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I See You, Sis:
Curations of Black Women's Healing Spaces in Oakland, California

By

Brittany Botts

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

African American Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Chiyuma Elliott, Chair

Professor Nikki Jones

Professor Nadia Ellis

Fall 2022

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Abstract

I See You, Sis: Curations of Black Women's Healing Spaces in Oakland, California

by

Brittany Botts

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Chiyuma Elliott, Chair

My dissertation analyzes everyday Black women's sacred space-making practices and argues that they are sites of spiritual healing. I assert that in the wake of urban displacement, unhoused and housing-insecure Black women in Oakland, California, perform rituals of care within curated interiors of bodies and homes. I trace a collective praxis of ancestral memory and spirit reclamation that undergirds each space. Everyday art-making becomes a ceremonial act, and I illustrate how mundane moments of hair braiding and home-making, within the confines of a tent or a stoop, hold ancestral and spiritual resonance. I argue that these women's sense of their own interior divinity stakes claims to humanity amidst the dehumanization of urban placelessness.

The dissertation is based on five years of ethnographic research with sixty-five participants. My sites of study range from living rooms to sister-circles and include a variety of spaces where Black women in Oakland find healing. Methodologically, I engage performance ritual as praxis. I develop decolonial methods that expand traditional approaches to anthropology by merging performance ethnography with poetics and creative arts to more fully encapsulate the nuances of Black women's spiritual lives. I posit "Black feminist space making as methodology," and I curate healing circles where participants produce art which becomes data for my research, with participant consent. These artworks, and the encounters they engender, contribute to an expansive ethnographic dataset. I link dissertation chapters with virtual curations that articulate my research findings through prose, poetry, and multimedia art. I offer multisensory experiences of my work, which enables liberatory theories to be legible for academic and nonacademic viewers, including communities that inform my project. My website, blackwomxnhealing.com/dissertation, serves as a home for these multimedia texts.

My project builds upon a genealogy of Black feminist anthropology to expand the ways we think about reading, writing, and theorizing Black women's intimate lives. I argue that, by excavating richly nuanced detail from the sacred lives of everyday Black women and "ordinary Black girls,"¹ we expand our conception of feminist anthropology when conducted at the margins of the margins. By centering care practices of the uncared-for, and by illuminating the life-making praxis of women marked for social death,² I work to reframe limiting notions of urban anthropology to shift the

¹ Savannah Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality and the Refusal of Ethnography," *Transforming Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2019).

² Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary."

ethnographic gaze from a pathologized Black femme subject to a complexly curated and artfully autonomous one.

Dedication

for Slim,
the prayer warrior
your energy lives on forever

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acknowledgments

my legal name is Brittany Botts, but during much of my graduate tenure, my preferred name was Ree Botts. My current name, my married name, as of December 2020 is reelaviolette botts-ward. i am honored to hold my beloved husband's name next to my own last name, and to add my mother's maiden name, LaViolette, to my first name, as a Black Feminist reclamation praxis.³

...

to the sixty-five Black women whose stories are the foundation of this work, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for trusting me with your truths. this dissertation wouldn't exist without you, and i am so grateful for the gift you have given me in allowing me to share your healing in these pages.

this here is no rhetorical pursuit. this is an act of love, a labor of care, a stretching of self. this growth in me, and the words that have birthed from that site of expansion, would not have been possible without the people and places that pulled me close in the comforting warmth of love and reminded me that i am not alone.

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³ To read more about this naming practice, read "a conjuring of maiden names" in my first book, entitled mourning my inner[blackgirl]child.

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&for all the love that i have loved and lost. for all the love that i embraced and released. and for all the sacred community that remains.



Figure 1. baby girls rock baby pink at the end of they cornrows in oakland, captured by @sydneyee (Sydney Forneret, Don't Touch My Crown, April 29, 2019, <https://www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus>).

i see you, sis

curations of black women's healing spaces in oakland, california

REELAVIOLETTE BOTTS-WARD

Ground Zero: The Welcome

before it is an intellectual work, it is a spirit-led work
before it is an academic work, it is a sacred work



Figure 2. reelaviolette, saging the space on the page, captured by @aestheticsconash (Aesthetics con Ash, Sage the Page, January 1, 2019, blackwomxnhealing.com/healingathome).

author's note

I.

/ dear reader,

This ain't what you used to. This ain't no typical dissertation project, because I ain't no typical doctoral candidate. I am an everyday round the way Blackgirl, and most of us don't make it here.

In this dissertation, I center us, unapologetically, and I affirm the worlds we make possible despite precarity. I write about our holes, and I write about us holy. I write about our trips to the beauty supply and our journeys across astral planes. I write about the bus stop, the crop tops, and the cornrows, the cookouts, the sister circles, and the Twerk Church. I write about our interior geographies, our ancestral encounters, and the homes we curate for healing.

I work to write words that mean something to the women I work to center. I work to merge these worlds in ways that they have continued to merge in my own life. I write more from the corner of MLK and MacArthur and less from the graduate lounge at the University of California, Berkeley. Yet, I must not fool myself into believing that this is only for them, because it cannot be. The impossibility of doing academic work with everyday round the way Black folks is that the ones whose lives and labor make your work possible will never fully have access to the words you say about them.

As I write to bridge this gap, I fail. I slip. I am unable to turn language into liberation when written for two audiences at once. When I started graduate school, I promised myself to never use the word "quotidian" in conversations about everyday round the way Black girls, because they will not recognize the word (I didn't). But along the way, I forgot which words were colloquial and which were not. I forgot what words I did and did not know before I entered this institution. I write back and forth between the languages that I speak to Black women and the language of academia. The white-male-dominant structure of the academy makes you forget how to write for your people. When you remember, white-male-dominant academy tells you to insert relevant terms, cite theorists who never talked to them, never talked to they peoples. While I do not see myself as one invested in these logics, I am still here, writing this work from this place, a human contradiction.

So, what words will I write on healing? How do I write for my mother, for the Black folks with one degree, with no degrees, with no high school diploma? How do I write for Black folks who never even learned to read? Who is my audience? What are my intentions? What are my limitations?

The way I do this work, i.e. my methodology, attempts to respond to my whirlwind of questions and contradictions by stretching language, by mixing storytelling and poetics as tools for narration, by centering bodies, narratives, and creative production as text, by using an autoethnographic approach to deeply interrogate my process, by illustrating my findings beyond the dissertation itself, by curating theory and praxis via blackwomxnhealing.com as a tool of accessibility.

My work asserts that the ghetto is sacred and the sacred is ghetto, thus, the most liberatory healing praxis might be found somewhere between the hymn and sway of an everyday round the way Blackgirl's chorus, singing, *I See You, Sis. I See You*.

This work is an altar call of sorts, and I thank you for being here to witness it. As you journey through these testimonies and sermons, I invite you to witness yourself in the process and be with what comes up—the joy, the pain, the discomfort, the disdain, the affirmation, the celebration, the healing.

If you yourself are an everyday round the way Blackgirl, stumbling through this journey of healing, *I See You, Sis. I See You*. And if you are not, it is my hope that, as you travel through these pages and witness the collective healing of me and my homegirls, you too are invited into your own healing, whatever that may mean for you.

II.

/ dear sister,

I wrote this for you. But, being in the academy makes it hella hard to write this for you. I do my best to write for two audiences at once. I fail at this attempt, often.

If this dissertation is too much—if the words just don't make sense and you cannot find yourself in these pages,⁴ I offer interactive, multimedia expressions of this project at blackwomxnhealing.com/dissertation. And if you are looking for additional healing resources, I created this Healing Tools Resource Guide just for you.⁵

You are worthy of healing, sis. Healing is possible, peace is possible, and you are not alone.

III.

/ dear self,

When I said I was writing for my mother, a Black woman with two degrees, I realized that even in my intention to write for her, I still had no language to bridge the gap between my tongue and the academy. I sent my mother the twenty paged document entitled *A Vision for My Dissertation*. She, a Black woman who studied Black women's domestic violence in her Master's program at the same time that I studied Black women's healing in my Master's program, could not grasp the liberatory message of the essay.

I want to write this dissertation for my mother, for my homegirl who braids my hair, for my high school students in the Black Girl Magic Self Love Club. Yet, I also want to be awarded

⁴ Each chapter of my dissertation has an interlude that introduces the academic theories and concepts I engage in the following chapter. I have written the chapters in poetic, creative, and narrative forms so that, if you are more interested in the healing narratives of Black women and less interested in the academic conversations, you can skip the interlude sections and read the chapters only. Thus, the chapters are written more for a nonacademic audience, but the interludes are written more for an academic audience.

⁵ My intention for this work is that it honor the lives of Black women in Oakland who have made my healing possible, and that it celebrate the healing journeys we each have cultivated. It is my hope that, in retelling the stories of Black women in Oakland who inspired my healing journey, you take what you need and find more questions than answers.

this PhD, so I might be better suited to serve them. Or, so my ego can trick me into believing that a piece of paper with some white man's signature would make me better suited to serve them.

What would I write about my aim here to Black women faculty mentors, who are reading this now and continue to live, work, and teach within the academy (in their own processes of spiritual interiority, self-seeing, subterfuge, and creative expressiveness)? What would I write to my homegirls who are PhD students alongside me and hoping to obtain their doctorate in order to one day become a faculty member at a research one university? Can I align my degree conferral with a genealogy of Black feminist thought that has, for generations, rejected the white-male-dominant academy and affirmed the radical tradition of Black women's intellectual histories through affirming our knowledge production of ourselves, by ourselves, on our own terms? Might I see them as the ones who authorize my degree rather than the white-male-dominant structure of academia? Even after I situate myself within a rich lineage of Black feminist scholarship, why do I still feel, so often in this work, so deeply alone and in isolation as I move through it?

My mother says this document makes her head hurt. My heart sinks. If my mother cannot comprehend what this work is trying to say about Black women, for Black women, then I know this is not for my hair braider, nor is it for my homegirls.

I write back and forth between the languages that I speak to Black women and the language of loveless restriction. This space between where I live and where I work force my tongue in and out of itself. My mouth knows where home is, yet my vocal chords get strained into palimpsest, into quotidian.

Over time, I begin to enjoy how the words flow from my lips, like I might actually be smart enough to belong here. If they hear me hold my vowels like they do, I might be smart enough to belong here. Then I remember who I am—the unabashed ratchet, the round the way warrior goddess of grace, the gold hoop rockin' red lip wearin' long nailed, kinky haired, hood healer of myself. I can't not write from that place.

...

I pivot my weight towards the window when I feel trapped in a graduate course. I motion towards my inner world where I convene with the characters of my daydreams who write to me in my graduate school notebook that is secretly my diary. My professor thinks I am taking notes but really I am writing poems, but really I am taking notes, conducting an autoethnographic account of how it feels to be Black and woman and misunderstood here. I am taking notes on the enclosure of this geography⁶ and how these white walls feel up against my spirit, notes on what is at stake for our ability to make space in the places where we feel most stuck. I am taking notes about how I wish to float out that window, how the energy here is as white as these walls, how healing means subversive escape.

At the healing circle that evening, I tell my homegirl about this praxis of being elsewhere while in the academy and she calls it fugitive.⁷ She say my journal itself become a portal to that which is otherworldly in me. She say, I don' found the escape route to freedom like

⁶ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (Verso Press, 1998).

⁷ Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

Harriet,⁸ the ink drawn metaphysical underground railroad to ground me, to lead me back to myself when these white folks in this white class insist that I lose me.

I tell her I feel like an outsider here and I prefer it that way. I say the closer I am to this the further I am from me. She agrees, yet tells me we are all still implicated.

...

There are many different kinds of insiders, multiple degrees of closeness to oneself, one's home, one's community. Who we claim, what we claim, where we claim, can only be accounted for in challenging the distance between each space. Inside out. Outside in. Trinh⁹ says mother will be outside, especially when you do not make her. Says community will be outside, especially when you try to force yourself inside. The distance between my *self*, my mother, my family, my home, my people—that is where my work must begin.

I begin with self portrait. I begin with auto/ethno/graphy.¹⁰ I start with the self who is ever present in the process of collecting data, in searching and *researching* for answers only to find more questions. I work to lean into the self and erase the self simultaneously, to know that “it is bigger than me and it is big in me at the same damn time.”¹¹

How Black folks move in and through Blackness matters. It matters that its you.¹² How Black folks see Black folks within Blackness matters. It matters that it's you. Light skin girl. PhD girl. Middle class girl. Daughter of HBCU graduate girl. Legacy girl. They will judge you for that. So where do I begin and end my list of identities?

I tear myself inside out. Search my flesh for answers to conundrum. Am I even an insider to my *self*? I am many women¹³, and every woman in me has her own biography, her own geography. So who does that make me? Do I list each adjective of privilege and social death so one might know who I am and how I came to this work? What will one know of me by seeing my skin through the line of the page? Black. What will one know of me by seeing my breasts through the calling of my name? Woman. One will assume, and I will not mind. I prefer those assumptions over others.

Inside out. Outside in. I am Black and woman on the inside and out. Yet I could never be inside fully, never fully inside myself, never fully inside another.¹⁴ So how does one talk of interiority, intimacy, and deep connectivity with a sense of recognition for these slippages?

Who sees me inside is not who sees me outside. There are many things we insiders know. Like where a Black girl might have got her gold hoop earrings. Like whether she got her hand bag from the beauty supply or the corner. Like if she used Eco Style Gel or edge control with the toothbrush this morning. Like how long her braids been in. Like how affirmed many of us feel when we celebrate each other, regardless. We know *quotidian* things

⁸ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Prophecy in the Present Tense: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee Pilgrimage, and Dreams Coming True,” *Meridians* 12, no. 2 (2014): 142–52. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.12.2.142>.

⁹ Trinh Minha. GWS Graduate Course.

¹⁰ Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics* (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Keisha, Homegirl from around the way, i.e. Quote From Black Woman Interviewee in Preliminary Field Work

¹² On the very first day of Nikki Jones' Fall 2016 UC Berkeley course entitled “Researching Race, Gender, and Justice,” she exclaimed to the class, “It matters that it's you doing this work.” Her grounding in critical positionality helped me understand myself as a Black feminist researcher.

¹³ Helene Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

of each other because we see with similar eyes on the surface. Yet, there are many things we can never know of our insides. That which is unseeable. Opaque. On purpose and on accident. Many things we cannot capture of ourselves, of each other.

I am learning to embrace what I cannot know, of myself and of my people.¹⁵ Learning to let my feet move through darkness, through dream worlds and death scapes, skull headed hauntings and still stained blues. I am learning to lean into the feeling of forgiveness for the facts of life that never add up, the truths of my life I need to project onto my project in order for it to make sense. I am learning that in remembering my *self*, in the recalibration of my insides, my inner wisdom, my erotic as strength,¹⁶ I cannot continue the process of processing my people's pain through the limitations of my own lens:

I wish to write up care/ I wish to write up healing/ I wish to hold healing like I hold this pen to page/
I wish to warm care like I warm the skin beneath my feet/ I wish to write up a thing that might make
Black women smile/ I wish to wander in these pages/ I wish to not censor my truth here, for God
forbid if I tell a lie I will lie on all the women who need me to be true/ I wish to fold into myself and
onto the page here/ I wish to dance with the demons of my womb here and not be afraid/ I wish to
be weary here/ I wish to not hide my brokenness/ I wish to wade in the waters of the ink I spill and
the blood I spill and the lives within me that I kill to create this/ I wish to be reborn here/ I wish to
reclaim the childlike state of Black girlhood I forgot to finish burying away/ I wish to write about
slippin, about traveling in and out of my self/ I wish to be honest/ to be seen and felt and heard/ I
wish to witness and be a witness/ I wish to write of myself and my sisters in ways that give us
somethin to hold onto/ I wish to tell our stories in the ways we want them to be told/ in the ways we
need them to be told/ I wish to trust myself here/ I wish to trust my process here . . .

I am a Black woman healing, researching Black women healing. I, too, am interviewed, inspected, collected. I am implicated, deeply. How do I interrogate who I am and how my positionality limits and expands this work?

. . .

I pause between paragraphs, to cry, to comfort me, to cradle myself in my own bosom, to draw colored rainbows in my journal with my left hand, channeling the child in me who is triggered by the chilling accounts of my sisters.

I never gave myself permission to be heavy from this. It was only when my grandmother said, in response to me describing my work, "That's deep, that's heavy, that's hard," that I realized the weight of writing on *tryna* be well.

My body aches from this. There is no easy way to do this work. This labor of love costs me somethin'—my holes, my ghosts, my fickle illusions of remedies. To do this project justice, I must do justice to my own healing, and that requires me to revisit the queasy aches in my chest that linger between who I once was and who I have chosen to become.

I allow my feelings to guide my engagement with this project, because embodying a praxis of healing means remaining present with the weight of my emotions at all stages of the process. To fully immerse myself in a project on healing, I must orient my life towards healing. I must

¹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1942).

¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

practice what Audre Lorde speaks of in *Poetry is Not a Luxury*—a process of “cherish[ing] my feelings,” of traveling to the “dark place within” where my “true spirit rises.”¹⁷ If I hope to illuminate these processes within the lives of Black women that I am in community with, I must first work to illuminate these processes within myself. Only then can I truly show up to this work and for my community in an effective and intentional manner.

I cannot simply write and read and think healing, I must feel healing in my bones. I must scratch healing into my flesh. I must allow myself to slip into the darkest parts of “ancient wisdoms,”¹⁸ even when it is scary. Only then can I ask a Black women how it feels to heal.

I do not heal because it is convenient for my dissertation project. I heal because I love myself and I love Black women. I heal because the depth of my desire to help us love and hope and dream supersede my desire for a sheet of paper that stamps my name as legitimized. I heal because I know there is something much greater in me that connects me to a magnetic force that thrives and bursts beyond seams of Black women who reflect me. Thus, the healing comes first and the project is secondary. The project is birthed from an already existing healing praxis, and seeks to narrate the spaces of care that have held and nurtured me.¹⁹

Asè

Asè

Asè



¹⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches: Eye to Eye* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984) 36.

¹⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36.

¹⁹ I began this work tryna teach Black women how to heal. I quickly realized that I ain't know how to heal myself and my ego had guided that desire. My need to have an answer, a prescription, a remedy to offer up to Black women, was rooted in love, and also rooted in pride. This project, and the Black women within it, humbled me. These stories taught me how much I really don't know, and how much I never knew I needed to know.

[the ghetto is
sacred grounds]

have yo
shoes off
when you
enter

dab some
oil on yo
fo'head
when you
come

this is a
space of
rememory²⁰

this 222
forgotten city²¹
this urban
dismal swamp
this land
of those marked
undesirable
disrespectable
neglectable

have yo
scripture
in hand
when you
step foot
into this
centuries old
deathscape
this scattered
dream and
broken promise
this prism
this schism
this mosaic of
remnants. this
rhetorical pursuit

²⁰ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory." In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2nd ed., Ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83–102.

²¹ Brittense, *The Power of Melanin* (222 Media, 2019).

the ghetto is
a gorgeous
reminiscent
of freedom

is an inspirin'
somethin
is concrete
death
is the
continued
longing
for home

the ghetto is
a healing space
is cobble stones
mapped onto
negro heads²²
is hypocrisy
in the wake²³
is washed up
humanity
is hunger
in the hold
is the
afterlife
at the end
of the world
is the
best place to
find yo'self
is the
best place to
/slip

the sacred is
a ghetto space
a curation of
ghetto
deathscapes
a reclamation
of self
of sister
of home

²² Christen Smith, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence and Performance in Brazil* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

²³ Christina Sharp, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

of nia wilson

whats sacred
is what
warrants
rememory

like her
colored
striped
shirt
like her
smile
like her
twentieth
birthday
memorialized at
MacArthur Bart²⁴.

to make a
space sacred
one must
remember
that which was
forcibly
forgotten

like home
like self
like sister

like grandmother and
God and ordered steps

the sacred is
a ghetto
cuz the ghetto
get forgotten
like the sacred
get forgotten
like somethin'
gotta be
made from
nothin'
like dust

²⁴ Brittsense, *The Power of Melanin* (222 Media, 2019).

and wind
would survive
you in the wake

like care could not
sustain us. but it did.

like care
cradled you
in the womb
of her. like
darkness
and death
and depths
of oceans

i was once afraid to swim.

somewhere
someone
is poundin'
a promise
into
broadstreet
concrete
makin'
sand
out the
stone
she was
given
grating teeth
in the leaf
of the bark
beneath the tree
where she
buried
her healing

somewhere
someone
finds
everything
sacred
in the
ghetto

in the

grandmother
who was
forgotten

in the
god of
magic
in the
making
of life
from
shredded
bone
in the
Blackgirl
who
grew out
her womanhood
way too soon

somewhere
someone
believes
the everyday
round the way
Black girl
when she
proclaims
the ghetto is sacred
the sacred is ghetto

and in that
somewhere,
we find
our healing



Figure 3. tryna be well in oakland, captured by @kristinaxwill (Kristina Ashley Williams, Untitled, August 8, 2018, <http://kristinaashleywilliams.com/artist#portraits>).

introduction

Healing ain't no trifling matter.

