challenges in Practice • Process/Interview Reflections 		

Appendix F: Recruitment Material

1. Original Artwork (by Pascale Ife Williams)



2. Social Media (Instagram) Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

- Are You Between the ages of 18 and 35?
- Self-identify as Black or Black mixed-race?
- Self-identify as queer, trans, gender non-conforming?
- Live in Chicago?

FREEDOM DREAMS CHI

An Active Archive Project Of & For Chicago's Black Queer Movement Creators
Black Queer Futures: 21st Century Medicine: Historical Memory
Interested In Sharing Your Story?

For More Information Visit ::
<https://bit.ly/3hsvbA1>

NOTE: This project is a part of Pascale Ife Williams' dissertation research [re]claim[ed] freedom dreams: remapping historical trauma and visioning afro-futures through black queer feminist praxes. Please direct your questions or requests for more information to Pascale Ife Williams at pwilliams8@wisc.edu

3. Partnership Recruitment Email Template

Sender: [\[freedomdreamschi@gmail.com\]](mailto:freedomdreamschi@gmail.com)

Recipient: [\[recipient email address\]](#)

Subject Line: Freedom Dreams Chi Participant Interview Invitation: Black Queer Futures:: Medicines::Historical Memory

Peace [\[Participant\]](#),

Greeting you with gratitude, love and an unapologetic commitment to Black liberation. My name is Pascale Ife Williams. I am reaching out to you and your organization as a comrade and member of the Chicago community whose work and commitment centers Black and queer people. For those who I may not have yet had the pleasure of connecting with, I look forward to the day.

I am a Chicago westside native, a cultural organizer, scholar-activist, and mother. I am also pursuing my doctorate at the University of Madison-Wisconsin (UW-Madison) in the field of Human Ecology. I am conducting a dissertation study titled “*freedom dreams chi: remapping historical trauma and visioning afro-futures through black queer feminist praxes*” that explores Black queer Chicago freedom dreamers to better understand the tools used to navigate and mediate the impact of historical trauma onto Black people and to examine creative and embodied tools that move us towards freedom and possibility. This study centers cultural organizers and artist’s, healing arts practitioners, and all mothering individuals (e.g co-mothers, community mothers).

I invite you to participate in this study and/or ask that you share it with others in your network.

You are invited to participate if you:

- Are between the ages of 18 and 35
- Self-identify as Black or Black mixed-race
- Self-identify as queer, trans, gender non-conforming
- Live in Chicago

Participation includes one virtual one-on-one interview of approximately sixty minutes to two hours (60-120 minutes). Individuals who are interested will also be invited to attend one a “Kitchen Table Cypher” which will include a collective dinner and mapping session (tentatively scheduled for April-June 2021).

To read more about the study please follow this link: [Freedom Dreams Chi Welcomes You](#)

If you'd like to participate in the study yourself (or know individuals who may be interested) please use or forward the following link to access the informed consent and brief pre-interview questionnaire:

Please take 5-10 minutes to complete this brief pre-interview form [Complete the Form](#)

Thank you so much for your consideration. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions (pwilliams8@wisc.edu) or by phone (773.386.0686)!

In healing and solidarity,

Pascale Ife Williams

Appendix G: Participant Art Submission Examples

Top Image: Original hand-crafted jewelry by Raheim, <https://www.instagram.com/rahcrystals/>
Bottom Image: Album cover for single by Johnaé <https://www.instagram.com/johnaestrong/>

Appendix H: Kitchen Table Cypher Menu

Menu curated and prepared by Chef and Community Cook Tera Murray on December 12, 2021

First Course (vegan)

crispy plantain~ cilantro coconut yogurt

Salad Course (vegan)

kale, avocado-mango vinaigrette, toasted coconut, orange segment, green onion, mint, coriander

Bread Course (vegan)

puff puff (fried dough) w/ stewed beans
bread & veg course served together

Veg Course (vegan & animal protein)

Collards~ smoked turkey necks or without

Main (vegan & animal protein)

Belizean curry & rice w/ cod or tofu

Dessert

caramel cake

Appendix J: Kitchen Table Cypher Images







Appendix I: Freedom Dreams Chi Kitchen Table Cypher Playlist

Spotify Playlist Link

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0l44Al8TCp4BGO9zVskq0B?si=d28846f6f4f64d22>

- ★ Young, Gifted, and Black - Nina Simone
- ★ Move on Up - Curtis Mayfield
- ★ Alice Coltrane
- ★ Journey to Satchitananda
- ★ Black Bird - Rachelle Farelle
- ★ “So Done” - Alicia Keys & Khalid
- ★ If I Ruled the World by Nas + Lauryn Hill
- ★ God by Kendrick Lamar
- ★ Go Up Moses-Roberta Flack
- ★ Ain't Got No- I Got Life -Nina Simone
- ★ "It's Going to Rain" Reverend Milton Brunson and The Thompson Community Singers
- ★ "Fruit Salad"- Tierra Whack
- ★ Ben Lamar Gay (Dere ma baby go, totem, primavera, fireflies)
- ★ Donna Summer - I feel love
- ★ Minnie Riperton - les fleurs
- ★ Young, Gifted, and Black by Nina Simone
- ★ Baldwin by Jamila Woods
- ★ Sula (Paperback) by Jamila Woods
- ★ Afro Blue by Robert Glasper & Erykah Badu
- ★ I am the Black Gold of the Sun
- ★ A live band + orchestra + drum circle playing instrumental trap, hip-hop, rock, + rhythm and blues accompanied by KRS 1
- ★ the old Kanye
- ★ Jill Scott