-Toni Cade Bambara²⁵

²⁵ Toni C. Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980).

This is a project about healing. It is an extended meditation on where Black women in Oakland go to get well. It is a narration of what that journey towards wholeness looks and feels like amidst ongoing struggle. It is a grappling with im/possibility, and a radical insistence on care.

It is a compilation of the carefree and care-full. A creative reckoning with interiority. A healing circle in recollection—raw footage of the act. It is a soul cry. An ancestral reverence. A script of embodied knowing. A spiritual reclamation of Blackgirl selfhood. An assertion of hood divinity. A love letter to The Town.²⁶

tryna be well in oakland

Oakland and its surrounding cityscapes exist in the afterlife of enslavement²⁷, meaning that we Black women who inhabit this particular space and time face ongoing physical, psychological, and spiritual antiBlack violence shaped by generations of displacement, disenfranchisement, and dispossession.²⁸ In Oakland, California, where gentrification encroaches upon the sacredness of Black life²⁹, and capitalism constrains livability, we Black women who are tryna be well find ourselves returning to this question: *Can we afford to be well? Can we afford not to be?*³⁰ We wrestle with feasibility: if healing requires space and time, and survival takes all my space and time, how do I be well?

And these entanglements of im/possibility are the roots of we're healing from—capitalism, carcerality, the generational outcomes of institutional neglect, the contemporary manifestations of gentrification, the compounding impacts of patriarchy and misogyny on girlhood trauma, ancestral grief, and contemporary survival, spiritual abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, femmephobia, misogynoir, ableism, classism, colorism, sexism, racism, and the stacking on of those generational wounds that map onto bodies and concrete.

We exist here, at this particular juncture between destruction and refusal, and we make life amidst the ruins. We curate radical spatial imaginaries, cultivate sacred enclaves of divinity, “create space for the soul to show up,”³¹ allow our bodies and spirits to *move*, make room for the reclamation of self-space³² in the city that seeks to erase our presence. We, Black women, wounded and weary, yet working to be well, force this city to stretch for our healing as we affirm our right to breathe here.

We are surviving and thriving in this afterlife. We are healing here, in this wake.³³ And we are dying here, too.

We are losing our lives from this fight. To suicide and unheard cries. To cancer, unanswered questions and medical neglect. To institutional harm. To physical violence and intimate partner abuse. To addiction—to food, love, gambling, drugs, work, sex, money. To needing a vice to soothe the pain. To turning to the one thing we learned to comfort, and all along it's killing us.

²⁶ Oakland is affectionately called “The Town” in the San Francisco Bay Area.

²⁷ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 10.

²⁸ Kerby Lynch, “Mourning in Two Acts: Live From Oakland,” *Insurgent Architectures* 23 (2019).

²⁹ Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson, *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* (University of California Press, 2018).

³⁰ Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*.

³¹ Veta Goler, *Increasing Wellbeing through Contemplative Practices* (SUNY Press, 2017), 238.

³² Stephanie Evans, *Self Worth, Power & Creative Survival in Memoirs of Sexual Assault* (Sunny Press, 2017).

³³ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 7.

The pain we maintain is killing us. The harm we endure, and the inability to know what to do with that harm—how to process it, how to move through it, how to make sense of it, outside of an addiction to *something*, anything that might numb the pain. Some of our addictions are glorified and others are hyper vilified but an addiction is an addiction and whatever that addiction may be it takes away Black life. [I know because I am in it. Workaholic addiction. Celebrated and glorified but still, like liquor, it takes away years of my life.] Strips our vitality. Blocks access to being well. Crowds and controls the lifeline.

There are the death risks that we can calculate and attempt to confront, and those that we cannot. There is the death that comes from not knowing how to cope with the traumas of the system and the death that comes directly from the hands of the systems/ the institutions of antiBlack violence that work to take our breath—Nia Wilson, Kayla Moore, Nikai David. Healing could not save her. Healing could not have kept her alive, in the body, in the flesh. Yet, healing keeps her alive in us, lets us say her name, even if she no longer breathing. And saying her name keeps us more alive, even if just for the moment. “And every Black Death has the same cause - the im/possibility of Black life.”³⁴ So, how do we make more Black life, even within the limitations of our breathing?

This is the urgency of our healing, for the sites of care that we create for ourselves become a lifeline of sorts. In a city that marks us for social death,³⁵ our healing be the one thing to keep our spirits alive, even if just for the moment.

Our healing be wake work³⁶ - a care praxis developed from the im/possibilities of surviving while Black and woman in Oakland. Even though we know we will never fully be “healed”, because healing is a lifelong process, and because the violence we are healing from ripples into the everydayness of our lives, we curate alternative worlds for ourselves to breathe in, and we hold each other tenderly here. As we learn to do this, each generation a bit more than the one before, we break generational curses and free up possibilities for new life.

We are healing from our grandmothers’ hurt, our mothers’ fears, our daughters’ pains. This harm is institutional and generational, yet so is our healing. We carry legacies of care from women who came before us, and we reimagine what healing could look like and feel like for ourselves in this contemporary moment. It is from this place that we formulate a “we who care”³⁷ for ourselves and for each other.

*Healing be hard and heavy when so much is at stake.
“Healing hurts harder than hurting, but it’s worth it. [We] deserve it.”³⁸*

Healing is in levity and mourning, in grief work and in grandiose ungodly worship of the flesh, in peace and in pain. Healing is in between the messiness and the excavation, the recovery of a Black girl self from the ashes we were given, the unabashed reclamation of that which feels most real, most raw, most worthy of relishing. Healing is movement through mercy uncertainty, unsettling insecurity

³⁴ Ree Botts and Osceola Ward, “A Wake Work for 2020: on Meeting Black Grief With Tenderness,” *Root Work Journal* Vol. 1, Issue 1.; Convening in the Ark: Black and Sacred Sites of Revelation.

³⁵ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 10.

³⁶ Healing has become a widely engaged term within many American communities of racial justice workers, often used to assert that individuals can, with deep breaths and affirmations, simply shift their material circumstances. This particular strain of thought fails to acknowledge the literal material conditions that inform daily life for Black women on the margins. Hence, I lean into Christina Sharp’s framing of wake work to inform my approach to a more expansive framing of healing that encompasses a recognition of the layered harms projected onto intimate Black life. Sharp, *In the Wake*, 6.

³⁷ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 8.

³⁸ reelaviolette botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child* (Nomadic Press, 2021).

and the root of it. Healing is comforting contradiction with integrity, is the courage to live in truth, is transparency, is folding and failing and fucking up. Healing is to be bare in spirit, to bear the weight of one's soul, to allow oneself to feel the heaviness of it, to make peace with how you bleed.

Our healing happens between pleasure and precarity, between presence and transcendence, between awareness of that which has caused harm and acceptance of who we are working to become in spite of it. Healing is in the dance Black women do between carefree and deep dive. Healing is all the ways we choose to show up as more fully ourselves each day. It is in the gold hoop earrings and the ancestral encounters³⁹, it is allowing ourselves to be multifaceted, to be all that we are, all at once, and feel no pressure to compartmentalize. It is being seen, felt, heard, affirmed, by yo self and by yo sisters, by yo God and by yo ancestors.

And as our beloved ancestor Toni Cade Bambara once wrote, "Healing ain't no trifling matter."⁴⁰ It is a heavy matter whose weight is won in bricks. It is a process of purging. It is an opening up for newness. We know levity might save our lives. We dance to the downbeat of a disco song, we beat a dundun drum and listen to the voice of the deceased, we dig deep into soil to plant a sunflower seed that might grow in our stagnancy, we breathe into the Black of our bodies and call it wake work, we decide to care deeply, we work towards harmony, we heal by having the space and time/ making the space and time to simply be. But who has the privilege of space and time to simply be, when we be bombarded with worries? And we return to this question, over and over again: *Can we afford to be well? Can we afford not to be?*⁴¹

healing
comes
after the
slip
after the
wake

after the
wound
has pulled
itself
out of yo
side. after
you glide
down the
thighs
of yo
longing

and find
that you
belong

³⁹ Jade Charon, "Gold: Made Just For You," 2022.

⁴⁰ Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*.

⁴¹ Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*.

nowhere
then
everywhere
all at once

wondering
when you
became
forgotten
only to
find
you were
born
that way

only to
remember
you are held,
in love, here
with the others
who are both
black and woman
who also know
this feeling

Every woman decides for herself what she needs to be well. Every round the way Blackgirl gets to choose what combination of healing modalities will help her heal herself. Each of us selects what cusion of spells will be the remedy. And it's helluvus still unwell. It's hella Black women healing who still hella crazy, lost, unable to define for theyself who they are, out of they mind. I am one of them. But I know, and we know, that healing gets us closer to sanity, or further from it, and maybe that's the point. Maybe the point is that we gotta lose our mind to find it⁴². In a world that been don lost its mind by makin us the mule of the world⁴³, maybe we Black women healing is just mapping our way back to ourselves by losing the mind they gave us and finding the one our God did. Maybe we just curating cartographies of selfhood, tracing our steps to locate a space to find ourselves, to find the wonder inside.

In the pages that follow, I share just a glimpse of those chosen practices, and acknowledge that there are many more practices of healing that have not been documented in these pages. I document here what has felt most real to me, and most real to the folks who my spirit has been drawn to. I share what I have learned, knowing that ten years from now I will have learned much more. We learn and we grow and we make peace with what we know now, knowing our truths are ever evolving. This, too, is part of our healing.

theoretical framework

⁴² La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Duke University Press, 2021).

⁴³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1937).

All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith in 1982, opens with an introduction entitled “The Politics of Black Women’s Studies,” written by Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith. They begin by framing Black women’s studies as an essential tool for Black women to assert our truths into national and global discourse. They state, “Black women could not exist consciously until we began naming ourselves. The growth of Black women’s studies is an essential aspect of that process of naming.”⁴⁴ The development of a discipline solely committed to the lives, narratives, and experiences of Black women was, and still is, “a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent,” in that our storytelling about our own world through our own lens is often devalued, delegitimize, and relegated to the margins of broader academic discourse.

Hull and Smith assert that Black women’s studies invites Black women to reclaim our relationship to “the life of the mind.” They argue that “the horrors we have faced historically and continue to face as Black women in a white-male-dominated society have implications for every aspect of our lives, including what white men have termed ‘the life of the mind.’” Because white-male-dominated society has, for centuries, read Black women as unintellectual and incapable of deep thought, we have come of age in a culture that has made regular practice of “discrediting our intellectual power.”⁴⁵ The “white-male assessment of Black female intellect” leads to the disregarding, degradation, and disposal of our robust sites of knowledge production that allow us to arrive at autonomous self-actualization. However, Black women have not needed a “white-male-dominant assessment” to engage our everyday practices of theorizing, naming, and getting free through intellectual thought. “The ways in which we have created and maintained our own intellectual traditions as Black women, without either the recognition or the support of white-male society”⁴⁶ demonstrates that we have not needed white men’s approval to think for ourselves, in our own way, on our own terms.

In developing a political impetus for Black women’s studies, Hull and Smith grapple with what it means to be researching and teaching Black women’s studies within the context of academia. They warn that we, as Black women who hold professional positions in the academy, must “beware of our problematic political positions in the academy and of the potentially antagonistic conditions under which we must work.”⁴⁷ In *Three’s a Crowd: The Dilemma of the Black Woman in Higher Education*, Constance M. Carroll expands on these antagonistic conditions. She states that “Black women in higher education are isolated, underutilized, and often demoralized.”⁴⁸ Black women academics who center Black women’s studies are not only isolated and demoralized for who we are but also for what we do, in that our research is devalued in the same ways that our personhood is.

Patricia Hill Collins’s *Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought* expands upon Carroll’s sentiments, and offers a radical model for Black women academics to exist within the academy while honoring and celebrating the gifts of an inside/ outside status. She states that “Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality . . . to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family, and society,”⁴⁹ and argues

⁴⁴ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (The Feminist Press, 1982), xvii.

⁴⁵ Hull et al. *All the Women are White*, xvii.

⁴⁶ Hull et al. *All the Women are White*, xix.

⁴⁷ Hull et al. *All the Women are White*, xix.

⁴⁸ Hull et al. *All the Women are White*, 115.

⁴⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought* (University of California Press on behalf of the

that “in spite of the obstacles that can confront the outsiders within, such individuals can benefit from this status.”⁵⁰ I am inspired by Collins’s assertion to identify how Black women have made great use of our relationality to white-male-dominant institutions that were designed for our subjugation, and yet I am also weary of language that might naturalize and normalize our suffering in an attempt to celebrate and honor what we make possible in light of abuse. I am also interested in what a contemporary model of Black womanhood in academia might look and feel like that does not require the types of attachment and intimacy that Collins names as a central feature of the outsider within status.

Collins’s essay features a legacy of subtle intimacies with whiteness, from Black women domestic workers to Black women academics, that I am less interested in in my work. While I recognize the usefulness and the necessity of this intimacy for Black women of previous generations, I am interested in what it might look like for Black women academics to create less intimacy and more distance from whiteness within academia. There were, and still are, many circumstances when an intimacy with whiteness in academia is necessary for navigating the academy. However, I am deeply invested in creating models of Black women’s studies and Black feminist studies that do not require such intimacy, that allow for more spaciousness between Black women’s intellectual production and the white-male-dominant culture of academia. These models detach and disinvest from whiteness, not only in word but in deed. They devalue “white-male-dominant assessment”⁵¹ and honor “Afro-American women’s cultures”⁵² of knowledge production as the standard for intellectual engagement.

As a Black feminist scholar in an African American studies department that has a long and vibrant legacy of radical Black feminist thought, I have witnessed and embodied these models in the five years I have been a PhD student. I have inherited the gifts of radical Black feminist thought that is seeped into the walls of the sixth floor from Barbara Christian, June Jordan, and Vèvè Clark. They pushed the boundaries of the academy so that Black women doctoral students like me could have grounds to stand on in our unapologetic assertion of Black feminist thought. They paved the way for me to know new freedoms, for me to exist within a tradition of Black feminist thought that is radical, rebellious, and unconventional, for me to carry on that legacy by centering and honoring everyday round the way Black women’s culture not only in my scholarship but also in the way that I *be*⁵³ as a Black woman in academia. Their legacies invite me into a radical praxis of detachment from the white-male-dominant culture of academia—its values, its measurements, and its expectations for social ways of being that rob me of my right to true liberation as a Black woman working to be well.

My all Black woman dissertation committee is a testament to this. My use of AAVE in classrooms with Black feminist professors who affirm me in my fullness is a testament to this. I believe that each generation of Black women academics are invited to get a bit more free than her foremothers, that as we honor the Black women who were forced to develop intimacies with the white-male-dominant culture of academia for their survival, we are invited to free up those parts of ourselves as we come into deeper understanding that those navigation tools might no longer serve us. For some, these navigation tools may still be very necessary, crucial, and essential for survival still. For others, like myself, the freedom to choose a different model of engagement with the academy that centers

Society for the Study of Social Problems, 1986), 1.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within*, 3.

⁵¹ Hull et al., *All the Women are White*, xix.

⁵² Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within*, 1.

⁵³ Carolina Valdez, Edward Curammeng, Farima Pour-Khorshid, Rita Kohli, Thomas Nikundiwe, Bree Picower, Carla Shalaby, and David Stovall, “We Are Victorious: Educator Activism as a Shared Struggle for Human Being,” *The Educational Forum*, 82, no. 3 (2018): 244-258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1458932>.

Black women's culture and decenters white men's culture might be most essential for our survival.

...

Hull and Smith invite us to think critically about theoretical and methodological genealogies. To separate from the white-male-dominant culture of intellectual thought, and to align themselves deeply with cultures of Black women's knowledge production, they invite us to trace a long lineage of Black women thinkers whose radical intellectual contributions embody a "creative, intellectual spirit coupled with a practical ability to make something out of nothing."⁵⁴ As scholars of Black women's studies, Hull and Smith introduce Black women thinkers as the center of their disciplinary tradition, and offer a genealogical map for Black women scholars to frame our work within so that our projects might find an intellectual home, and a site for belonging. While names like Milla Granson have often been written out of scholarship, because enslaved Black women were never granted access to being read as intellectuals, Hull and Smith assert that Black women's studies allows us to work towards reclaiming their names, their legacies, and their stories in order to solidify a foundation of Black women's studies that is deeply rooted in honoring Black women who have come before us.

Their historical analysis of forgotten Black women's voices in academia can be used to read contemporary struggles for naming and reclaiming Black women's intellectual cultures and traditions as central to the scholarly work we do as Black women researchers. Hull and Smith affirm that "the politics of Black women's studies are totally connected to the politics of Black women's lives in this country. The opportunities for Black women to carry out autonomously defined investigations of self in a society which through racial, sexual, and class oppression systematically denies our existence have been by definition limited."⁵⁵ Black women's studies offers not only Black women academics but also Black women outside of academia the opportunity to engage in processes of self interrogation, self definition, and self actualization. They argue that our intellectual pursuits must be accountable to the everyday pursuits of everyday Black women who deserve a right to personal and political autonomy. In other words, it is the responsibility of Black women academics who study Black women's studies to offer Black women within and beyond academia new tools for journeying deeper into the life of their own mind so that we each are offered the chance to know our intellectual powers more intimately, since we have been socialized to distance ourselves from and devalue those parts of ourselves.

Black feminist methodologies allow us to communicate our research in Black women's studies to Black women within and outside of academia. They also invite us as Black women who research Black women to find new homes, safeties, and comforts as we navigate the politics of the white-male-dominant culture of the academy by decentering and devaluing its power to assess our stories and lives. Just as Black feminist scholars like Irma McClaurin and Patricia Hill Collins assert, everyday Black women's genius challenges normative practices in academia. When McClaurin argues for centering the wisdom of beauty shop stylists⁵⁶, and when Collins foregrounds the analysis of working class domestic workers about their own lived experiences⁵⁷, they each affirm that the theoretical interventions of everyday Black women are at the foundation of the Black feminist research that we, as Black feminist scholars, produce. Thus, what we choose to study, and how we

⁵⁴ Hull et al., *All the Women are White*, xix.

⁵⁵ Hull et al., *All the Women are White*, xvii.

⁵⁶ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*.

⁵⁷ Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within*, 1.

choose to center the folks we study, matters deeply. When we study everyday Black women, and write about their lives in language that is tangible and accessible to them, we honor Hull and Smith's political intent for Black women's studies to be radical and relatable to the everyday lives of Black women. We also give ourselves the gift of an intellectual lens that decenters the white-male-dominant gaze and offers us heightened experiences of belonging within and beyond our research. Theoretical and methodological tools like linguistic refusal, autoethnography, and Black feminist citation practice allow Black women researchers to deepen this politic.

Linguistic refusal invites Black women, and particularly everyday round the way Blackgirls, to honor our culture and heritage in our scholarship and in our everyday academic lives. It also can free us up from the pressures of identity performance that so often dictate how Black women feel we have to show up in professional academic settings. It is the process of speaking the same language we use in our communities within the academic setting, particularly honoring African American Vernacular English as a language worthy of living and thriving in the academic setting. While I recognize the limitations of linguistic refusal, as it may be an inaccessible tool for folks whose professional careers might be jeopardized by speaking in their natural mother tongue on the job, I am interested in possibilities of linguistic refusal in professional settings like mine, where a Black Studies department might make it safer to release the pressures of code-switching.

When expanding upon her experience as a Black woman in academia, Carroll states that “it takes a great deal of psychological strength ‘just to get through the day.’ the feeling is much like the exhaustion a foreigner speaking an alien tongue feels at the end of the day.”⁵⁸ I would argue that, in many ways, Black women are foreign speakers of an alien tongue, in that our language, our culture, and our identities are so often not reflected in white-male-dominant academic spaces. For everyday round the way Blackgirls who are in academia, this is even more true, as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is rarely spoken in academic spaces and even more rarely is it affirmed as a complex knowledge-based linguistic system that holds room for deep intellectual truths. I believe that, the more room we make in our scholarship to speak in our tongues without the pressure and burden of translation, the more we can preserve our psychological strength, the less we have to overexert, overextend, and over-exhaust ourselves amidst the pressure of translation. By drawing inspiration from rebellious Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and bell hooks, my work aims to center AAVE as the language in which I distribute the intellectual production of everyday round the way Black women. As a part of Hull and Smith's broader assertion, that Black women's studies invites us to reclaim our intellectual power on our own terms, rooted in our own culture, values, and voice, my choice to ground this work in Black feminist linguistic refusal serves as a radical methodological choice that carries on this legacy of Black women's studies.

In *The Race for Theory*, Christian details her frustration with the white-male-dominant academy, and the pace at which it functions. She asserts, as Hull and Smith do, that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.”⁵⁹ She affirms the poetic and creative aspects of Black feminist theorizing that often exists beyond the scope of what is comprehensible to the white-male-dominant academy. She states:

I am inclined to say that our theorizing . . . is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How

⁵⁸ Hull et al., *All the Women are White*, 120.