Appendix K: Black Queer Pleasure Principles as Research Methodologies

In an effort to tend to and activate my creative writing muscle throughout the “research data organization and coding” phase of my dissertation (February 2022 through June 2022) I maintained a 15-minute creative writing/freestyle exercise inspired from various emerging themes in my data. The following notes are on widely, integrating pleasure principles into the research process and has at its center, a Black queer feminist praxis. I have maintained the original format of the writing as it offered a more fluid, creative, and easeful practice to process my thoughts, challenges, and ideas. For the most part, this writing includes narrative prose in lower case, with little attention to grammatical or structural standards.

[April 12, 2022, *notes on integrating pleasure into methods and my (writing) process*]

pleasure means to me moving with ease, like writing a (reasonable) to do list and finding joy in checking things off/offering grace in moving things onto my to-do list for the next day. Its (sometimes) writing while lounging on my couch, almost always catching sun rays through my window if possible, and definitely having water and a favorite snack at my disposal this process has also necessitated that i integrate my approach to thinking through and creating, as an artist. the 15-minute freestyle sessions allowed for a pleasurable, easeful and accessible format for me- because writing for long durations of time is not friendly; because freestyle writing cyphers -like prose without worry, or not needing to focus on sentence structure, on word usage, or how what I want to say in the moment may (or may not) be in conversation with what others are saying- is supportive.

Pleasure (and care for self) in this process has also meant claiming unapologetically to my advisor, at the beginning on my graduate studies, that I am unwilling to lose myself or die (literally or figuratively) while navigating the (almost) un-survivable conditions of white institutional expectations as a black (brown) mixed race, queer, single mother, financially unstable femme. pleasure was both experienced in the boundaries I set and the deep love and grace i offered myself

also, in the:

movement/dance/body activation breaks

mid-day masturbation sessions

co-working with beloveds (whether they were dissertating, or working, or dreaming)

approaching my work as sacred object/practice

integrating creative/visual/non-written exercises to activate my ideas and “product(s)”

....

[May 4, 2022, *Notes on exploring sites of work as exploration as research curation*]

In the summer of [2008/2010?] my mama and i decided we wanted to begin an adventure of visiting every 88 neighborhoods of our beloved the city of Chicago, this was no small feat. Demarcating our roadmap beforehand and generally choosing the neighborhood at random (or per location and pre or post plans) we would zig zag (driving) down every block of a certain mile radius, occasionally parking to enjoy a building or park at closer glance, or to ask permission to take a photo of a fellow Chicagoan at work, at leisure, at play. We would most often go on

Sundays, enjoying the looks of church goers' attire. Always stopping for lunch at a local fare just before small banter turned hangry back and forth (I am the one to become hangry, my mama could fast for days) ...

In 2015, my little (at that time only three and a half years old) and I left for Madison, WI so that I could begin graduate school. While our weekend visits [to Chicago] were frequent [...] we did not make our visit to every neighborhood before my mom's transition in 2017.

As an ode to this Chicago neighborhood homage, during my research process I sought out to visit and work at as many public libraries as possible. Enjoying the unique vibe of each library, the beautiful architecture of the older buildings, and the quiet yet low chatter filled ambience seated at the heavy block wooden tables and chairs.

During my final dissertation analysis and writing (September 2021- September 2022) I was able to visit and inspire from the following city libraries (of which there are 81):

- Humboldt Park Library (Humboldt Park)
- South Shore Branch (South Shore)
- Richard M. Daley (West Humboldt Park)
- Legler Regional Library (West Garfield Park)
- Park Ridge, IL (May)
- Chinatown Branch (6/2/2022)

[note on traveling to Mozambique to begin intensive writing phase with comrade, fellow mother-activists, and doctoral candidate colleague]

[April 19, 2022, *notes on methods as bqf praxis*]

[I see] "Research as a relationship to your work and your pleasure and your participants and your word(s). For me bqf research methods, at its core, at its willful and hopeful essence are about the embodiment of care for black queer and expansive people and ideas.

its not doubting beginning your conversation/interview with "how are you magic?" and still pondering with such intention and tenderness, the *knowing* that everyone is magic.

BQF methods include/are:

- Care
- Intersectional reflection (self) and system
- Ecological underpinnings
- Loving black and queer people
- Interviews as dialogical moments of remembering and knowing/learning
- Many questions about possibility, about curiosities, about imaginings
- ...