⁵⁹ Barbara Christian, *The Race for Theory*. Cultural Critique 6 (Spring 1987): 55.

*else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. It is this language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it, that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in form of the hieroglyphy, a written form that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.*⁶⁰

Her assertion of the poetic beauty of Black feminist theoretical intervention when told in our language and unfiltered by white-male-dominant pressures of language, is the true essence of my intention for the linguistic refusal I highlight in my work, through the language I use to tell the stories of my folks on our own terms.

Erna Brodber, Gina Ulysse, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Carol Boyce Davies serve as additional models of Black women scholars whose work does the sort of poetic storytelling that Christian names here. I am particularly inspired by the ways in which they use poetic language to lift up nuances within Black women's spiritual lives as a site of rich study. As creative writers, spirit workers, and scholars, they each, in their own ways, practice a linguistic refusal that honors the divinity and spiritual wisdom of Black folk, and particularly everyday Black women. Brodber, traditionally trained as a sociologist, uses her novels as sites of contestation as she grapples with her own positionality as a Black woman scholar in academia and a writer rooted in a politic of communal healing. Ulysse, trained as an anthropologist, centers performance and ritual as her mode of refusal. Ulysse's most recent series of performance based installations inspired by Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* illustrates how linguistic refusal can exist beyond the page, on the stage, beyond the written word, and rooted in the power of the Black feminist spoken word. Ulysse's performance work emphasizes yet another register of refusal that opens up new possibilities for developing the sort of Black feminist being that I am moving towards in this work. I engage Alexander and Davies more deeply in chapter four of this work, as I grapple with how to research Black women's spiritual lives in ways that honor the ethic of care embedded within the linguistic refusals they each embody in their work.

Collins highlights the ways in which bell hooks and Zora Neale Hurston engage outsider insider tools to navigate their positionality in academia, and I am particularly inspired by how both Hurston and hooks use linguistic refusal to position themselves as Black women scholars who are in the academy but constantly working to stretch it's bounds so that there is room made for the complexities of their individual and communal truths. Collins highlights bell hooks' reflections on living as an outsider within, and how that impacted her use of language in theory. She states, "Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality."⁶¹ This lens, or standpoint, informs hook's use of linguistic refusal. In *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*, bell hooks argues for a decentering of the white gaze and an assertion of Black women's ability to see ourselves and name ourselves on our own terms. Her commitment to linguistic refusal and accessibility in her work, across projects, shifted the nature of Black feminist writing in the canon. Collins states that Hurston "most certainly reflects her skill at using the strengths and transcending the limitations both of her academic training and of her background in traditional Afro-American community life."⁶² When Hurston speaks of her research practice, she states, "I enjoyed collecting the folk-tales and I believe that people from whom I collected them enjoyed the telling of them, just

⁶⁰ Christian, *The Race for Theory*, 55.

⁶¹ Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within*, 3.

⁶² Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within*, 3.

as much as I did the hearing.”⁶³ She, like Collins and McClaurin, asserts that the everyday folks in her community have significant intellectual contributions to make, in their own voice, and that their knowledge and stories are worthy of sharing in ways that are authentic to them. Her practice of linguistic refusal is deeply rooted in her ethnographic and auto ethnographic approach to scholarly inquiry. She recounts that she “had to go through an initiation”⁶⁴ in order to connect deeply with the communities she studied. In so doing, she models an embodied politic of autoethnographic research that merges ethnography and linguistic refusal to honor the voices and cultures of her folks.

Autoethnographic research, particularly as it relates to Black women’s lived realities, is another useful methodological tool for radical Black feminist scholarship. In *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*, Irma McClaurin argues that “autoethnography [is] both as a stylistic form to textualize the ethnographic experiences of Black feminist anthropologists and as a theoretical lens through which we can interpret how we do what we do provides the vehicle for a transformative ethnographic knowledge production.”⁶⁵ Contemporary Black feminist projects like Robin M. Boylorn’s *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience* provide a brilliant depiction of the utility of what she terms Blackgirl autoethnography, a method that makes space for the personal in the collecting and writing up of data. She views herself as “(one of) the main character(s) in her research stories,”⁶⁶ centering her own resilience in conversation with that of the family members she recounts.

Black feminist citational practices, alongside autoethnographic work and linguistic refusal, also offer new modes of being for Black women in academia. Projects like Christen Smith’s #CiteBlackWomen, Yaba Blay’s Professional Black Girl, and The Church of Black Feminist Thought, curated by miyuki baker and Ra Malika Imhotep, curate collective space for healing and reclamation of Black women’s voices and intellectual genealogies. The #CiteBlackWomen Collective started “as a campaign to push people to engage in a radical praxis of citation that acknowledges and honors Black women’s transnational intellectual production.”⁶⁷ It has since grown into an international movement to support Black women scholars in finding intellectual community and genealogies to draw from in grounding the work we do that is rooted in a political of radical love and communal care for our people, and for our academic elders and ancestors. The Church of Black Feminist Thought offered healing space based in the Bay Area for folks invested in Black feminist study. Their culminating text, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*, defines Black feminist study as “a converging of mind/ body/ spirit with joy, humility, and community.”⁶⁸ Professional Black Girl “is a multi-platform digital community that celebrates the everyday, round-the-way culture of Black women and girls. In OUR community, “Black Girl Magic” isn’t just reserved for those of us who have accomplished unprecedented achievements (the first one to do this, the only one to do that) – we ALL magical around here! By announcing ourselves “Professional Black Girls,” we assert an UNAPOLOGETIC identity (#WhoGonCheckMeBoo) in a world that too often tries to tell us how we “ought to” act. We know that “acting” like anything other than ourselves robs us of our FREEDOM, so instead, we choose, embrace, and celebrate EXACTLY WHO WE ARE. *We are professional code-switchers. We hold PhDs and listen to trap music. We twerk and we work. We are Professional Black Girls.*”⁶⁹ Curated by one of my dearest intellectual inspirations, this platform has shifted the

⁶³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1935), 197.

⁶⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 191.

⁶⁵ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*.

⁶⁶ Robin Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience* (Peter Lang Press, 2013), 13.

⁶⁷ Christen Smith, <https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/> (2022).

⁶⁸ Ra Malika Imhotep and miyuki baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas* (The Church of Black Feminist Thought, 2019), 10.

⁶⁹ Yaba Blay, Professional Black Girl, <https://professionalblackgirl.com/> (2019).

way I see myself and my work. Yaba gave me permission to decenter the booji respectable politics of the academy and convinced me, “do you, boo!” She modeled what was possible for me, as each of these models have.

In conclusion, Black feminist thought has served as an intellectual home for Black women who exist on the margins of academia. For women like me, who grapple with their own positionality in relation to academia, it can at times make it difficult to solidify and root oneself in ethics and politics of Black women’s studies that are the antithesis of white-male-dominant academia. The nuanced and often complex positionality of Black women who are scholars, working from within and beyond academia, require a different set of navigation tools for moving through the university. Black feminist theory and methods offer a robust set of tools for us Black women scholars to deeply interrogate the academy while still holding professional positions within it. These theories and methods have carried Black women scholars through and offered each generation of Black women thinkers an intellectual tradition to step into. From historical projects like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1942) to contemporary projects like Christen Smith’s #CiteBlackWomen and Ra Malika Imhotep’s *Church of Black Feminist Study*, I write within a long genealogy of Black women writers and researchers who worked to expand the bounds of what academic work can do and make possible.

project overview

In conversation with Katherine McKittrick’s “Black feminist cartographies,”⁷⁰ Christina Sharp’s “wake work,”⁷¹ and Savannah Shange’s “Black Girl Ordinary,”⁷² I theorize geographies of interiority alongside discourses of spatial inequality, which often decenter narratives of healing and autonomy. Additionally, I merge visual culture studies with Black feminist geographies to explore how Black women’s memory, mourning, mapping, and intimacies might invite us all into new ways of imagining and enacting life-sustaining healing modalities.

I ask, how do unhoused and housing insecure Black women in Oakland curate sites of healing amidst displacement, disenfranchisement, and dispossession? How does the everyday round the way Black womanchild⁷³ curate a self, a home, a space, a life? How does she map her healing onto Oakland? How do these practices of creative space-making make Blackgirl spirit reclamation⁷⁴ possible amidst the spirit murdering⁷⁵ of gentrification? How do these radical spatial imaginaries force us all to reimagine what wellness can look and feel like in the wake of precarity?

I assert that, in the wake of urban displacement, these Black women perform rituals of care within curated interiors of bodies and homes. By tracing a collective praxis of ancestral memory and spirit reclamation that undergirds each space, I read everyday art-making as a ceremonial act, and I illustrate how mundane moments of hair braiding and home-making, within the confines of a tent or a stoop, hold ancestral and spiritual resonance. I argue that these women’s sense of their own interior divinity stakes claims to humanity amidst the dehumanization of urban placelessness.

⁷⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁷¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

⁷² Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

⁷³ Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

⁷⁴ Aja D. Reynolds, Ree Botts, and Farima Pour-Khorshid, “Critical Sisterhood Praxis: Curating a Woman of Color Feminist Intervention for Spiritual Reclamation in the Academy,” *The Journal of Educational Foundations* 34, no. 1: 14–30.

⁷⁵ Bettina L. Love, “Anti-Black state violence, classroom edition: The spirit murdering of Black children,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 13, no. 1: 22–25.

Within these healing spaces, I map both physical and metaphysical geographies by accounting for those ancestral presences that can only be felt in ritual. Thus, I study how Black women's enclaves of care challenge Eurocentric notions of space and time by existing within, between, and beyond normative modes of materiality. In other words, I theorize the astral place, the ancestral realm, the underworld, the interior, and the self space with the same rigor as my theorizing of seascapes, skyscapes, city blocks, concrete, earth, soil, home, ocean, river, sand, dust, wind, community center, bedroom, tent.

This project is based on five years of ethnographic and autoethnographic accounts with sixty-five Black women, the majority of whom were unhoused or housing insecure at some point during my data collection process⁷⁶, between 2016 and 2020. My sites of study range from living rooms to sister-circles and include a variety of spaces where Black women in Oakland find healing. My interviews and participant observation occurred mostly between 2016 and 2019, and my autoethnographic work is most prevalent from deep reflection on positionality throughout 2020, where I conclude with reflections on the ways in which 2020 exacerbated disparities. While I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of most participants, I do use real names for a select few cultural workers and organizations with public platforms, with whom I engaged in public settings, in order to cite their creative production and theoretical contributions to the work, with hopes that you engage their work more in depth.

The majority of my project is centered in the western part of Oakland, with the streets between Downtown Oakland and Lake Merritt being centralizing locales for events, gatherings, and festivities. The homes I enter and exit, and neighborhood bus routes I frequent are mostly between the West Oakland BART Station and the Fruitvale BART Station. While I recognize the ways in which East Oakland is often left out of Oakland discourses, my project centers the Western part of Oakland to explore how the most gentrified sections of Oakland are experienced by Black women, whose daily encounters with the aftermath of gentrification expose the ongoing confrontation between Black women and the city.⁷⁷

My project builds upon a genealogy of Black feminist anthropology to expand the ways we think about reading, writing, and theorizing Black women's intimate lives. I argue that, by excavating richly nuanced detail from the sacred lives of everyday Black women and "ordinary Black girls,"⁷⁸ we expand our conception of feminist anthropology when conducted at the margins of the margins. By centering care practices of the uncared-for, and by illuminating the life-making praxis of women marked for social death⁷⁹, I work to reframe limiting notions of urban anthropology to shift the ethnographic gaze from a pathologized Black femme subject to a complexly curated and artfully autonomous one.

⁷⁶ At the start of my work, I had not planned to engage unhoused Black women, yet being in my neighborhood with the encampment two doors down became a central part of my healing community, and therefore forced my work to expand to center their healing narratives. My project then became about unhoused and housing insecure Black women, as I realized just how much housing insecurity plagued Black women in my community to various degrees. I engage housing insecurity on a spectrum, and define it as any Black womxn who at any point during my data collection process fell within one of the following categories: unhoused, living in a car, living in a tent, living in between homes, having no secure place to live with guarantee of sustainability and longevity, having a desire to live on their own yet currently living with family or friends due to an inability to afford rent, home payments (rent or mortgage) that required over half of their monthly income. This spectrum speaks to the impossibility of housing security for Black folks, and Black women in particular, amidst contemporary Bay Area gentrification.

⁷⁷ Across this project, I use *The Town* to refer to Oakland, as it is the term most affectionately used in the Bay Area that refers to Oakland, in opposition to *The City*, which refers to San Francisco. When *The City* is used with capital letters, it refers to San Francisco, however when I write the city in all lowercase letters, it refers to Oakland, and points to the city-fication and urbanization of Oakland's contested space.

⁷⁸ Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary," 4.

⁷⁹ Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary."

chapter summary

The dissertation is organized into six parts: Ground Zero: *The Welcome*, Part One: *The Body and The Town*, Part Two: *The Home and The Self*, Part Three: *The Circle and the Sisters*, Part Four: *The Ancestors and the Astral Plane*, and Part Five: *The Departure*. At the beginning of Parts One through Four, there is an interlude that offers insight into the methodological and theoretical choices that inform each preceding chapter. Each chapter is a creative compilation of vignettes that offer snapshots into Black women's healing spaces, and while the interludes engage more in academic discourses, the chapters are written in narrative form in attempts to enhance accessibility for nonacademic readers. Ground Zero and Part Five serve as the introduction and conclusion of the text, which offer bookending reflections on the stakes of this project.

Ground Zero features an Author's Note, an Introduction, and a Methodological Prelude. The Author's Note offers autoethnographic reflections on my intentions for this work, and clarifies my multiple intended audiences. The Introduction section lays the foundation for the theoretical impetus for the project. The Methodological Prelude introduces my interdisciplinary methodological approach to the work, and details the ethical necessity for stretching and expanding traditional methodologies when researching the intimate and interior lives of unhoused and housing-insecure Black women. Additionally, it offers an overview of each interlude's intent.

Chapter one traces everyday encounters between Black women in city publics, mapping the quotidian movement of our curated bodies to show how micro-moments of homegirl exchange reconfigure the gentrified urban landscape. I explore the ways in which embodied style narratives⁸⁰ inspire round the way Black girls' encounters with each other in passing as we move through routine routes of Black city life. I argue that, by curating the body as a healing space, a flesh-based canvas of sacred hood aesthetics, we invite each other to be seen, felt, and held through a familiar gaze of recognition, and inadvertently force the city to contend with our collective presence. I write about sites as mundane as the corner store, and highlight micro-moments of intimate exchange between strangers, homegirls, and friends. I argue that there is a particular way we hood girls in Oakland "dare to recognize each other . . . in a context bent on making strangers of us all."⁸¹ From life-affirming encouragement at the East Oakland Dollar Tree check out line to impromptu healing spaces curated on the 57 bus, Black women in Oakland use *I see you, Sis* as a refrain of hood girls' chorus⁸² spoken while crossing the street, waiting at the bus stop, or shopping through the discount isle. It echoes *I feel you, I acknowledge you, I carve out a corner of this contested concrete to celebrate you*.

In **Chapter two**, I shift focus from the publics of the city to the intimate interiors of home. I label Black Feminist Interior Design as a framework to examine how the material interior of a Black woman's homespace is curated alongside her own interiority. I engage homespaces as sites of study, mapping the ways Black women use sacred artistry to force small spaces to expand for their healing. Additionally, I challenge the impossibilities of home for poor Black women in Oakland who have no access to sustainable shelter, yet discover home and healing in a curatorial praxis of refusal; a process of merging theory and practice that allows for the creation of a liberatory elsewhere that serves as an alternative site of life-making amidst the confines of displacement. I map the ways unhoused and housing insecure Black women use sacred artistry to force spaces to expand for our wellness. I frame houselessness as a state sanctioned domestic violence, and center the ways my unhoused

⁸⁰ Carol Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

⁸¹ Jaqui M. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Duke University Press), 279.

⁸² Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

homegirls design concrete for care, transforming decimated city blocks into safe-havens of healing. More broadly, I assert that the homespace is a reflection of the self space and the communal space. The affective sense of connection and rootedness from artfully curated collective space inspires the design of our homes. Our homespaces exist in dialectic exchange with communal spaces, which expand our capacity to “become more fully present”⁸³ with our interior worlds.

Chapter three explores the curatorial process of communal healing spaces. I examine how these spaces are curated, designed, and implemented, and how Black women bring their homespaces into these communal spaces. I think about how Black women bring items from their homespace—altar pieces from grandmothers’ jewelry box or a flower print dashiki cloth with deep rooted meaning—to collectively design a communal creative site of care that is birthed from the collective culmination of each item, each item carrying with it a story in and of itself. When all of these stories come together, through each item and through our own embodied memories, we curate a mosaic of Black femme healing that has the power to transform each of our own internal worlds. From Twerk Church dance classes to monthly Self.o.lo.gy Sunday sista-circles, I examine the creative space making practices that inform Black women’s sacred convenings. I use creativity as the center of my analysis, and write about rituals of memory and mourning that occur within these spaces, and the joy and levity they make possible. Within these enclosed sista circle style gatherings, I think about the ways in which Black women invite each other into a praxis of intimate sisterhood that lends itself to the healing of deep wounds. I use *Black feminist creative space making as methodology*, hosting a monthly #BlackWomxnHealing space and an accompanying bi-annual exhibition inspired by the various sista circles I attend on a regular basis. As I curate each space with deep intention, my installation praxis becomes the connective tissue for my data collection process, as the space I curate serves as both a site of study and an object of study simultaneously.⁸⁴

Chapter four concludes by reading the body, the city, the homespace and the communal space as portals into unseeable locales of interior and ancestral healing. I provide an analysis of the ghetto as sacred, and the sacred as ghetto. Here I frame ghetto as the process of “making something out of nothing,”⁸⁵ the ingenious creativity of curating spaces of care within the confines of structural violence. By mapping sanctity onto the round the way, and mapping the ghetto onto sanctity, I work to open up understandings of everyday space making by locating transcendence within the neglected underworlds of Black women’s intimate and interior lives. Additionally, I theorize metaphysical sites of healing, and primarily focus on two primary sites—the ancestral astral plane and the inner[BlackGirl]child. Using palimpsest as a theory of the ever pervasive past that “disrupts the present,” I think about how histories of Black femme trauma are mapped onto Black women’s bodies. These histories, pasts of our own life and the lives we have inherited from ancestors, perpetuate the wounds of grief and mourning. Each site mapped in previous chapters is now interrogated more deeply through the lens of metaphysics.

In closing, **Part Five** features an epilogue that exposes the heightened precarity faced by unhoused and housing insecure Black women in Oakland amidst the global pandemic in 2020, and my move to San Francisco in its wake. The epilogue grapples with my own positionality as a researcher who is a member of beloved healing community, yet has the privilege and access to leave The Town when it

⁸³ Goler, *Increasing Wellbeing through Contemplative Practices*, 231.

⁸⁴ In McMillan’s *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, he cites a genealogy of unconventional, autotheoretical Black feminist artistry. My methods are inspired by his framework. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (NYU Press, 2015).

⁸⁵ D. Alexander, *Are Black People Cooler Than White People* (Utne Reader, 1997).

gets too heavy. I ask, how do navigations of safety, healing, and well-being influence desires for mobility? What does my own access to mobility mean for the work I do for, by and with Black women in Oakland?



Figure 4. the opacity of the everyday round the way blackgirl nature goddess, captured by @sydneyee (Sydney Forneret, The Daughter of Mother Earth, April 29, 2019, <https://www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus>).

methodological prelude

Girl, this project is really just me,

kickin' it with my homegirls,

healin' with my sisters,

and writin' about it.

-reelaviolette⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Me, tellin my homegirl what I do in grad school.

My intervention is both theoretical and methodological. At the heart of this project, there is a deep interrogation of the research process itself. Every narrative and encounter I illustrate leans into fundamental questions about how a radical Black feminist ethic of care⁸⁷ might be used to collect and present data more responsibly to audiences “within and beyond the academy.”⁸⁸ Hence, I label this work an ethnographic curation because it is a sacred gathering of people and places that I assemble with deep care and intention. I compile an assemblage of scenes, testaments to the multiple scales of Black women’s healing spaces, and the layered methods required to examine them accountably.

I remix ethnographic methods of participant observation, focus groups, and interviewing by turning towards new modalities for naming and engaging these practices. For instance, I rethink participant observation in ways that stretch its capacity and make space for a round the way communal sense. Instead of formal focus groups, I use a methodology of Black feminist space making which views communal healing circles and sacred spaces as sites of rich theoretical dialogue. My interviews are casual, everyday, and informal, in that they encapsulate the everyday dialogues exchanged between homegirls and friends outside the limitations of the research context.

In *Soul Talk: the New Spirituality of African American Women*⁸⁹, Akasha T. Hull conducts a series of interviews with women who are dear friends and mentors. Alongside her model of exchange, which centers sisterhood and first person accounts as central to her data collection, I also use *Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research With Black Women*⁹⁰ to critique the traditional academic model of interviewing. The traditional ethnographic “interview” often closes off the possibility for deep connection, as it requires the interviewee to be deeply interrogated while the interviewer refrains from revealing their own relationship to the questions they ask. In a desire to reimagine what a dialogue of sisterhood might look like within my project, I reframe my interview process as an opportunity to bond more deeply with the Black women I wish to learn from, for my research and for my life. Beyond providing space to vent, I want these women to feel my deep investment in their healing processes, not as a researcher but as a homegirl, a sister, a friend. I take very seriously the opportunity to give to them as they give to me.

I also think about everyday sites of creativity, like hair braiding, as sites of rich analysis. In *Black Feminist Anthropology*, Irma McClaurin argues that a praxis of radical Black feminist ethnography centers the theoretical interventions of the folks around the way. She includes the “beauty shop therapists”⁹¹ as scholars who make necessary intellectual interventions that expand the way we know what we know in the world. In *PsychoHairapy: Using Hair as an Entry Point into Black Women’s Spiritual and Mental Health*, Dr. Afiya Mbilishaka argues that PsychoHairapy is “a community health model created to secure space for Black women to address mental health and well-being through hair care.”⁹² In conversation with the two, I think about how my hair braiders’ wisdom provides a deeply spiritual and radically critical analysis of Black women’s healing spaces. I am most interested in the ways in which the process of a collectively curated site of creation (my hair) becomes an entry point into collectively curated theories that shift the way we think about Black womanhood and wellness

⁸⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 1990).

⁸⁸ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 4.

⁸⁹ Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Inner Traditions International, Vermont, 2001), 150.

⁹⁰ April L. Few, Dionne P. Stephens, and Marlo Rouse-Arnett, “Sister-to-sister talk: Transcending boundaries and challenges in qualitative research with Black women,” *Family Relations* 52, no. 3 (2003): 205-215.

⁹¹ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*, 4.

⁹² Afiya Mbilishaka, “PsychoHairapy: Using Hair as an Entry Point into Black Women’s Spiritual and Mental Health,” *Meridians* 16, no. 2 (2018): 382–392. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.16.2.19>.

in the wake of palimpsestic remnants of antiBlack violence. I also engage Patricia Hill Collins's theory on Black feminist sisterhood to explore how intimately nurturing bonds between Black women allow for personal and communal transformation.

Additionally, I use communally centered terms that rupture the binary of researcher and researched in order to reframe my own proximity to the people I engage in this work. I call my interviews sister to sister dialogues, as they are simply our everyday interactions studied for research purposes. They take place in the settings where I convene with my sisters, in the language we communicate in, on the topics we speak on regularly. As opposed to labeling my fieldwork interactions as participant observation, I think through my embodied movement through Oakland alongside my kickin' it in community to frame the majority of my fieldwork. Like Ruth Nicole Brown in *Hear Our Truths: the Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*,⁹³ I call my research respondents my homegirls, not simply for my research, but also in real life, as this is the language I use to communicate with the women who have become dear friends to me beyond the bounds of this research process.

In *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith defines homegirl as "the girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with."⁹⁴ In citing Alice Walker's definition of womanist,⁹⁵ Smith plays on the terms girl and woman to identify a community of sisterhood that is both "grown-up" and "girlish," a reclamation of the girlhood process of growing up and becoming grown, while cherishing girlhood sentimentality. I can recall my mother yellin "homegirl!" on the phone with her Detroit crew, her homegirls yellin back from the other side of the concrete, "homegirl!" That homegirl call has been passed down in my family like a matrilineal heirloom from one generation to the next.

While I came of age on Philly concrete, I like to say that Oakland raised me, since this city taught me to embrace aspects of my round the way Black girlness in ways I had never been given permission to before. I like to think that I am still coming of age, even in my mid to late twenties, in this city that has adopted me, in this place I have been proud to call my home, with the women who have embraced me as their homegirl. *No, I ain't from around here but I always feel like my Oakland homegirls adopted me.*

on everyday round the way blackgirl methodology

My hybrid methodology, which I call an "**Everyday Round the Way**⁹⁶ **Blackgirl Methodology**," is a fusion of methods for collecting data, presenting data, and grounding data. Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology asserts that the sacred is ghetto and the ghetto is sacred, thus the methods we use to study sites of hood encounters, aesthetics, and politics must honor the sanctity of everyday Black women's lives.⁹⁷ Building on Black feminist methodological frameworks by Savannah

⁹³ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁹⁴ Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Rutgers University Press, 1983), xxiv.

⁹⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Harcourt, 1983), xi.

⁹⁶ In 1990, LL Cool J released his award-winning song, *Around the Way Girl*, which celebrated the fly girls he saw on a daily basis in his neighborhood. *Around the Way Girl* became a term that honored Black women and girls whose aesthetic flare affirmed cultural connections to Black urban communities. In 2017, Taraji P. Henson released her memoir, entitled *Around the Way Girl: A Memoir*. Her memoir narrates an everyday round the way ethic and politic that inspires my framing of my methodological approach to this project. Taraji P. Henson, *Around the Way Girl: A Memoir* (371NK Atria, 2016).

⁹⁷ Throughout this text, I use the terms everyday round the way Blackgirls, ghetto Blackgirls, hood Blackgirls, and poor Black women. While these terms are related, they are not synonyms nor are they interchangeable. Everyday round the way points more to the linguistic and aesthetic presentations of hood ethics. While it is a geographic term that points to the sites in which these embodied representations are produced, I use it most here to signal the embodied interpretations of these hood ethics that get passed down between homegirls, cousins, and communities. Thus, my use of everyday round the way is about a way of being in the world as, what Yaba Blay calls, a "Professional Black Girl." This way of being is rooted in a celebration of ghetto culture and hood ethics. When naming poor Black women, there is an explicit pointing to the conditions that capitalism creates,

Shange⁹⁸, Aimee Meredith Cox⁹⁹, Ruth Nicole Brown¹⁰⁰, and the Crunk Black Feminist Collective¹⁰¹, I utilize this form of “Black girl methodology [as] an ethical mode of refusal”¹⁰² that “pay[s] close and generous attention to the quotidian spaces of meaning making that Black [women] enliven and invent.”¹⁰³ Alongside Dr. Yaba Blay’s *Professional Black Girl*, I think through how a shared praxis of visible selfhood invite us into ways of belonging that is both affirming and celebratory. I model this practice of exchange and reciprocity, as I illuminate and mirror the sharing of self, space, and slay that make up our in motion encounters throughout the city.

Deeply inspired by Dr. Yaba Blay’s *Professional Black Girl*¹⁰⁴, I define **Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology** as a critical interrogation of selfhood, sisterhood, exchange, and encounter that captures the innovative richness of Black women’s intimate lives, with a particular focus on those whose daily practice of being Black and woman in the world disrupts normative aesthetics of respectability.¹⁰⁵ I argue that in these practices we find alternative liberatory modes for healing ourselves.

Everyday round the way Blackgirl methodology is a mode of studying Black women’s intimate lives that unapologetically centers the disrespectability¹⁰⁶ of our language, tonality, register, aesthetic, praxis, and curation in order to expand the conceptual and expressive limits of academic form. Inspired by an everyday round the way Blackgirl method of living, modeled by my homegirls and me, this methodology combines life methods with research methods to think critically about what it means to practice an autoethnographic Black feminist ethic of care. Additionally, my work situates the vibe of the round the way Blackgirls at the center of my analysis because we are the ones who exist not only at the margins of respectability but simultaneously at the margins of academic Black womanhood. While many Black women scholars have researched the anti-respectability politics of Black women they research, there is very little space within the academy to talk as a researcher about being both hood and hooded/ ghetto and doctoral, and even less space to have these discussions within the context of theoretical interventions. Thus, I ask, what would it look like and feel like to center every day round the way Black girls in a discourse of Black women’s healing?¹⁰⁷

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and the im/possibilities of survival informed by lack of access to housing, health care, and state sanctioned networks of support. While ghetto and hood are at times used interchangeably, they point to the relationality between the aesthetics of round the way celebration and the conditions that produced them.

⁹⁸ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

⁹⁹ Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *Hearing Our Truths*.

¹⁰¹ Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (Feminist Press, 2017).

¹⁰² Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary,” 4.

¹⁰³ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Yaba Blay, *Professional Black Girl*, <https://professionalblackgirl.com/> (2019).

¹⁰⁵ Cooper et al., *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, xviii.

¹⁰⁶ Cooper et al., *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, xviii.

¹⁰⁷ Even as I proudly proclaim an everyday round the way Black girl method for researching and for living, I wonder about the limitations of being this unapologetic as a Black woman. What would it mean for us to give Black women the same permission we give Black girls to be unruly and disrespectful? What we know within the constraints of late neo-liberal capitalism is that, even while Black girls are often hyper criminalized and treated as grown women when they are children, the consequences for Black women showing up in the world as our full selves is greater. It is our responsibility to be employable so we might feed and clothe ourselves and potentially our families as well. Employability is largely framed by an ability to meet normative expectations of capitalist white supremacy, i.e., respectability. Hence, when Savannah Shange states that “Black excess” leads to “(lack of) access” (Shange, 18) she points to Black children’s failure to meet expectations of the state for proper performativity. What are the consequences for these failures among adult Black women? What are the consequences for being an everyday round the way Black girl as a grown up Black woman on the job? What is we are too much round the way in all the wrong places? What is a stake when we assimilate into a performance of respectability and what is at stake when we do not? Who has the freedom to show up as themselves in the day to day roles they play and who does not? How is this deeply classed, in that being marked unemployable marks round the way girls as having limited access to sustainable income, housing, survival? Who has to perform for whiteness in order to keep their job and to keep the lights on? While my work is not seeking to have an answer for these questions, I feel it necessary to pose them within a framework of limitations and possibility.

Below, I introduce the following methodological tools within the Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology framework¹⁰⁸:

Methods for Collecting Data¹⁰⁹

1. Round the Way Ethics of Care
2. Kickin' It In Community
3. Round the Way Encounters
4. Black Feminist Interior Design
5. Space Making as Methodology
6. A Methodology of the Black Feminist Sacred

Methods for Presenting Data

1. Poetics of Blackgirl Autoethnography + Linguistic Refusal
2. Black Feminist Ethnomedia

Methods for Grounding Data

1. Centering Black Women's Black Girlhoods
2. Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology as A Method for Living

Each of these methods is a renaming, reworking, or reconfiguring of methods that exist within multiple fields, including critical ethnography, performance studies, American studies, curatorial studies, Black studies, and Feminist Studies. I work to build upon, stretch, and sometimes totally reconfigure the ways in which these traditional methods are engaged by blending an everyday round the way ethic and sensibility with a rigorously methodical approach. Thus, these methods are not solely inventions of my own, but a compilation of scholarly and hood methods molded by the chorus¹¹⁰ of homegirls who demanded I see them through a different lens. Black feminist scholarship has given me the language and the tools for engagement in the field, yet it was the sis who asked, “so how you gon write me up boo?,” or the town healer who asked, “what that doctorate got to do with me?” that led me to merge, blend, and restructure my orientation to academic writing altogether. Hence, these methods are deeply rooted in Black feminist study¹¹¹, and

¹⁰⁸ In the appendix, I offer a more detailed description of each method.

¹⁰⁹ Each methodological interlude details these methods more in depth.

¹¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* names “the chorus” as “all the unnamed young women of the city trying to find a way to live and in search of beauty.” In a similar way, I view the chorus of Black women who inform this work as a collective of voices that inform my writing process, and it is these women who I remain most accountable to in my work. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your mother : a Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

¹¹¹ Imhotep and baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*.

most essentially inspired by five years of being in deep community with Black women healing in Oakland.

Round the Way Ethics of Care grounds my intention for this work. It is a simple idea—how we treat the Black women we work with matters most. Yet I did not quite understand what this meant until I got into “the field” and had a difficult time distinguishing between “the field” and my everyday life. Because being a Black woman healing studying Black women healing made it hard to know the boundaries between my project, my community, and myself. In many ways this was a beautiful blurring of lines that represented the intentional merging I had cultivated for my life. When I began shifting my lens from the academy towards my people, the Black women I claim to center, my process began looking very different. I decided that central to this project would be a decolonization of method, a radical shift in the tools with which we use to enter Black spaces in Black bodies. This shift led me to frame what I call a round the way ethic of care, an agreement made with myself to always do my work in ways that center my people first and foremost.

I expand upon Patricia Hill Collins’s “ethic of caring”¹¹² by grounding my work in a round the way ethic of care. Hill Collins frames a Black feminist ethic of caring as one that centers empathy, feelings, and emotions.¹¹³ With a focus on the aspects of integrity that ground an ethic of caring, my round the way ethic is one that seeks to keep it 100, one that requires accountability to a community that raised you, that stakes claims to you, that you stake claims to. My mama raised me to, as we say where I’m from, not do nothing shady, sheisty, or grimy. My politic of accountability in this work means not doing anything that would jeopardize friendships or relationships with those I love and respect. If I cannot hand every single woman who informed this work a copy of my text and feel proud of how I portrayed her, I don’t want it. Thus, I engage in a process of member-checking¹¹⁴, where I send my homegirls who are featured in this work a copy of each section where they are highlighted, and receive their feedback about what they might like me to change, add, or shift. This helps me to stay accountable to their dreams, intentions, and desires for this work.

Another central component of my Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology is an ethnographic approach to the research field that I call **Kickin’ It In Community**. In *Shapeshifters*, Aimee Meredith Cox discusses “co-performative witnessing”¹¹⁵ as a method of study that “expand[s] on the nature of the connections and commitments that emerge in the ethnographic process within methodologies typically captured under the term *participant observation*.”¹¹⁶ She argues “co-performative witnessing . . . requires us to do ‘what others do *with* them inside the politics of their locations, the economies of their desires and their constraints, and most importantly, inside the materiality of their struggles and consequences.”¹¹⁷ Similar to the spirit of her methodological investments, my work expands the traditional use of participant observation to make more room for communal reciprocity.

Kickin’ it in community is my way of framing participant observation within communal spaces. A professor of mine once said that ethnography “is a fancy way of saying deep hanging out.”¹¹⁸ In

¹¹² Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief*, ed. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (AltaMira Press, 2003), 62.

¹¹³ Collins, “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” 62.

¹¹⁴ Few et al., “Sister-to-sister talk.”

¹¹⁵ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 32.

¹¹⁶ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 32.

¹¹⁷ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 32.

¹¹⁸ Ivy Mills, UC Berkeley’s Infrastructural Imaginaries Graduate Seminar, Art History Department, Fall 2019.

other words, kickin' it in community is my form of deep hanging out. It is being hella present with the people whose openness to sharing their lives makes your work possible. It is the act of grounding my sense of self in the web of entangled love and care that captures the essence of the place I study. It is an awareness of the fact that myself and my folks are "all in this beautiful mess together. And only together [can] we craft models for different, more life-honoring ways of living."¹¹⁹ Round the way encounters made kickin' it in community possible for me. Kickin' it in community enlivened my round the way encounters. What might begin as a round the way encounter becomes stayin' a while.

In a more literal sense, my method of kickin' it in community has looked like living the life I would have lived whether or not I was engaging this research project. I attended all the events I woulda went to anyway, met all the homegirls I woulda met anyway, lived my life as a Black woman healing in Oakland, and wrote my research from that place. I signed up for every listserve that resonated with me and checked my inbox frequently for any events related to Black women and healing. I went to every single one my schedule would allow. The silent retreats, the yoga retreats, the sound healing retreats, the meditation retreats, the writing retreats, the creative art spaces, the exhibition openings, the open mic nights, the radical pleasure and play gatherings—I did it all.

Kickin' it in community, for me, also meant being where my spirit felt safe to heal. In other words, it was a subjective process. There were spaces I entered that were named "Black women's healing spaces," that were transformative for folks I loved, that made me feel unsafe and unwelcomed. My spirit did not allow me to frequent these spaces, for fear of forcing intimacy where it was not wanted/ accepted/ possible. While I wish to write honestly about the failures and the slippages of healing spaces, it was also crucial for me that this work be spirit-led. Those events, those communities, and those spaces deserve to be written about, and if any other Black woman healing in Oakland were writing this, she may have centered them. However, what I learned from those spaces was to appreciate the sites where I did feel safe enough to be my full whole self. After moving through Black women's healing communities and settling in spaces where my spirit felt most safe, I cultivated deep friendships within the communal spaces that inform this work.

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Subsequently, each chapter employs its own methodological emphasis and begins with a Methodological Interlude that details the theoretical necessity for utilizing a particular combination of methods to best respond to a set of complex questions. This Methodological Prelude introduces the components of Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology. Chapter One's Interlude takes up **Round the Way Encounters** as sites of rigorous study, where I interrogate my own embodied presence in relation to other Black women in public and communal space. Chapter Two's Interlude explores **Black Feminist Interior Design** and Home Making in a context where home is constantly shifting and precarious. Chapter Three's Interlude expands possibilities for **Space Making as Methodology**, particularly the ways in which Black feminist researchers' curation of shared space is a research method in itself. Chapter Four's Interlude engages **A Methodology of the Black Feminist Sacred** to explore how material sites can function as portals into ancestral and interior rememory.¹²⁰ I conclude with reflections on what this compilation of approaches to Black feminist study might open up for future work in the field.

¹¹⁹ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 32.

¹²⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*.

My use of **A Poetics of Blackgirl Autoethnography** bridges Robin M. Boylorn's Blackgirl Autoethnography¹²¹ with Katherine McKittrick's Black feminist poetics of landscape¹²² to produce a poetically geographic and personally intimate writing. I write transparently about who I am and how I move through this work, relying on poetry to communicate the depths of sentimentality that traditional academic writing does not allow for. In other words, I write out my process, and I process in poetry.

This project is a disillusioned dialogue between the two worlds I frequent, the academy and the Black spatial imaginary made real through the ghetto girl practice of healing oneself in the midst of an antiBlackwoman city/ nation state/ world. I write as a Black feminist autoethnographer, placing a poetics of reflexive transparency in conversation with sensory storytelling to illustrate my navigation through contested sites of communal care. As Irma McClaurin states in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*:

blending the grounded, detailed descriptions that come from ethnography with the poetics of autobiography to create autoethnography offers Black feminist anthropologists a suitable genre through which we may express ourselves and our experiences as 'natives' in the field among our communities.¹²³

I view these forms of poetics and storytelling as expansive tools that might hold the complexities of exchange across spaces, particularly between Black women's interior lives and my own interior life, in ways that traditional academic writing cannot.¹²⁴

An autoethnographic blackgirl poetics lets me talk freely about rememory¹²⁵ and all that was lost in the afterlife of enslavement, lets me read multiple time periods as one, and allows me to map spaces and times on top of each other in all the ways they occur at once in me. A poetics of transparency, rooted in Black feminist care, opens up new modes of telling the stories that must be told with delicacy, must be treated as precious as the archive of the heart that can only be held in song. A poetics of reflexive self knowing lets me talk about how I sing to my memories, and how they respond to me, and how that is what brought me to this writing.

Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Cade Bambara taught me how to write in ways that would not shame my ancestors—in all the ways that are true. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Saidiya Hartman, and M. Jacqui Alexander taught me to merge my academic research with the beauty of a Black girl tongue, to trace the stories unapologetically in poetry, to never not write from that place. Like Gumbs, who writes of “nameless women in unknown places who were laughing and looking sideways at each other and a world that couldn't understand them,”¹²⁶ I experiment with new ways of communicating care through syllabled song. Like Hartman's *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments*, which she calls “a narrative written from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia,” my work is a “fugitive text of the wayward.”¹²⁷ I, too write for myself and for “all the [women] living novelistic lives with no arc or ark to save them.”¹²⁸

¹²¹ Robin Boylorn, “On Being at Home With Myself: Blackgirl Autoethnography as Research Praxis,” *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (Spring 2016): 44-58. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2016.9.1.44>.

¹²² Katherine McKittrick, *Commentary: Worn out*, *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2017).

¹²³ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*, 71.

¹²⁴ Boylorn, *Sweetwater*.

¹²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987.; Morrison, Toni. The Site of Memory. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83-102

¹²⁶ Gumbs, *Spill*.

¹²⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, xiv.

¹²⁸ Gumbs, *Spill*, xi.

My process of **Linguistic Refusal** rejects respectability within this site of professionalization that demands assimilation for upward mobility. My writing mirrors an embodied practice, as my dress and language work in tandem to disavow the gaze of academia. I place this praxis in conversation with the mirrored aesthetic of Black women who do not have access to this space, yet know in their movement throughout the city that their self-presentation is disdained and policed by state sanctioned forces with values similar to those of the academy. The academy, whose logics mirror that of the state, works to keep us disjointed, dismembered, and untrue to that which comes natural to us.