[April 25, 2022, *on methods as bqf praxis (continued)*]

My approach to methods has included a deep curiosity and integration of questions and creating spaces that invite all of the senses— drawing from the original source question:

What does a creative healing praxis through a black queer feminist lens smell, feel, look, sound, taste like?

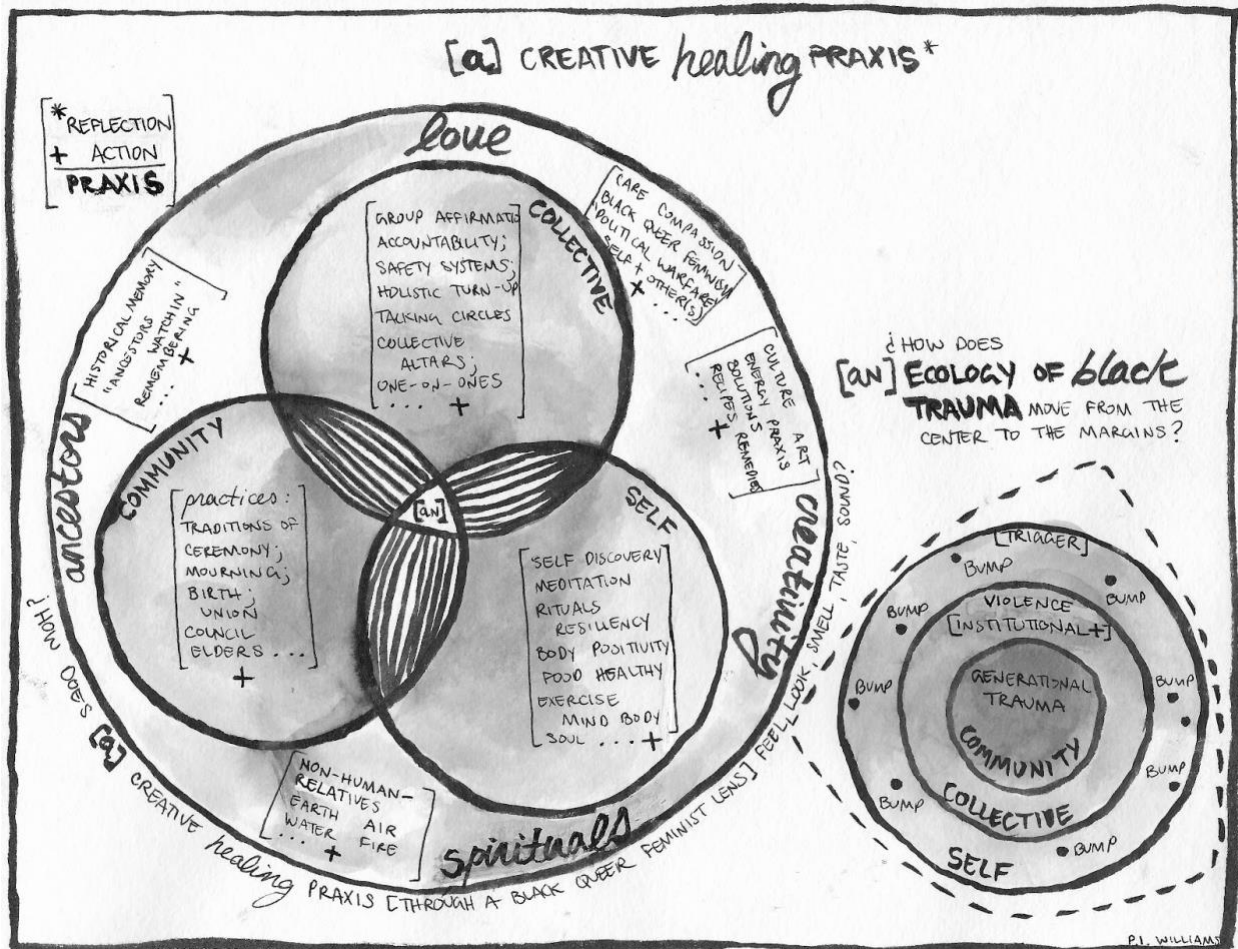
I sought out to create and craft a methods approach that was equally informed by my role as researcher as it was by my years [of] experience as facilitator, as community mothering, as black-queer femme identified.

The approach was rooted in wanting to know participants as whole, fully expressed, embodied and spiritual beings. In knowing and sharing in celebrating the songs that can transport us into varying time-space realities. Of indulging in the tastes and foods that remind us of home, of dirt and grandma's hands [in] dishes. of the sites and faces that helped shape each person

bqf methodology for me includes how any given moment feels, looks (from the geometry in a dish of food to the color of the room to the layout and spaces in between people's dialogue).

It is my hope that the care, intentionality, and critical research methodology that I have sought to employ is reflected in the pages of this manuscript.

Appendix L: [a] creating healing praxis [an] ecology of Black trauma



Appendix M: “Mama, Spirit, and the Lorde” (Image of my work station)