“Embrac[ing] the critiques, ideas, metaphors, wisdom, and grounded theories of organic intellectuals in the form of . . . street-corner philosophers . . . and beauty shop therapists alike,”¹²⁹ I argue that the capaciousness of these women’s narratives requires the dissertation to extend beyond normative scholarly conventions, as these stories can only be adequately told through a process that disrupts expectations about discipline, registry, medium, and form. I insert the lexicon of everyday round the way shared language into scholastic literary work. I use Zora Neal Hurston’s articulation of folk language as a model, as she centers the voices of folks in her community in their raw form, without translating for an audience who would not comprehend its complexity.¹³⁰

I also reveal my own linguistic nuances by writing in the tone—and sometimes with the words—I use with my homegirls. In certain parts of this work, I write their voice and my voice the same, illustrating the intricacies of the shared language we speak. I wonder, if I let the g’s get cut off from the ends of their words, and let their vowels slur in my typing up of their quotes, how could I not also write my voice the same?

I wrestle with the challenges of enacting such disruptions while operating within the constraints of the academy. I am not so much interested in the academy’s failure to understand us, as I know they never will, and that is not a project I am invested in. I am much more invested in us understanding each other, recognizing each other, and caring for each other in sisterhood and healing. However, in the process of writing between two worlds, translations will get lost. Within my practice of linguistic refusal, Black women and girls I am accountable to will not understand the words used to weave their stories between two contested spaces, even as I attempt to write for them. While the Eurocentric male-dominant academy would assert that my homegirls’ inability to comprehend excessive academic language is a measure of their inability to comprehend complex theory, they are in fact the primary producers of groundbreaking theory in this work.¹³¹ It is the ways in which I am asked to make the depths of their theories legible to the academy that prevent them from recognizing their own brilliance within the context of my written transcriptions of their lives.

Thus, grounded in this politic of Linguistic Refusal, the chapters provide narrative-based insight into the intimate lives of Black women healing in Oakland. They are written in deliberately accessible prose to appeal to a broad range of communities within and beyond the academy, including the many folks who may want to read about themselves in the stories I document. The interludes between chapters provide an entry point into the messiness, the slippages, and the entanglements of collecting and writing up data in a way that contextualizes it within the broader discourses of urban studies, Black studies, Black geographies, Black feminist ethnomedia, and mental health studies; they

¹²⁹ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*, 4.

¹³⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1942).

¹³¹ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Smith, *Home Girls*.

are a creative bridge between my theoretical and methodological interventions, which inform the story-based analysis found in the chapters.

I define **Black Feminist Ethnomedia** as a compilation of digital humanities based creative approaches used to study Black women's artistic modes of life making. I use the creative as an entry point into the theoretical by centering various media art forms as research, from adornment on the body to informal communal architecture curated in the town/ sister circle/ home. The myriad of ways I merge a multiplicity of methods together opens up space for the textured complexities found in these Black women's healing spaces I explore.

Very little has been written about genealogies of Black feminist visual artists. In the contemporary moment, when heightened focus and institutional funding is being rapidly redirected towards initiatives that support Black art in ways that have not occurred in the history of the art world, there is a resurgence of discourse centered on Black women artists. In *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* and *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Aruna D'souza and Uri McMillan trace the historic erasures of Black art within the museum space. They center Black women artists like Adrienne Piper and Howerdena Pindell, whose art paved the way for contemporary museum exhibited artists like Kenyatta Hinkle and Simone Leigh. While the energy around financially funding Black women's art in ways that have never been made possible before is extremely exciting and necessary, my work turns towards the hood artists whose work has not been seen as theoretically rigorous enough for the museum space, or who, like me, are more invested in locating curatorial sites for Black art to live outside of predominantly white institutions.

I have great respect for renowned artists like Hinkle and Leigh whose fugitive praxis of utilizing institutional funding makes community art initiatives possible. I view my own fugitive methodological praxis of Black feminist space making as an extension of their methods to use white money for Black liberation. Yet, this text is less invested in that particular conversation. This text works to locate art that exists within everyday Blackness, the sites where artists like my homegirls' dwell, the spaces where experimental, amateur, radical, and liberatory art is made, the places that ain't no museum checkin' for. Thus, I ask, what might it mean to reject academia's elitist longings to find Black women's healing art in the museum and to instead turn to the homegirls whose 'fro and lip let you feel like it is okay to step into any room representing yourself in ways that feel affirming of your truth?

Central to this project is the artistry of survival, the claim that Black women curate for our healing. I read everyday round the way Black girl creative production as theory to illustrate how our hood art making practices make our healing possible. Woven throughout this text are images of Black girl ordinary, Black girl magic, Blackgirl autoethnography, and Black feminist curations of space making. Whether it be embodied productions of selfhood read through a Black feminist geographic framing, a collage of Black women's magazine images theorized as aesthetic resistance, or a self-published chapbook read alongside *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, each form of artistry offers critical insight into my research questions. In conversation with Carol Tulloch's *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* and Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, I think about how we Black women artists use our bodies as a canvas to paint the town all the colors that represent our slay. As Tulloch asserts, where we make art, how we make art, and how we be art all become crucial aspects for our reimagining of the world. In the spirit of Ruth

Nicole Brown's anti-narrative photo-poem¹³², I write alongside visual art that grounds and enhances my theoretical interventions.

Many of the local artists featured are my homegirls, my sisters, my dear friends, the women whose homes I cried at, whose couch I sat on getting my hair braided, whose insistence on seeing me set me free. Sharing their work with you is deeply sacred. I place their art in conversation with theoretical interventions like Beyoncé's *Lemonade Visual Album*, music videos from Solange Knowles' *A Seat at the Table*, Terri McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. In conversation with Ruth Nicole Brown's framing of the "creative potential of Black girlhood," where she defines her "performative and creative methodology" as one that aims to "showcase Black girl inventiveness of form and content,"¹³³ I place my homegirls' art on display.

Citing my homegirls and our idols becomes a core part of my round the way ethic, in that it makes space for the brilliance of the folks whose theories are often labeled nonacademic, due to their tone and also their form. Here, I lean into breaking form not only linguistically but also visually, using up and coming and first-time photographers, videographers, painters, and the like to celebrate all the beautiful shit we make that keeps us alive.

I embrace the experimentality of our creativity, the amateurism of our art practice next to the professionalized gloss of the women who inspire us to make our art, whose albums we play in the background as we make our art, laid out on the carpet of a studio apartment. I place my homegirls' poetry and prose and short stories next to my other homegirls' collage of Nia Wilson, next to my video art about healing at home. Together we curate an assemblage of creative texts, an ensemble of multimedia hood humanities. Our art making becomes a spiritual practice of self making, home making, and world making. It merges times and spaces, from the physical to the metaphysical, and blends together the complex nuances of our lives.

Additionally, each dissertation chapter corresponds with a virtual essay, housed at www.blackwomxnhealing.com/dissertation, that articulates my research findings on Black feminist visions through prose and poetry, accompanied by my homegirls' artwork. In this way, my work combines digital humanities and ethnographic data based on experimental visual culture studies to produce literary work that lives beyond the page. This platform blends the multimedia digital humanities with Blackgirl autoethnography. It is a site for conversation, where my academic ideas are made legible to a wider audience. Housed on StoryMap, a digitized scholarship platform, these two genres provide a richly immersive experience of my work.

I use digital platforms to make this work legible beyond the page. I am inspired by Ruth Nicole Brown's solhot.com, where she curates a multimedia display of her scholastic work and centers the artistry of Black girls who inform her research. I am also inspired by Christen Smith's use of afroparadise.com, and her citations of the digital platform within the text of her book. Both of these authors provide multiple modes of knowledge production and distribution, merging creativity and the arts with digital mediums to make academic ideas more accessible. Additionally, I remain inspired by professionalblackgirl.com as a digital space for and by "everyday, round the way Black girl" creative expression. Dr. Yaba Blay illustrates a total disinvestment from the academic gaze, and has no interest in forging her platform for legibility to multiple audiences. She is clear about the

¹³² Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 3.

¹³³ Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 3.

website's aim to assert a round the way ethic of care throughout, making space for the unapologetic celebration of all that is Black, woman, hood, and *we*.

By **centering Black Women's Black Girlhoods**, I engage a praxis of inner[blackgirl]child¹³⁴ healing within the affirmation of the term *girl* as it is used throughout this text. Engaging the round the way as a physical and metaphysical site of belonging, it becomes a geographic site of origins from which this text and the Black women it speak from, unapologetically remaining authentic to the sound of voice, color streak of hair, hand on hip and natural sass of ghetto Black womanhood. But meaningful conversations about Black womanhood are often also necessarily conversations about Black girlhood. Oakland taught me to embrace the round the way Black girl in me. As a first year Masters student at UCLA, I remember putting so much effort into making myself invisible. Wearing the frumpiest clothes I could pull together in my closet so that no one would judge me, I just wanted to look smart. I had never seen anyone dress like me and be labeled smart, so I shifted my presentation of self with hopes of being embraced as a scholar. Two years later, on my first day of graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, I wore exactly what I wanted - some fly combination of Rainbow, Beauty Supply and Fashion Nova. Oakland had emboldened me. Witnessing everyday round the way Black girls wear whatever they want wherever they went gave me permission to do the same, and taught me to enter into every room as my full unapologetic self, from the graduate seminar to the sista circle.

What I value most of all about this practice is our embrace of Black girlhood aesthetics. Beads, barrettes, and ballies adorn the ends of Beyoncé style lemonade braids. Lips lined with hot pink and neon green, glitter lined eyes matching bold blue fingernails. The things we women are told to do when we get older - tone it down, dress more modest, wear darker colors and nudes, be more invisible, be less alive and less awake - the round the way girl finds ways to reject this performance of Black lady maturity. As Savannah Shange describes, "blackness manifests as and in excess."¹³⁵ The "excess" of our Black girlish/ womanliness¹³⁶, the too "muchness" of it, in a sense of someone calling your outfit loud, in a similar way they might call your voice loud, may be the very thing that sets you free. Bright colors, bright weaves, and neon adornments make being a grown ass woman feel like carefree Black girl joy. Just as many Black women in my work can recall their entry point into swooping baby hairs with Jam Gel, I draw upon these girlhood sites of ghetto girl origins to illuminate Black women's relationship to our own round the way origins.

By naming Black women with a round the way sensibility everyday round the way Black *girls*, I am intentional about utilizing the relationship between our girlhood as a site to reclaim our womanhood. As Shange attests, the impossibility of access to girlhood for the Black girl child creates a condition of the Black "womanchild," the unclarity between being seen as grown when you young and young when you grown. While there is a body of scholarship on the infantilization of Black women, and the degradation of our womanhood through the use of the term girl to refer to adult women, I am interested in the ways in which Black women lean on a reclamation of girlhood in aesthetic and linguistic choices that allow us to reclaim access to pieces of a childhood we were refused access to. Our use of the term "girrrrrrrlllll" when engaging each other, our rallying around #Blackgirlmagic, these all inform how we might merge our grown womanness with our inner Black girl to return more fully and wholly to ourselves.

¹³⁴ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

¹³⁵ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

¹³⁶ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

Engaging **Everyday Round the Way Blackgirl Methodology as A Method for Living** means celebrating and embracing this mode of being beyond a dissertation project, within everyday life. To be clear, a round the way girl is one who does not give a fuck about broader societal norms and expectations, one who rejects respectability in her dress, in the way she wears her hair, in how she paints her nails. In her active praxis of giving no fucks, she gets a little more free each day. She practices a breaking free from the bounds of performativity required to navigate whiteness in a world where Black being is deemed disorderly. She is the unruly, wayward¹³⁷, disrespectful Black woman who remains uninvested in the matrix of performativity that is required for mainstream acceptance in an anti-Black woman world.

An everyday round the way Black girl method of living is rooted in an anti-performance politic, a refusal to perform for whiteness and any other structures that might attempt to limit our personal freedoms. It is the bamboo earrings and the braids and the lox's swooped up in a bun and the headwraps and the patted crocheted weave, which may not be an intentional, elaborate, or deliberate agenda of radical activism against the state, that works to dismantle the logics of the state. While we may perform flyness, funk, and fierceness for each other, we do not negotiate with external pressures about who and what we are supposed to be. In the words of my dear sis Dr. Yaba Blay, we everyday round the Black girls "assert an UNAPOLOGETIC identity (#WhoGonCheckMeBoo) in a world that too often tries to tell us how we 'ought' to act. We know that 'acting' like anything other than ourselves robs us of our FREEDOM, so instead, we choose, embrace, and celebrate EXACTLY WHO WE ARE."¹³⁸ These are the women who are moving through the city unerased in the city that constantly seeks to erase them.

In emphasizing this way of being in the world that veers from societal and institutional respectability in the talk, walk, and self-fashioning of oneself, I do not wish to romanticize the layered consequences of radical ways of showing up in the world, nor do I wish to flatten the moments that require a visible engagement with state values for the sake of survival. Yet, while the dance we do between who we want to be and who we pose to be is always on a tightrope, our primary investment in life is to keep it raw, keep it real, keep it trill. I turn to Aimee Meredith Cox's assertion, that "perhaps we can develop collective strategies for living fuller, self-defined lives without the threats of extinction that attempts at living in this way generally incur when you are young and Black."¹³⁹ I am interested in the ways in which a round the way Black girl aesthetic might help to illuminate a healing praxis of self power that is predicated on one's own sense of creative self formation. I argue that the poetics of the round the way Black girl invite us into new forms of healing through unapologetic ownership of contemporary cultural aesthetics of Black womanhood in Oakland.

My engagement with everyday round the way Blackgirl modalities centers a shared aesthetic culture. Yet, in naming some of these aesthetic practices, like baby hairs and bamboo hoops, I in no way attempt to limit the aesthetic possibilities of round the way Black women. I am cautious here about reinscribing standards of beauty and desirability that get mapped onto round the way aesthetics which exclude certain round the way aesthetics and amplify others. Thus, in my use of everyday round the way Blackgirl, I affirm the baby hairs and the bonnet, the intention to slay and the lack of desire to get cute for anyone. In photographer Brittense's work (discussed more in Ch. 1), I find an inspiring model of everyday round the way Blackgirl living, in that her work displays the ways we look, and be, with each other that may or may not be for show, i.e., rollers in hair, sweats and a

¹³⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

¹³⁸ Yaba Blay, *Professional Black Girl*.

¹³⁹ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 8.

bonnet. That, too, is an everyday round the way Blackgirl slay. So, I affirm here that the everyday round the way Blackgirl does not have to always be “on,” always be laid and snatched and slaying intentionally. My engagement with everyday round the way Blackgirl methodologies celebrates all the ways we show up as our full whole selves, authentically and unapologetically.

I also want to name here how class informs an everyday round the way Blackgirl methodology. There are ways that middle class, upper class, and wealthy Black women appropriate working class black femme culture when it’s convenient for their aesthetic yet refuse to be in solidarity with / in sisterhood with ghetto Black girls, hood Black chicks, and poor Black women. That, to me, is the antithesis of an everyday round the way Blackgirl methodology, in that it reproduces middle class ethics even while engaging working class aesthetics. Hence, I want to be careful here about my framing of the everyday round the way Blackgirl and the methodology she requires for research and for living.

Everyday round the way Blackgirl methodology is not only about recognizing and affirming the embodiment of hood culture and ghetto aesthetics, it also requires a detachment from middle class standards and values. It requires affirmation of and communion with the ghetto girls that make yo slay possible. I want to make clear that I find it problematic af when middle class Black women wanna dress like hood chicks when it’s cute and cool but be the first ones to look down on and marginalize the same poor Black women that they sometimes want to look like and talk like but not be like. Thus, everyday round the way Blackgirl methodology must be anti classist, anti elitist, anti booji, or else it will be inherently antiBlack.

There is also a way that we sometimes give Black girls permission to be ghetto and ratchet in ways that we don’t allow for Black women, as if ghetto is a thing to outgrow when you become a woman. I have witnessed middle class Black women who love and affirm ghetto girl children but refuse to show the same love to ghetto girls who are grown women. It is also a testament to what is expected of us in the transition from Black girl to Black woman, in that we are to leave behind the parts of us we were taught to be most ashamed of (often those “rough around the edges”¹⁴⁰ parts of us). Thus, this reclamation of Black girlhood affirms that we can reconnect with the beauty of our own ratchet Black girlhoods and we can affirm that in all the Black women we see.

methodological inspiration

I write within a tradition of radical Black feminist thinkers whose methodological interventions rupture the way we think about how we conduct research for and by Black folks. The rich genealogy of their writing opens up my own writing and holds me in a sea of comforting ink as I curate a contemporary methodology that builds on the foundation of their interventions. From Zora Neale Hurston’s unapologetic rejection of disciplinary bounds and tonal restriction¹⁴¹, to Aimee Meredith Cox’s buoyant rendition of Black girl choreography that shifts the ways we think about ethnography¹⁴², I write with deep gratitude to each and every Black woman writer whose words make my words a possibility. Years of basking in their literary innovation has led me here. I am forever indebted to them for the risks they took on behalf of all the Black girls they never knew, including me, a lil Black girl from Philly with dreams of writing what is real. They have given me permission to write what is real so that I might make a bit more room for another Black woman to

¹⁴⁰ Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (Viking, 2020).

¹⁴¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

¹⁴² Cox, *Shapeshifters*.

do the same. In this way, I pay homage to these women as a form of “ancestor work,”¹⁴³ a praxis of generational healing, a citation of my deepest gratitude to the Black girls who became Black women who became bold enough to write on their own terms. In the words of Savannah Shange, “I offer a jar of honey, a fistful of flowers, a fifth of whiskey, and a deep breath to each soul”¹⁴⁴ of each Black woman writer who paved the way for me to tell my stories.

Zora Neale Hurston,
 Patricia Hill Collins,
 Robin M. Boylorn,
 Audre Lorde,
 Alice Walker,
 Aimee Meredith Cox,
 M. Jaqui Alexander,
 Christina Sharp,
 Saidiya Hartman,
 Dionne Brand,
 Gloria Wekker,
 Irma McClaurin,
 Akasha T. Hull,
 Carole Boyce Davies,
 Katherine McKittrick,
 bell hooks,
 Chanequa Walker-Barnes,
 Toni Cade Bambara,
 Ntozake Shange,
 Savannah Shange,
 Evelyn C. White,
 Barbara Christian,
 Eve Clark,
 June Jordan,
 Octavia Butler,
 Toni Morrison,
 Lorraine Avila,
 Alexis Pauline Gumbs
 Yaba Blay
 Ruth Nicole Brown

Deeply inspired by McClaurin’s genealogical map of Black feminist anthropology, I work to curate a map of Black feminist methodology of each hybrid approach, weaving together citations and references of these Black women writers within and beyond the body of the text.

I am a storyteller weaving together real events of the contemporary moment to narrate intimacy, creativity, and possibility. I am an ethnographer using literary tools to reimagine what research might allow us to say when we allow ourselves to truly be undisciplined. I resonate deeply with Crunk Feminist Collective’s assertion of the “productive dissonance that occurs as we work at the edges of disciplines, on the margins of social life, and in the vexed spaces between academic and nonacademic communities.”¹⁴⁵ Yet, since “the work we do requires new modes and methods of researching,”¹⁴⁶ I lean deeper into Christina Sharp’s demands to “become undisciplined.”¹⁴⁷ The step

¹⁴³ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, xi.

¹⁴⁴ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, xi.

¹⁴⁵ Cooper et al., *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, xviii.

¹⁴⁶ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 13.

from the “edges of disciplines” to “becom[ing] undisciplined” is embodied in everyday round the way Black girl logics, in that the very praxis of freely being yoself in the world is a mode of nondiscipline, a “willful defiance”¹⁴⁸ of the restricting covenants of social norms that rejects our ghetto Black lives. Thus, my methodology is as willfully defiant as the hood girls whose taking up space in the world has inspired my taking up of space in the academy - an unapologetic praxis of doing yo thing and giving no fucks about who got what to say about it, periodt (pooh).

data collection

My intimate sisterhood with sixty-five Black women in Oakland is the basis of this work. This research process was birthed and sustained by me living the life I would have lived whether or not I was engaging in this dissertation exercise. It has looked like me, as a Black womxn healing, diving deeply into my own process of tryna be well, with the hands and the ears and the guidance of the Black womxn who have loved me through it. Thus, the literal data collection process was essentially doing all the things I needed to do to help me to get free.

My sites of study range from broad publics to intimate privates, from the entire city of Oakland to the small tent where my homegirl lays her head each night. Oakland itself is the ethnographic site, and every corner of the city where Black women find healing becomes part of my analysis. Thus, I study the city block with the same rigor as I study the bedroom, the barbeque, the basement and the bottom step of a fourplex landing where reading and writing occur. Each locale becomes rich with meaning when seen through the eyes of a round the Black girl determines to heal herself.

What might begin as a round the way encounter becomes stayin’ a while. I maintain an openness to the city, and to all the Black women I encounter here. I remain available for whatever experiences come. I linger in the checkout line after a compliment, strike up a conversation about her hair or her nails, we exchange numbers and become friends. I stay late after the opening night of the art show to let all the women who inspired me know that I hella fuck with they work, that they ignited the artist in me, and we exchange numbers and become friends. Many of my days in Oakland have been spent like this. Moving through my routine routes - runnings errands at the East Oakland Dollar Tree, walking down the street from my crib to pick up Toni Morrison new collection at Marcus Bookstore¹⁴⁹, riding the 57 to the Grocery Outlet, picking up pink and purple braiding hair from the Beauty Supply Depot - these mundane Black girl tasks made crossing paths with fellow round the way girls possible. The women I would meet in passing, whether we became close or not, made me feel a part of their community. The deeper I engaged community, the more it grew, and the more I saw not only strangers who witnessed me but also familiar faces of women I may have seen once at one event, or homegirls who I had not known frequented the same routine routes as me. A year into living in the Bay, I could not go one place without seeing someone I knew, and I was never surprised by the fact that each time I left my house, a rich experience would await me.

My encounters round the way are only made possible because of my insistence on seeing myself as a part of a shared community of Black folks tryna be well in Oakland. My “self-conscious positioning of [my]self as a Black wom[a]n (first) who do[es] anthropology (second)”¹⁵⁰ is foundational to the way I enter this project. As opposed to a traditional model of ethnography, where the ethnographer

¹⁴⁸ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

¹⁴⁹ Marcus Bookstore is the oldest Black owned bookstore still standing in the United States of America. It is a cherished hub for Black thought in the Bay Area.

¹⁵⁰ McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*, 16.

sees herself in relation to research participants as “one with them, yet not one of them,”¹⁵¹ I argue that as a Black woman healing in Oakland, I am in fact “one with them” *and* “one of them.” Like Akasha T. Hull’s approach to her work in *Soul Talk*, I “incorporate myself and my experiences freely, to really *be* one of the ‘African American women’ I was talking and theorizing about, rather than distancing myself as some kind of detached observer.”¹⁵² My being a doctoral student and researcher does not separate me from my community, although the institution of higher education was designed to do so. Central to my round the way ethic of care, I see myself as an equal part of a collective communal healing that can only be understood through living it, breathing it, and being in it fully.

After a while, my schedule became solidified. On Saturdays, I go to Twerk Church¹⁵³ and shake my ass with my friends from The Way.¹⁵⁴ On Sundays, I attend the church around the way that feeds my spirit. On Thursdays, I visit the Buddhist circle that cleanses my soul. I join monthly sistah circles, attend weekly twelve step recovery meetings for women and people of color, join the taskforce for curating healing informed curriculum for Black girls in Oakland schools, teach Black girls in Oakland schools, lead a Black Girl Magic Self Love Club and mentor high school Black girls in schools. I go to all the festivals - the Black Joy Parade, the Umoja Festival, BBQing While Black, First Fridays. I join a collective of Black healers working to lead Black youth in living fuller and healthier lives, become a facilitator for healing retreats with an organization invested in supporting poc wellness.

I make art with Black women healing, attend the new years vision board parties that become art studios, collaborate with a sis I met for my poetic video narrative, be featured in a sis’ video narrative about Black women and pain, be a muse for a homegirl photographer and hire her to shoot for my new book, make my bedroom an art studio and let a sis come over to paint. I get my hair braided by the same five women in rotation. I go to the homes of the women who have become my friends. We kick it. I host a healing circle at my school, at the park, at my home, and invite the whole hood to come through.

This methodological approach has invited me to be my whole self in the work that I do, and has given my homegirls permission to bring their whole selves to this process as well. Embedded in the process is an unapologetic affirmation that my homegirls are the most brilliant theorists I know, and that tracing the genealogy of their genius is a liberatory praxis, in and of itself.

¹⁵¹ Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁵² Hull, *Soul Talk*, 16.

¹⁵³ Twerk Church is a dance class for women that also serves as a sister circle and a healing space.

¹⁵⁴ The Way is the name of my community church.

Part One: The Body + The Town



Figure 5. everyday round the way blackgirl fresh from an “i see you, sis” encounter, captured by @sydneyee (Sydney Forneret, Queendom, April 29, 2019, <https://www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus>).

interlude one: round the way encounters

na, i ain’t from around here
but i swear Oakland adopted me¹⁵⁵

.

Oakland been had love for Philly girls
cause we came up similar. cause we
cling to our chocolate city¹⁵⁶ while we
watch it slip from our grip, too.

“omg, you from
Philly?! i looove

¹⁵⁵ Drake, *Versace*, 2013.

¹⁵⁶ Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson, *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* (University of California Press, 2018).

Philly girls.
y'all the
coolest.
with them
accents.
with that
vibe.
y'all like
the East Coast
us.”¹⁵⁷

and Oakland been had love for
them Southern girls. the ones with
roots like theirs.

“you such a
Georgia peach.
with that
Southern
sensibility.
with them
Gullah
Geechee
roots.
with that
Creole
like my
cousints.
remind me
of my grannie
my mama's mama.
all our peoples
down South.”¹⁵⁸

the piece
of me
that is
ATLien
and the piece
of me
that is
Philly Jawn
merge to meet

¹⁵⁷ The chorus. A combination of homegirls.

¹⁵⁸ The chorus. A combination of homegirls.

Oakland.
to become
more me in
Oakland
with them
Town Girls
who let me in
let me see they
struggle. who reflect
my struggle. who
hold space for
all that space
in between

.

.

.

i am a black woman
who is also a blackgirl
curating a home in
oakland.

.

.

.

each day my body
moves through
the town, i am
data collecting.
participant observing
the inner workings of
blakgirl communal sense

each day i step out my
West Oakland home
curves draped in bold
colored clothes. head
crowned in crinkled
colored kinks, or
braided beads
lips painted
pink/ purple/

lavender
gold/ bronze/
blue
i am living my
research. embodying it

each interaction
i have and hold with
black women
who are also
blackgirls
becomes data.
the day to day
black femme terrain
of The Town
becomes my
primary site
of analysis

seeing black women,
and being seen by
black women, births this
collective theory of Oakland as
a Black Women's Healing City

***black geographies in black cities:
a theoretical analysis***

In *Chocolate Cities: the Black Map of American Life*, Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson offer chocolate cities as a framework for understanding Black geographies. They explore Black folks' space making practices to understand "how Black people...live within their own maps, whether in response to or in spite of institutional discrimination."¹⁵⁹ They engage "Black mapping . . . [as] a framework for understanding how Black people make place in response and critique . . . [of] gentrification processes."¹⁶⁰ While they argue that Black people can only be "Black and free" in our imaginations¹⁶¹, their work reveals various modes of liminality and transcendence within safe spaces of Black communal life amidst the confines of the city. Thus, they interrogate the embodiment of Blackness and its potential power to remap and reframe socially constructed limitations of the American city.

As Katherine McKittrick states in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, "disposed black bodies are naturally in place, [because] racial codes . . . mark the black body as ungeographic."¹⁶² If Black people are inherently invisibilized, dehumanized, and mapped outside of the social construction of the American city, then chocolate cities become radical configurations of remapping. I am particularly interested in how Hunter and Robinson reveal how chocolate cities

¹⁵⁹ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, x.

¹⁶⁰ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 33.

¹⁶¹ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 88.

¹⁶² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 4.

engage unconventional modes of Black poetic cartographies, specifically through the lens of relationality between the Black body and the chocolate city. Here, I explore embodied Black movement itself as a site of refusal to the cartographies of marginality imposed onto Black life by the city. This dialectic exchange between Black people and their built environment highlights the ways in which Black folks rebuild and restructure the environment to meet our own needs.

McKittrick also argues that geography “not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are.”¹⁶³ Hunter and Robinson help us to understand the who and the where of Black geographies, as they offer tools for exploring how Black selfhood is in a constant dialectic relationship with the city, and how the city is also in a constant dialectic relationship with the multiple Black selves that move about its social landscape. In thinking through the ways in which Black bodies come to know their place in American cities, and know themselves as a result, I am interested in exploring how Black girl selfhood and a Black feminist communal sense is constructed in the city, and how the city is in turn constructed by these notions of individual and collective identity. This, in turn, expands understandings of cognitive cartographies that Black folks formulate within a city.

Within a chocolate city, Hunter and Robinson assert, there is a “village sensibility” that defines Black engagement and structures the relationships between Black community members within their environmental context. They argue that “it first takes a village to make a chocolate city,” and as Black people made “homes and communities out of ghettoized space,” the village made way for the “independence and autonomy [of] collective synergy and action.”¹⁶⁴ Across space and time, carried down from generation to generation, Black families forged new meanings of environments, forever altering its infrastructure of the cities they migrated to. As Robinson and Hunter state, the “village sensibility [is] born of the place-making practices of Black people. As they moved, they made a world, bringing with them their previous worlds as the rich soil with which to lay the foundation anew.”¹⁶⁵ They view chocolate cities as constantly in conversation with each other across boundaries and borders, mirroring the same sensibilities and submerging themselves in the same collective activities.

In Drake’s remix of Migos’ *Versace*, he states, “Born in Toronto but sometimes I feel like Atlanta adopted us.” In this line, Drake acknowledges both his hometown, which he represents with pride, and the city that he feels at home in, Atlanta. While he was not born and raised in Atlanta, it has become a second home of sorts, a familial site of belonging in which he has been “adopted” into. Drake’s bar alludes to a lineage of Black movement and migration, and draws upon a legacy of Black folks being adopted into Black cities where they were not originally born and raised.

Hunter and Robinson also argue that every chocolate city is made up of similar ingredients, and that during the Great Migration, Black folks transferred remnants of the South with them in every city that they settled. To be adopted by a chocolate city, then, and particularly as someone born and raised in, or adjacent to, a chocolate city, means that there is a shared round the way sensibility that binds all Black folks who learned to navigate chocolate cities across the Americas. In this way, I ground my framing of my own positionality in Oakland as an East Coast chocolate city girl adopted by the West Coast chocolate city girls who saw something recognizable in me that made me familiar

¹⁶³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xii.

¹⁶⁴ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 59.

¹⁶⁵ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

enough to embrace. I am forever grateful to have been called family here, and it is from this familial place that I do this work.

Aimee Meredith Cox's *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* serves as an inspiring model for how to engage this project as an insider/outsider with close ties to the cities we study. *Shapeshifters* invites readers to reorient ourselves to a Black feminist sense of space making. While Black women and girls are always already out of place within the confines of citizenship, she asserts that, in the places we make for ourselves, we find the freedom to make the rules and set the tone for how our bodies move about. Even when the spaces we make are relegated to the crevices and corners of the city, within sites of so-called forgotten underworlds, Black women and girls connect with a power of choreographed meaning making that maps itself onto contested concrete.

As Cox states, "there is a map of movement or plan for how the body interacts with its environment . . . by the body's placement in a space, the nature of that space changes."¹⁶⁶ In other words, Black women and girls entering into and moving through sites of contestation shifts, changes, and alters the very make up of that space, as it requires the space itself to reorder and realign to meet our needs. I study the ways in which everyday round the way Black girls map their bodies onto the city of Oakland, and move through the troubled and often violent terrain of their everyday urban environments. I pay close attention to their "embodied meaning making, physical storytelling, [and] affective physicality,"¹⁶⁷ and affirm their practices of healing, on the body, in the city, and in all the spaces in between.

I am also interested in the ways in which everyday round the way Blackgirls' bodies become geographies of meaning making, in and of themselves, as the body itself is curated and adorned with artifacts of diasporic care. Symbolic adornments like wooden hair beads, gold hoops, and neon lipstick, paired with jerseys and t-shirts of familiar signage, serve as tools for Black women's bodies to map Black space onto the city. Scholars like Kimberly Lamm, Carol Tulloch, and Tanisha C. Ford offer a robust analysis of Black style and fashion that expands my theories of Black feminist embodied geographies. While Lamm traces Black style patterns during the Harlem Renaissance, Ford and Tulloch expand a study of Black fashion by offering a more expansive timeline of Black style's progression from past to present day.

In *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, Carol Tulloch introduced "style narratives" as a framework for understanding how our bodily adornments tell stories about our values and identities.¹⁶⁸ In "Sartorial Self-Fashioning in the Harlem Renaissance," Lamm states, "a visual and material practice of transformation intimately women into the texture of everyday life, fashionable clothing was an aesthetic medium African Americans developed to fashion themselves as historical subjects with pasts and futures of their own design."¹⁶⁹ As Tulloch and Lamm both demonstrate, Black folks became curators of their own bodily geographies through dress. And as they fashioned new selves through clothing, they also fashioned new narratives for the new lives that they imagined for themselves. This tradition of Black style has been inherited by the everyday round the way Blackgirl.

¹⁶⁶ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

¹⁶⁷ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 28.

¹⁶⁸ Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool*.

¹⁶⁹ Kimberly Lamm, "Chapter 3: Sartorial Self-Fashioning in the Harlem Renaissance in *African American Literature in Transition, 1920 – 1930*," (Cambridge University Press), 73.

As Ford argues in *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to Fashion*, “clothes are never just garments. Each time we stand before our closet to pick out our clothes, we make a series of choices about how we want to appear to the world . . . the way we adorn ourselves communicates something about who we are and where we come from.”¹⁷⁰ And while we all may not have closets of clothes to choose from, even folks with limited access to materials of adornment make fashion choices and style narratives for themselves. For instance, the unhoused Black women in my study embrace bold colored wigs and neon tops that accentuate their style.

There is a particular way that class complicates Black style. Poor and working class Black women in Sadiyah Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* were ghetto girls of the 1920s and 30s who used glitter and gold to tell the city of their presence. Pointing to a class-based aesthetic, Hartman rejects traditional narratives about respectability and attempts to dress proper in order to be acceptable to the middle-classed white-male-dominated metropolitan world.¹⁷¹ This is the aesthetic style tradition and lineage of the everyday round the way Blackgirl. For hood chicks with chips on shoulders, style serves as a tool for self actualization in a city that nullifies our existence. “Through our clothes we can do our own form of world-making, imagining possibilities beyond what our current status says is our reality. And nobody does this better than oppressed groups.”¹⁷² And, I would argue, nobody does this better than everyday round the way homegirls in Oakland, who allow themselves to enjoy “the everyday pleasures and delights of *styling out* . . . [to] create communities around style and dress . . . [to embody] the affective power of Black style as a tool for radical self making and community building.”¹⁷³

As the little sister of a fashion designer, I grew up with a keen understanding of this. Since my big sister Cameran Nichole was in the third grade, she has been sewing, crocheting, and creating her own outfits to announce her presence to the world. She was the first person to teach me how to theorize Black style. As a little Black girl in an overwhelming world, she let fashion be her muse and made new visions of herself through her garments. In 2016, she created @cami.co.lace¹⁷⁴, a clothing brand that gives folks a chance to rep their set, to shout out their hometown, to honor the geographies that matter most to them. Each garment can be custom made with the name of your city, your community, or the face of a homegirl who transitioned. For Black women, Cami co. Lace has been an invitation for us to enhance our adornment rituals, and to rock all our favs unabashedly. From time to time, you might see a Cami co. Lace booth at First Friday in downtown Oakland or you might spot a homegirl in her custom made Cami co. Lace with The Town’s home team written across her chest. Cami co. Lace has laced her fashion’s print into the geography of Oakland, even as a Philly jawn like me who ain’t even from up around here.

Through her radical politic of Black style, my sister taught me how to wear my heart on my sleeve in my super crop Oakland top with the town written down the left arm. She taught me to mourn my beloved homegirl by wearing her picture on a hoodie. Her clothes offered me new tools for curating my own style narratives, an opportunity to tell the stories of who and what and where matters to me most just by how I show up in space. Thus, my sister, like Tulloch, Lamm, and Ford, each teach me in their own ways that, as Black women, what we wear, and how we choose to show up as ourselves

¹⁷⁰ Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to Fashion* (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2019), 1.

¹⁷¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

¹⁷² Ford, *Dressed in Dreams*, 3.

¹⁷³ Ford, *Dressed in Dreams*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Visit camicolace.com or @cami.co.lace on Instagram for more.

to ourselves, our sisters, and our city, matters deeply for the healing geographies we curate in the city.

Cox offers “shapeshifting” as a way to theorize these sorts of Black feminist spatial imaginaries, the creative space making practices that we engage in order to remain sane, whole, and healing. In some ways, shapeshifting can also be understood as a shifting of the city’s atmosphere towards the healing we need to survive, and a simultaneous shifting of the body from the flesh and concrete to the spirit realm. Cox places Black girls’ shapeshifting in conversation with the “transformations of self and spirit that occur during rituals.” In this way, I read Black women’s embodied movement through Oakland as ritual. This daily encounter with Oakland fortifies ancestral and spiritual knowing that lives in the body and grounds itself in memory, power, healing and strength. This ritual “embrace[s] rather than fight[s] against our inevitable and perpetual displacement,”¹⁷⁵ in that it honors the flexibility of spirit movement, and “use our displacement as a starting point for regeneration and the creation of new life worlds and spaces that affirm our collective humanity”¹⁷⁶ In other words, in amidst displacement, Black women and girls make home anew. In the body. In the city. On the skin. In the flesh. At the turning and passing of sisterhood encounters and round the way exchanges. And this becomes the point from which we develop healing modalities that sustain in the wake of dispossession and disenfranchisement more broadly.

I place Cox’s notion of shapeshifting in conversation with Hartman’s *Wayward Lives*, and think about how the presence of everyday round the way Black girl embodiment within gentrified commons “remap[s] the [Town], messing with the organization of the city by the ways [we] inhabit and use public space.”¹⁷⁷ Hartman’s work introduces the radical resistance practices embedded in the daily life of Black women and girls in early 20th century urban metropolises, particularly those who were poor and working-class. Hartman explores what she calls “riotous forms” of Black girlhood and womanhood, centering the radical forms of life-making performed by young Black women and girls from the Great Migration in the 1920s. She illuminates the young Black migrant woman’s “manner of walking that threatened to undo the city,” affirming that her embodied practice of everyday life demanded something from the city and threatened the city to not meet the needs of her longing.

Like Cox, she too names the possibilities of space making that existed within and beyond the body and the city. She states, “The map of what might be was not restricted to the literal trail of a [black girl’s] footsteps . . . this unregulated movement encouraged the belief that something great could happen despite everything you knew, despite the ruin and the obstacles.”¹⁷⁸ Hers is a story of Black girl longing, of imagining an elsewhere and an otherwise, and working within and beyond the bounds of disenfranchisement to bring that sacred vision of freedom to reality. In highlighting the boundless, limitless, and unrelenting Black feminist imaginary of Black women and girls whose stories were so often forgotten, Hartman honors our migration ancestors and leaves a trail to trace the riotous legacies they left behind or us to inherit.

I use Hartman’s recounting of these geographic moments of refusal as a framework to better understand contemporary everyday round the way navigation of the city as an ancestral praxis of reclamation. These hood strategies of ghetto girl survival draw upon the everyday round the way survival art of our foremothers, our grandmothers, our ancestors, their kin and their friends, their

¹⁷⁵ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 27.

¹⁷⁶ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 27.

¹⁷⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 87.

¹⁷⁸ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 234.

homegirls and their sisters. Hartman details the journey of country girls coming from down south to Philadelphia, like me. From the chocolate city of my youth, eighty years later, migrating still. I draw upon this legacy to read my own movement patterns alongside that of Oakland homegirls whose grannies came to The Town from places like Louisiana and Arkansas in the years of the Great Migration.

Robinson and Hunter's engagement with Marsha P. Johnson's embodied Black feminist space making praxis in *Chocolate Cities* echoes this ancestral migration remembrance that Hartman engages. Hunter and Robinson view Johnson, a radical Black trans activist instrumental in the Stonewall uprising of 1969, as a Black geography in and of herself. Their engagement with her somatic spirit ritual of urban city life in New York offer a healing-focused analysis of Hartman's riotous acts and Cox's shapeshifting.

Marsha P. "made the road by walking,"¹⁷⁹ and her body was her healing space. She was at home in her body and she gave her soul to her people, curating spaces of healing in the streets, on the concrete, for other trans Black women to feel freed up to take up space in the city and stretch the limitation of its bounds. In this way, she mapped healing onto the city for herself and others. She remained committed to her spiritual grounding in a Jesus that delivered her, and through her own embodied praxis of "worshiping and meditating,"¹⁸⁰ she became a healing space in her own right. As "the people's queen," she used her step and stride to make a road for herself and her people to travel on, a chocolate city within the chocolate city for those rejected by the chocolate city to find healing.

Hunter and Smith's reading of Marsha P. expands my framework of embodied healing. I think about how Black women, like Marsha P., "make our roads by walking," how we become villages in and of ourselves, how we cultivate our inner spiritual worlds of fortitude that we map onto chocolate cities in order to ensure our survival. I think about how we reimagine and reconfigure the roads we once knew as home through new found fictive kin, how we grapple with the roads we were forced away from, roads like Philadelphia's South Street and Oakland's Telegraph Avenue, the roads that were instrumental in curating the Blackness and the villages that we know today. The P. in Marsha P. proudly stood for "pay it no mind," and her "pay haters no mind" inspires the everyday round the way unbothered Black girl energy of ghetto girls and hood chicks today, as it asserts an agency of Black femme being that is central to our survival.

In this interlude, and its preceding chapter, I place Marcus Hunter and Zandria Smith's *Chocolate Cities: the Black Map of American Life* in conversation with Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Aimee Meredith Cox's *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, and Sadiyah Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* to read everyday round the way Black girl's space making as a chocolate city praxis that challenges normative assumptions about where we go to get well. I place Black Bay Area artistry in conversation with a Black tradition of space making, and read everyday communal practices as an affirmation of the village sensibility that grounds our collective healing practices.

For example, I read works like SOL Development's *The Sol of Black Folks* as a radical Black geographies intervention. *The Sol of Black Folks*, an album written by members of my spiritual

¹⁷⁹ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 70.

¹⁸⁰ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 70.

community, is a compilation of sounds, rhythms and beats that reflect the Black Oakland I have come to fall in love with, an Oakland that many argue is in jeopardy of “losing its soul.”¹⁸¹ *SOL Development*, the group of dynamic artists who wrote, produced, and performed these sounds, established their collective to illuminate the souls of Black folks whose artistry and creative survival strategies have been utilized for personal and communal sustainability. This album traces the space making patterns of Black folks who face the ongoing threat of displacement. In honor of DuBois’ legendary text, which highlights the ways in which Black folks’ survival remapped Black life in America, this album fuses a contemporary critique of the Anti-Blackness with a soul shaking celebratory chorus of the creative agency of Black folks’ artistic praxis. This album is a project of Black Geographies, a vocal depiction of the cartographies of Black struggle and triumph in the wake of racial dispossession. From *Source of Light* to *Helicopter*, each song signals a breath of being, a beacon of joy, and a call to greater purpose beyond the bounds of disenfranchisement.

embodied movement through the city of oakland

The body and the city merge to meet us at multiple scales. The embodied adornment of a round the way Black girl becomes a fuck you to their city, and a celebration of ours. Them and us, we both say Oakland but channel different things in the naming of a place. Them, a hipster's haven. Us, a clinging to color - of house, of food, of mural, of skin. Us, a dope era ass city¹⁸², a city where the *dope man is a painter and the artist sell weight*,¹⁸³ where every hood got a “hypoghettoal”¹⁸⁴ priest who put yo numbers and chakras and sun rising in alignment to determine yo destiny, where hood girls learn to bob and weave through debris, where Black girls double dutch and duck and dodge, where the drummer at the corner of Telegraph and 25th get the whole block hyphy on a Friday night, where every other summertime day it be a block party, where we Black folks declare with our bodies - *this still be that West Coast Chocolate City*.¹⁸⁵

The space of the round the way, the corners and the concrete, become our stomping grounds for healing in the wake.¹⁸⁶ The space of the round the way, both real and imagined, a tangible site of gathering and a space to take with you in spirit when it has been taken from you in flesh, a space to wear on you when it has been snatched up beneath your feet, when impossibility becomes the ground you stand on, in the exact place that once was yo round the way. This space, between Blackness and precarity, between a gentrified city and salt sprinkled on bloodied wound to burn out the harm, to heal, this place is the palimpsest, the grounds for recollection of self/ sister/ spirit/ home, the site we rename in rememory.

*I got a home, and I
take it everywhere I go.*

-Erykah Badu¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ Alex Werth and Eli Marienthal, “‘Gentrification’ as a grid of meaning,” *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 20, no. 5 (2016): 719-736, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2016.1224484>.

¹⁸² Dope Era is a clothing line in Oakland created by local rapper Fab, who many natives take great pride in.

¹⁸³ Homie from round the way.

¹⁸⁴ The Hypoghettoal Instagram Page. 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

¹⁸⁶ Sharp, *In the Wake*.

¹⁸⁷ Erykah Badu. Round the way home girl of my dreams.

The round the way girl asks herself each day - will I paint a part of my house red, like lips traced in matte marker to signal a sensual self knowing? Will I squeeze the thighs of me into more cotton, stretching Rainbow out of shape, forcin' these jeans to make space for the excess of me? How will this body as home hold me? Her body commemorates the relationship between physical and metaphysical loss. There is an affirmation of the Black womb caught in the throat of her, a laying on of hands in her heightened awareness of them women who be reflecting her, a healing in her ability to see and to be seen by Black women in Oakland. In "a city overcrowded with errant spirits . . . [her] yearning not easily satisfied in towering buildings or in slabs of concrete,"¹⁸⁸ the everyday round the way Black girl eases her homegirls' yearning through her process of witnessing.

The round the way Black girl's body becomes a canvas for curated memory. She interior designs the city with her slay, paints the whole city Black with her body. She maps The Town with each step of her stride, making her body match her city, letting her body depict her city, the city she knew before they tried to make it not hers no more. She makes her whole body a theory of radical Black feminist selfhood, a theory of survival in the wake, a theory of liberatory healing. Her body art becomes a site of Black feminist interior design, a whole ass theory in its own right. She and all the women of the wake she knows move they bodies beneath the surface of the shore and above the clouds all at once, women who wore white to they own funeral, the death of they city a rebirth of becoming. This city, in its tensioned tug of war between a warped sense of that which is real, becomes the most fertile ground to become yo self again.

The city itself becomes a healing space for Black women healing in community with Black women healing. These women of the wake invite me into the wake and let me mourn my chocolate city amongst them. We force Oakland to extend for us, to expand itself as we expand ourselves, to open up for us as we open up for us. The same city that is a site of trauma becomes a site of healing because we make it so. We deem us worthy enough to take up space in our demanding of a right to be here.

All at once, the micro-moment of a Black woman's aesthetic exchange shifts the tides of the city. All at once, the 57 and the BBQ and the bus stop become a healing space, a passing in the day when we steal away remnants of fugitive freedom. To feel like you belong with Black women who wear in their skin a declarative statement - *I deserve to see and be seen here*. To sit in the sanctuary of that encounter. The subtlety of "I see you, sis" becomes life altering, alerting one Black woman to another, a survival tool of recognition that demands we see each other in the city that seeks to erase our presence. These aesthetic affirmations / aesthetic acknowledgements produce micro moments of care in the city, and these moments of care become healing.

In publics we make private. With spirits housed in bodies and spirits who float. The repetition of the affirmative, the I see you, you see me. The signaling of ourselves to each other. The call and response. My *For the Love of Black Girls* t-shirt calls to you and yo dashiki patterned faux lox respond to me. Yo unapologetic showing up in the world invites me to move more like you, more free, more flow, more giving no fucks. You invite me into yo city so I might see what there is to see of me. That in itself is magic.

And then there's always that one stank ass bus driver who have a hard time letting you slide for leaving yo wallet home. The one who put you off on the next stop in the rain and don't give you no

¹⁸⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 287.

grace. Or the one lady at the Target check out who won't give you the discount you know you pose to get on your buy four get one free. Them Black women who internalize and project the trauma of being a Black woman in this Town, who was maybe having a bad day or week or month or year or season in they life, or who been this stank all they life cuz nobody showed them what to do with they hurt, so they harm others with hopes that they might make a reflection of themselves feel as low as they feel.¹⁸⁹

In Audre Lorde's *Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger*, she argues that this tensions between Black women, and the refusal to recognize each others' gaze in passing, is rooted in a deep self hatred and internalized disdain. She sites moments of her own embodied movement through the city, naming a trip to the library, "waiting to be recognized by the Black woman library clerk [who] . . . cuts her elegant sidelong glance"¹⁹⁰ at Lorde. Lorde asks, "What does she see that angers her, or disgusts her? Why do I want to break her face off what her eyes do not meet mine? Why does she wear my sister's face? My daughter's mouth turned down about to suck itself in?"¹⁹¹ Lorde grapples with what *I See You, Sis* means within a world where Black women refuse to recognize each other.

In a city where Black women show Black women hella love, that shit hurt. How you gone refuse to see me in the city that is moved by Black women seeing Black women? But I see you, sis. I see why the world would feel that heavy, how the everyday toll of yo labor take a toll on you. I see you and affirm you still. No, not all Black women wanna see themselves in Black women, because some Black women be too burdened, and some Black women be too scared, too scared to see you cuz they scared to see they self, and seeing you might call for too much reckoning. These moments of affinity slips makes belonging that much more meaningful. They remind me to turn towards the world where Black women insist on recognizing each other in order to trace a radical praxis of recognition that serves as a mode of healing and dismantles the very frameworks of internalized self hatred that Lorde speaks of in her encounters.

. . .

Using what I call *round the way encounters* as an ethnographic research method, I center everyday round the way Black girls and our exchanges with each other in passing as we move through our routine routes of life in the city of Oakland. With a deep consideration of the ways in which my embodied movement through the city exists in relation to other round the way girls I engage, I am particularly interested in the micro-moments of exchange that occur in passing. With strangers who become friends, with homegirls who I ain't seen in a minute, these everyday scenes of micro-moments make community possible for me, and community is what has made my healing possible.

Naming round the way as a geographic site of belonging, both imagined and real, I use a Black feminist geographic framework¹⁹² to discuss how we Black women healing in Oakland make our spatial imaginaries real through the daily and mundane praxis of taking up space in the city. As our bodies, adorned in a curated collection of care, encounter the contested grounds of the city, we see ourselves reflected in each other, and this helps us to feel just a little bit more safe to feel at home here. Our process of place making and space making, even when simply showing up in public in the

¹⁸⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

¹⁹⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 154.

¹⁹¹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 154.

¹⁹² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

full expression of our humanity, defies the myth that urban renewal has erased Black presence in Oakland. We still be hella here, hella hood, hella Black, and hella proud.

Our bodies rearrange and reorder space.¹⁹³ We “reshape city spaces,” choreographing our own belonging by commanding our right to move freely, as our full selves, in every space we enter.¹⁹⁴ The everyday round the Black girl “ma[k]es [her] ground by walking,” learning to become “a village in and of herself.”¹⁹⁵ Each time she steps into the Jack London farmers market¹⁹⁶ or the Lake Merritt¹⁹⁷ park, with a fro or a head wrap or some braids past her booty, she lets me know it's okay to do the same. We give each other permission to “be Black and free in public.”¹⁹⁸

Within communities of Black women who have a round the way sensibility, a recognizable blackness, an ethic of moving through the world that is rooted in a shared way of seeing and being oneself, there comes a responsibility to let a sis know when you see her. I argue that there is a particular sense of knowing the world that allows us everyday round the way Black girls to immediately recognize each other when we are seen by each other. Round the way encounters, as a methodological emphasis, maps these sites of recognition as rich locales for healing, as they foster a communal sense of belonging, and a feeling of being seen in a space that might otherwise make you feel alone.

There is a particular way that we everyday round the way Black girls in Oakland “dare to recognize each other again and again in a context bent on making strangers of us all.”¹⁹⁹ Our embodied style narratives²⁰⁰ tell stories of aesthetic refusal that are familiar. Our linguistic refusal feels like home when shared on the corner, at the bus stop, at the stop sign. Strangers become sisters on a beauty supply run, cashiers become homegirls at the checkout line. Recognition of each other becomes vital to our survival, a second nature sixth sense of Black girl knowing that requires us to shout out car windows at the red light, in traffic, “I see you, sis!” to a woman we have never seen before and may never see again.

“I see you, sis!” It is a hyper recognition of presence, an insistence on acknowledging the ways in which we round the way Black women take up space on every street corner, city block, and alleyway we enter.²⁰¹ It is a verbal affirmation in a tone that is familiar of the way we continue to show up for each other and for ourselves by providing reflections of each other in passing. “How [we] “design,” [our] lives and bodies for day-to-day living ultimately informs [each of our] individual biography or autobiography.”²⁰² What we know about each other, just by looking, is that “the styling of our bodies . . . consequently beck[o]me[s] part of the holistic making of [our]selves,” and that by making a muse and an art form out of this canvas of a body, we get a little more free each day. We see each other

¹⁹³ Cox, *Shapeshifters*.

¹⁹⁴ Cox, *Shapeshifters*.

¹⁹⁵ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 70.

¹⁹⁶ Jack London is an area in Oakland that was predominantly inhabited by Black folks for Friday night turn ups. It has since become an extremely gentrified area of the city. My homegirls and I go to Black to Yoga ther on Sundays during the farmers market, turning white folks' Sunday grocery shopping into a Black ass experience.

¹⁹⁷ Lake Merritt is a central site of communal gathering for Bay Area residents. A three mile walk all around, it opens up the city from multiple viewpoints. As Oakland becomes more gentrified, the lake becomes a contested public, where white folks like BBQ Becky call the police on Black people who do what we have done for generations at the lake - play our music and barbeque with our folks.

¹⁹⁸ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 102.

¹⁹⁹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 279.

²⁰⁰ Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool*.

²⁰¹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (2007).

²⁰² Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool*, 8.

and love each other and learn how to heal our bodies by modeling and molding on our bodies who we wish to be. This, too, is central to our healing.

To see a sis is not just a visual act, and does not just privilege a Western emphasis on the eye as the primary way to know. *I see you sis* means I feel you/ I acknowledge you/ I honor the holistic being of you/ I hear you/ embrace you/ make space for you/ carve out a corner of this street to celebrate you. *I see you sis* is a Blackgirl proverb that vibrates beneath the concrete of these streets, birthed from an underworld of forgotten fragmented selves who feel the urgency in remembering who they are and what they are made up of.

fugitive map making

Locating sites of healing becomes a continuous underlying tension throughout this text. While I view the round the way as geographic, I also must contend with its inability to conform to the bounds of traditional cartography. As I think about space both physically and metaphysically, materially and otherworldly, I ask, what is the impetus for locating? To what degree is the desire to point to a particular site on a map rooted in a Eurocentric geographic rendition of surveillance and forced hyper visibility?²⁰³ Like Katherine McKittrick's cartographic practices in *Demonic Grounds* and Dionne Brand's in *A Map to the Door of no Return: Notes on Belonging*, I work to reimagine what alternative map making processes might look and feel like when analyzing round the way encounters, as well as encounters that occur on multiple scales, and multiple planes. I am much less invested in the literal X,Y coordinates of these sites of fugitivity, and much more invested in a process of sensory experimentation.

I think critically about how my Black feminist poetics of landscape²⁰⁴ maps the body's movement through the city and my own interiority simultaneously. Additionally, I think about various modes of depicting space and place that is not constricted by linear, two dimensional conceptualizations of space. Inspired by *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*²⁰⁵, which uses mixed media art by authors miyuki baker and Ra Malika Imhotep to map theoretical space, I use a number of creative, unconventional processes of mapping to locate healing. Using a compilation of visual and literary representations, I map memories and recollections of the city and read my homegirls' art practice as a mapping praxis of world making. I also map at various scales simultaneously, drawing physical and metaphysical space as overlapping. I map both intimate space and city space, as I question what it means for me to illustrate these maps based on my own positionality. I lean into the complexity of the question - what does it mean to map unknowable and unseeable space?

...

Black folks know that this land is a colonial imaginary, a site of haunting mapped onto a site of haunting mapped onto a site of haunting. OH lone forced out mapped onto Black women forced out. OH lone Land tagged to the concrete adjacent to 37MLK, just blocks away from the weave depot. On different days you see different traces of Blackness across those words, waves of everyday remnants of Black girlhood - a hot pink bra with beaded trim, a weave braid and a bandana, a silver gold slipper, an orange Ballie and a brown wooden bead that musta fell off a brown girl's head while

²⁰³ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: on the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015).

²⁰⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

²⁰⁵ Imhotep and baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*.

jumping rope, rollin her hood body in and out the one two thud of the neon green to concrete, jumping one two thud on top of concrete marked OH lone Land. The concrete as palimpsest. The “ground we stand on” as a past that lingers, a past that remembers, a past that haunts and repeats itself back to itself. OH lone land. Land of nothingness, erasable, irreconcilable. Colonial conquest. Nothing was there before whiteness. Erasure of OH lone. Erasure of Blackness. Nothing was there before whiteness. Empty lot. No one was there. No one is there. Houselessness as nothingness, blackness as nothingness, indigeneity as nothingness. Indigenous to a colonial imaginary, Black folks staking claim to the land whiteness made, the land never owned by none of us. Belonging to OH lone. Belonging to Blackness. They say *Bring Black Oakland* and stamp it on a t-shirt. They say *Make Oakland Black Again* and print it on a tote bag. The blank space of the empty lot, the site of undesirability, the space that becomes desirable only after whiteness recognizes its use. Like swamps, like Black folks always travelin’ to the site of the unkempt, in order to make a home where they least expect it. The empty lot. A site where death is transformed to life. A space of nothingness filled with everything, like love and healing and care, still seen as a site of nothingness by the state.

...

My Black woman Uber driver pulls up to my West Oakland block. "Have I watched it change?! Hunny! West Oakland looked like North Carolina when I first came here in the '70s. Pristine! This trash on the street? Never! Know why? 'Cause them Black folks was from Louisiana and they ain't play that! They was clean baby, them yards, clean, them outfits, clean! You know how we do, sharp! Had them Cadillacs right in the driveway all through the week, and ride that hooptie to work so the white man don't know what you got, but on Sunday?! Hunny! Ride them things right down Broadway." As we pull up to my teal blue fourplex, I see my block through her memory map. She echoes what Donna Jean Murch reveals in *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party* - that Black Southern migrants made Black Oakland their own.²⁰⁶ I thought about who might have lived in my home back in the days when she rode around in her fancy car down Broadway on Sunday. I thought about the palimpsest of West Oakland space, of Ghostown, of my role as outsider/ insider. On the one hand, I am a non-from-the-Bay Black girl. On the other, I am a Black girl whose peoples from Louisiana and Mississippi, who claim the same diaspora as Oakland natives, who knows what Marcus Hunter and Zandria Smith know, that a Chocolate City is a Chocolate City.

²⁰⁶ Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 21.



Figure 6. mapping the town, drawn by @reclaviolette (reclaviolette botts-ward, map, April 15, 2019, Oakland, California).

So, how does a non-native map memory? How does an outsider map The Town? How does a Black woman map how Black women's healing maps itself onto Oakland? How do I map the tear between tensions, the tears between rage, the isolation of an always already ephemeral house that could never ever be home, because Black displacement is the constant state of Black America? How do I map the layered consciousness of spirit worlds that Black women speak of? How do I show what one cannot hold - the weight, the heaviness, the burden? How do I use pen and page as cartographer to capture the glory of embrace, the subtle submission to the worlds above and below and the one we live in in between?

By listening. By walking block by block. By being Black and woman like Black and woman folks be here. By being with them. By learning from them. By teachin' they babies. By making space for them. By pulling back, pulling back, pulling back assumptions. By not judging. By befriending. By living. By being in spiritual community. By convening. By asking - How has Oakland's map been shaped and sustained by the very presences it

rapidly pushes away? How have you survived? How do you still thrive? How do you remember/ What do you remember/ What do you still hold/ How do you let go?

This map illustrates the underworld and the overworld, and the world in between. The Earthly material world, the world of streets and suns and lakes, lets us know the spirit world more intimately. Black women like Peaches call this consciousness. They can see God in the sun. They know God(dess) lives above and below. They bow their heads to pray to the most high and the most low. On days they feel low they go to the lake and sing grace to Oshun. They know the salt water rivers are for ritual. Black women like Kendra call this meditation. Levitation. Healing.

The worlds they know collide, but they feel the floating in the wind. They know below the Kalunga line their ancestors shield them from anything that would cause harm. They hold faith in something greater than themselves. They dream . . . dream . . . dream . . . and I dream with them. Dream of the world we cannot see and open our eyes to the feeling of it. The sound of the sacred. The unlocatable space of transcendence. The site of unstructured solace, of coming back to oneself again, in the communal care of sister friends and fairies and Gods and gangstas who found they peace in Haven. We hear and see and smell them with each foot step we take on concrete.

They call this town what it is. A ghost town. A place we once owned. We Blacks. We, a people. We, cultivators of home. We, curators of care. We, architects of healing. We learned how to make home of the hardship. Of shipyard city with hilltop views. We vowed to be self sufficient. Till the settlers saw new value in space they perceived as vacant. One by one, women like Kendra's best friend watched best friends evacuate. State of emergency. We can't be here and whole no more.

Whose spirit died here? Who could not stay alive here? Who heals here? Who struggles here? Who can't pay the rent but cannot afford to leave here? Who had to flee? Who feels most deep the pain of Nia Wilson? Who saw her die and said nothing? Who mourns her most? Who knows of this space what many cannot know? Who recalls the block before the coffee shop? Who still believes in Oakland? Who has a right to make claim to 'The Town'?

*the first step towards healing is
being able to SEE yourself
from a lens of unconditional love
and not trauma/struggle.”*

-Brittsense²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Brittsense. Documentarian from Deep East Oakland. Learn more at <https://www.brittsense.com/>.

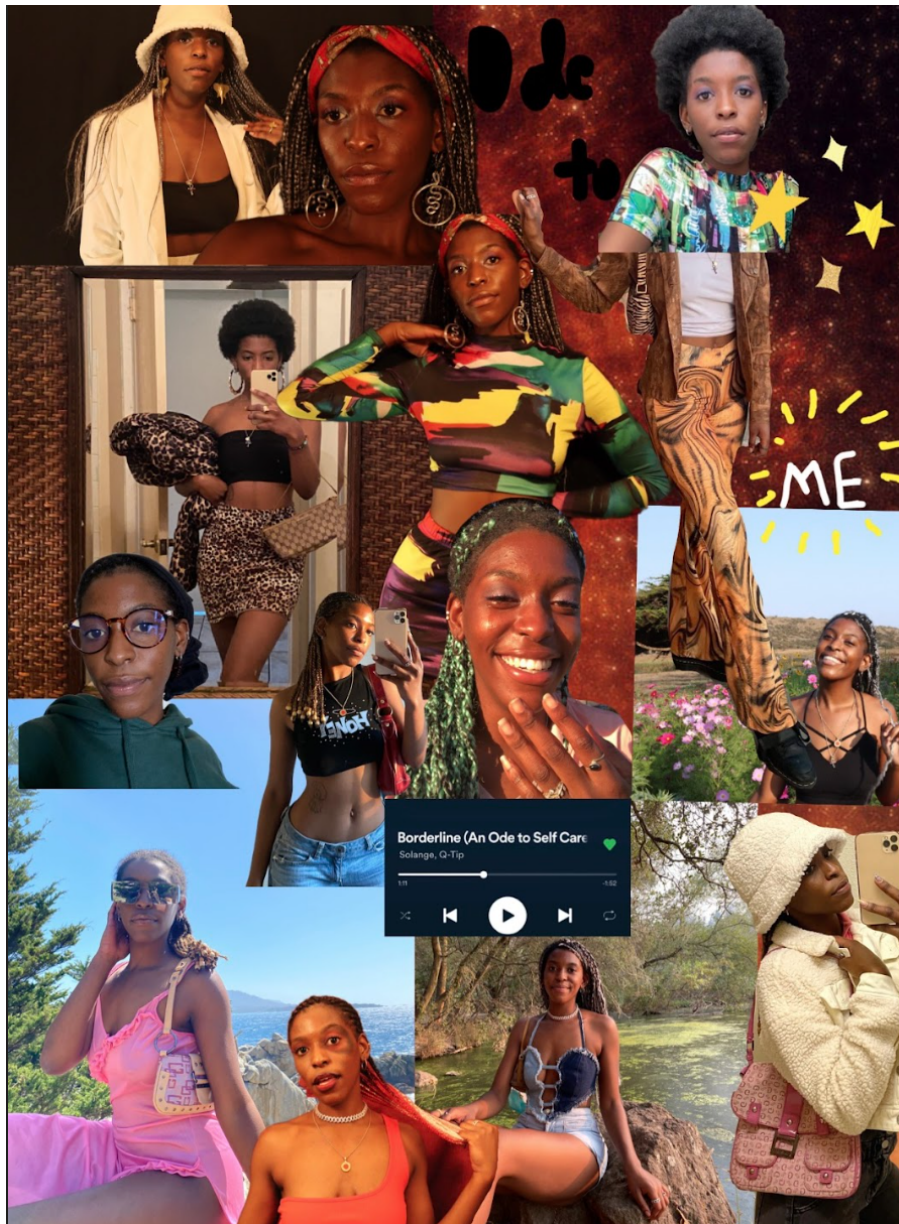


Figure 7. slaying round my way, round the town, art by @maybejasmineee (Jasmine Sozi, ode to me, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

chapter one: embodied curations of blackgirl space-making

two two two forgotten city girls

[for the round the way girls in the town]

222 Forgotten Cities is a movement that “documents the beauty of melanated communities that mainstream media considers ‘dangerous’ & says only struggle exists.”²⁰⁸ Brittsense, a photographer from “Deep East Oakland” whose billboards featured everyday roun’ the way folks in the town, created 222 Forgotten Cities Media Company to highlight the beauty of her people who live in the places our nation has forgotten. Brittsense states that “The first part towards the healing process of myelinated people psychologically because she feels the first step towards healing is being able to SEE yourself from a lens of unconditional love and not trauma/struggle.” This section, and much of my work, is inspired by her art and her genius.²⁰⁹

...

A Black girl with star-shaped, bamboo engraved gold hoops, one hand on hip and the other brushing back fingered waves, all five fingers on both hands bedazzled with round-shaped rhinestones on top of lime green, brand new Jays matchin’ brand new fade, dashiki tie dyed and imprinted - this fly ass round the way Blackgirl, with her gold shined grill to match her grit, claps back to this new Oakland, exclaiming in the way she wears her self on her skin, *I am here and you will contend with me*. Her body paints the city Black.

I see her as I hop off the 57 bus at 40th and Telegraph, my knee length braids with beaded ends brushing up against my hip. “I see you sis, you slaying’ that look!” I let her know as we cross paths. She echoes me. “So is you, boo! So is you.” I tilt my head up to my favorite city landmark, the 222ForgottenCity billboard by Brittsense.²¹⁰ *Money is fake. Energy is real.* A stranger in a white Honda rolls down the window at the stop sign adjacent to where we stand - “I’m loving them braids sis! You slaying’ that look!” In that moment, like many moments in motion in Oakland, her body, my body, and the built environment Black women curated for our bodies, becomes a site of healing.

Our bodies as texts convene and converse with fellow Blackgirl bodies as texts, speaking a language of self slay and asé, speaking back to brown skin and gold trim. Our bodies as a canvas for adornment, our bodies as the embodied realization of the adorned interior self, as the body adorns the self and the city simultaneously, painting the concrete Blackgirl glittered magic. To see and be seen as Black woman in Oakland is healing.

To see a sis is not just a visual act, and does not just privilege Western emphasis on the eye as the primary way to know. *I see you, sis* means I feel you, I acknowledge you, I honor the holistic being of you. I hear you/ smell you/ taste the pain of you.

The body that is a healing space forces Oakland to become a healing space. We mold Oakland into healing city because we make our bodies a healing home. By recognizing each others’ bodies in

²⁰⁸ To purchase her book, visit <https://www.brittsense.com/>
Brittsense. *The Power of Melanin*. 222 Media. 2019.

²⁰⁹ Brittsense. *The Power of Melanin*. 222 Media. 2019.

²¹⁰ Brittsense. *The Power of Melanin*. 222 Media. 2019.

everyday movements through routine routes of Black city life, we make the whole city a site of healing even as it simultaneously exists as a site of terror, violence, and displacement and precarity.

Us round the way girls be reimagining the infrastructure of the city, forcing Oakland to stretch and expand for us, shifting the senses of city blocks and breaking up the rigid census where arithmetic subtracts the number of Black folks in Oakland by the minute. Click tick tockin' on our livelihood. But for every one Black woman's body as canvas made art on body, she channels the entire chorus. She stands on the corner where her grandma use to stay and she invoked an inner power that is collective, communal, and generations old. The cousins who can't find work, the mamas who can't afford the physical conditions of the back breaking labor within which they work, the daughters and the babies and the elders and the sisters who are just struggling to breathe. The presence of her body pays homage to every pushed-out, unseen, unaccounted for and forgotten chocolate city Blackgirl.

And I ain't from around here, but I be swearin' Oakland adopted me. Because of the way them girls embrace me at the bus stop and the cookout and the dolla store. Yet, while a chocolate city is a chocolate city²¹¹, Bay Area mourning is a particular sort of mourning, a particular type of memory mapping from the dust and dirt of death.

Like all chocolate city round the way girls, we mourn in ghetto harmony with one another. Yet, this Black Bay Area mourning looks and feels like a life force sucked out and snatched back simultaneously. I will never never know, no matter how close I hold the strangers who become homegirls who become friends, how it feels to mourn this city the way them Bay girls do. Black girls from 'The Town' grapplin' with loss of land. Loss of love. Loss of self/ home/ help from the state/ the loss of peace they only got a taste of in the warmth of an Auntie's arms, an Auntie who live in Antioch/ Tracy/ Sacramento now. The loss of life in the city of social death, the reverberations of impossibility. And while Black cities across the nation are facing the ruptures of gentrification, Oakland's push-out²¹² game been too strong. Tent cities exacerbate the im/possibility of living, the intensity of contrast between rich and poor, wealth and struggling. The extremes you see here out in Oakland, and the fight for life that is birthed in blossoms of creative force, ain't nothin' like I ever seen in no other chocolate city, it's somethin' real special and unique to Oakland. Even in its diasporic roots and routes, 'The Town' got this way about her that give you unconditional love in her gaze even as she is suffering. That is the healing that Brittense names, that gaze that gets you through, the reflection that brings forth healing.

These girls, determined to get well and get free, they find a lot in 'The Town', and they make a lot in 'The Town'. They keep makin' they self/ they home/ they life over and over again in 'The Town'. Keep mendin' they scars in this 'Town'. Them everyday round the way Blackgirls who is women but still womanchild²¹³, they be learning how to breathe in 'The Town', even in the midst of toxic air. They dare to dream here. Together, with ten toes down²¹⁴ and clarity about who and what lives within and beyond them, they be knowin' it ain't safe, but that safety might come in small soft moments, in the minutia of tethered moments strung together in time, when Black women see Black women and let Black women know they ain't alone. Somewhere between gentrification and remembrance²¹⁵, 'The Town' holds them Blackgirls who hold me. The Town teaches me to hold

²¹¹ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

²¹² Morris, Monique W. *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. The New Press. 2016.

²¹³ Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary."

²¹⁴ Nipsey Hussle, Round the way angel/ hood spirit guide.

²¹⁵ Alexis Wells-Oghoghohemeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

myself more closely as my sisters teach me to be held. I cling to the clarity that Oakland provides and learn to love myself here.

The everyday round the way Black girl's body is a palimpsest²¹⁶ that remembers. In her showing up on concrete, her body becomes a channeling of all the Blackgirl bodies/ minds/ souls/ hearts/ ancestors/ spirits who came of age on this here concrete, who have since been erased in time and space. Who double-ditched with they feet between too tight of a rope, who start ditchin' class at just nine years old cuz the teachers aint teach what they needed, who stretched phone cords and clothes lines on a Sunday night right before them street lights come on. Her body is a palimpsest that demands you remember. Her body in the city forces the city to see the unseen. Her body carries the cloak of what they deem the underworld. Her body is a witness to the domestic violence of whiteness that the city projected onto Black bodies like her own, bodies that carry the memory of what used to be. She knows domestic violence intimately - the violence of the state onto her home, the loss of her home, the lingering im/possibility of home, of safe, of free.

She is a hood chick who remembers. The Concert at the Lake and Tupac's performance and the Deep East around '88th. Her body tells you this. Her body traces the grave of the state, its death trap, its repetition. One Blackgirl slain at MacArthur Bart. Two Black girls shot. Three Black girls harmed. Four Black girls armed. And on and on and on. Her body becomes a road map for the clap back. Engraved in her gold hoops²¹⁷ is a good anthem of thrones, is a claiming and a clinging to Queen, is a catastrophe turned symphony. Seen between the gold grained grills on her two front teeth is the shimmer of a smile she summons each time she take the 57 route through The Town. Each time she stroll roun' what use to be. In alignment with all that was and all that is and all that continues to be, she makes herself heard in the city by making herself seen in the city. She don't really give no fucks bout how they feel about it, she just know she will be noticed by those who know all that her body means to the city. She is a Blackgirl still hangin' onto the city when all the rest of her folks were forced to leave it behind. She has a hope and a dream for the city and she keeps that alive with every stride.

...

Check out line at East Oakland Dollar Tree. Green shirt, badged woman with turquoise hip length locs smiles at my bubbles. "What you gettin' these for?", she asks as she rings up twenty-five packs of six. "Art exhibition, for Black women to play Black girl games together, to heal."²¹⁸ She asks if she can come. I hand her an extra large flyer. She folds it up and places it behind her cashier box. "Ima definitely try to come. You do this a lot? You look artsy, like you do this often." I nod my head. Tell her about the monthly healing space I hold on campus. I hand her my card and she hands me my receipt. I look down to realize I did not pay for half the items in my cart. "So sorry, I got caught up talkin' and forgot to put the rest of my stuff up here." She cuts me off - "Go 'head, you good," whispering and waving my towards the store exit. In awe at the blessing, I smile and give a head nod of recognition, affirmation, gratitude, for a Black girl to see another Black girl and support her

²¹⁶ Christen Smith, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence and Performance in Brazil* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

²¹⁷ Jade Charon, "Gold: Made Just For You," 2022.

²¹⁸ The art exhibition I was shopping for, entitled "This Sh*t is For Us: An Exhibition of #BlackGirlHealing, is explored more in depth in Chapter 3. It is accompanied by a virtual curation, found at blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus.

in a simple moment and nurture her craft and look out. What an act of care, an act of love, an act of radical refusal on my behalf. I left out the East Oakland Dollar Tree with half my items unbagged - notebooks for Black girls to write poetry, bubbles for Black healing, paper plates, gift bags. A Black woman I did not know saw me in bright blue dashiki shirt and braided bun and baby hairs swirled and bright bold lip. A Black woman I did not know allowed herself to see me, let herself recognize herself in me, put her job at risk to redirect her position of power for my benefit, for the benefit of the work I was doing on behalf of Black women.

. . .

Order Uber. Black woman swerves into parking lot. Parks crooked. I come to the door and open. “Oo, ain't you cute! I love that top, that blue! Lookin' like you celebratin' Black history baby!” I smile and step into her 2002 Toyota. “Yes ma'am, I celebrate it everyday!” – “That's right baby, how you doing today?” – “I'm stressed,” I admit, thinking of the long list of to-do's clouding my head. (Email artists, contact volunteers, plan for exhibition opening, etc.) “Stressed?! Baby, you too blessed to be stressed! You just went into the store and walked out with bags. You blessed!” I smiled, for she had not even known just how blessed my encounter moments earlier had been with another Black woman who chose to see me, just as she did. The tender calming care in her voice loosened my muscles and unclenched my jaw. I told her about the exhibition. My fear and anxiety about not giving all I envisioned for Black women. “Well, listen here, we gon' do this real quick.” Bows head. Closes eyes. Red light turn green. Opens eyes. Continues prayer. “In Jesus name, I pray you give Brittany the strength to channel all the gifts you've given her.” Something about hearing this stranger turned auntie say the name my mama gave me made my insides jump with joy. Brittany was the name of my inner child healing, the inspiration for my desire to research how Black women work to heal their inner Black girl through creativity, and the name on my Uber account. I smiled, knowing spirit moved me to her to slow down, to learn to listen, to let myself breathe.

so who
are these
round
the way
girls?

these
wayward
lived
girls²¹⁹

these
ghetto

²¹⁹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

girls

these
bamboo
eared
girls
from

“222 forgotten cities”²²⁰

these girls from
underworlds²²¹

who are these
theorists
of curation
these artists
in the
everyday
sense?

.

round the way
a geographic site
of Blackgirl
space-making
self-making
world-making

round the way
a physical location
of belonging

a place
where
space
is made

where dice
is rolled up
and self-
proclaimed
dykes be
rolled up

²²⁰ Brittense, *The Power of Melanin* (222 Media, 2019).

²²¹ Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “No one knows the mysteries at the bottom of the ocean,” *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007): 1–13.

and healers
hymn tunes
to a beat
that be
familiar
and family
is made
and home
is made
and

here
we
are

head wrapped
colored. in colors

you cannot
unsee me
you gon
see me
see
me

the ghetto girls' way of saying
I AM HERE

-Sadiyah Hartman²²²

to the
world
that wishes
she would
disappear
then
reappear
in
new skin
same frame
same braids
new name

pick her
apart to
put her

²²² "The glitter and shine afforded on city streets... (was) the way the poor girl accounted to the world: *I am here.*" (117); Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

back
together

to have
her wear
the skin
of the
woman
who is
prettier
like Becky²²³.

but these
round the way
Oakland girls
ain't never
gave no fucks
about a Becky²²⁴

these
round the way
girls from
the Town
bob head
to hyphy
and hone
they art
and heal
in the
Heavens
they curate
in hell

the havens
the enclaves
these counter
culture girls
who make
culture
with the
compass
of their
choreographed
citizenship²²⁵

²²³ Beyonce, "If you wish, I can wear her skin, wear it over mine," *Lemonade*, (2016).

²²⁴ BBQ Becky called the cops on Black folks grilling at the lake. BBQ'n While Black became an annual festival to celebrate the whole hood at the lake.

²²⁵ Cox, *Shapeshifters*.

these
Oakland
girls
girls from
The Town
don't
undo theyself
for no one

and that
is self-making
and that
is healing

who
are these
Oaktown girls
with murals
and mottos

of making space
making time
to be in
what is real
like energy
like staying true
is the only
thing to
save you

the
hood girls
always
the realest
cuz they
ain't lost it
like deep East
who ain't
switched up
how she walk
or talk
or her
style of dress
like them
girls who
ain't stopped
seeking
each other

ain't stopped
stepping out
and
poppin out
and
doin
they damn thing

healing
is bein
round the way
with these
Blackgirls

walking
West Oakland
a healing space
where my
reflections
see me back

the fifty seven bus

[From Emeryville to Foothill Square]

The 57 bus travels back and forth from two edges of Oakland, from what was once the West which has now been renamed Emeryville (a developed section of town with shops and restaurants and clean paved roads and skyrocketing rent) to Foothill Square, the Deep East part of Oakland reaching past the 100s. Its last stop is Foothill Blvd and 108th. This bus maps Oakland in motion, riding from the most to the least gentrified, tracing the patterns of antiBlackness at each stop. Who gets on and off when and where teaches me about The Town.

...

I don't lived in the North, in the West, and in the East of Oakland. Always at the border between one place and another. In Temescal, on the border of Berkeley and Oakland, in Funktown, on the border of not quite the East and the East, (at the heart of the debate about what is and is not East Oakland), and in Mosswood, on the border of North and West. With each move, I don't attempted to use the bus route to map for myself where gentrification travels, how fast and how furious, in order to get a sense of where I am, who is here, what is here, and what I am entering into in my process of tryna make home. From the hipster half of the North they named Temescal to the start of the East, where whiteness creeps gradually yet steadily, to the edge of the transition between West and North, where tent city scapes map the concrete, I have tried to make sense of Oakland's contested space through the bus route I know most intimately.

In every spot I ever lived, the fifty seven bus got me where I needed to go. With a transfer to or from the 6 or the 12, the 18 or the F, the 57 transported my body as canvas as art through every corner of The Town. Got me between home and school, home and community, home and my students in the Black Girl Magic Self Love Club, to Target and Ikea, to the East Oakland Dollar Tree and the Beauty Supply Warehouse, to therapy, to my homegirl house, to get my hair braided, to

the healing training at the Youth Uprising Center out in deep East Oakland, to the end of year holiday party at Joyce Gordon gallery, to Twerk Church and back, to Sunday service and back. I watch where I hop on and hop off, see my steps to and from each stop as a map of Blackgirl healing.

The 57 bus becomes a site of sacred convening. The Divine use the bus to build Black women up when we come across each other in passing. To let Black women see Black women. The bus be the place where I meet my friends turned sisters turned family. The Blackgirl from back East, like me, who grew up close to the Philadelphia I still cling to, who work at my favorite pizza spot and always give me discounts when I come through. The Blackgirl who run the bible study. Who bring her books and her holy packed neat in her bag and pull them out one by one to show me her Jesus, her prayers, her faith. The bus be a space to catch up with a sis you ain't seen in a while. A homegirl you met at an event some years back. A student who grew up and became a woman.

Tika, who I taught Black Feminist Poetry at Oakland Tech, who all grown up and workin' at Target now, who I ride with on the 57 bus from the West side to Emeryville. Who cry to me about needing a hug and a healing, thanking God I just so happen to be on the bus that day, headed to her job on the 57 that day. We hope off the 57 together and walk into Target and she tell me she don' bought Sacred Woman and gon learn more about how to be well.

That one therapist I met at SoOakland's²²⁶ New Year's circle for Black women seeking sisterhood and healing, I always see her on the 57. She always check in on me. She remember when I called about being low. The day after December 31, the day after I performed a poem at that event and spoke about tryna be well, I had finally decided to try again to find a therapist who could help me heal. I had called the Black therapist office and heard the voice on the other end say *Ree, Ree Botts, that name sound so familiar, your voice, familiar, did you just perform last night?* And she say she regret not being able to hug me then but she thank me for my words, and ensure she gon get me a therapist that's Black and woman and well. And I been seeing sis around ever since. At all the Black women's healing events. At all the parades. And on all them 57 buses.

...

The Black women who sit at the bus stop on the right side of my teal green bay-windowed fourplex. Smile big. Eyes wide. Inner light glow from the resilience of they spirit. Cigarette in one hand, hot cheetos in the other. Green hair. Blonde wig. Red tips. Red lips. Bright blazer, with the matching hand-me-down bag from some kind Black lady from the church corner.

"You better work that bun sis! You cute and can't nobody tell you otherwise." Her friends chime in and a chorus of compliments wave over me. Reflected. I smile back. "Thank you so much sis! You too! I'm loving your hair/ nails/ shirt/ bag. You better slay that look!"

I watched her and her friends return to their West Oakland tent city home and honored the space that was once theirs. That I stole. That I as Black woman could afford to call home. This is where Black womanhood slips into fragments of positionality. Yet the gap between my home and theirs, a block apart, felt wider than the space of wondering between their world and mine. And still, there is an investment in reflection, of seeing and being seen among each other. In passing, we at times

²²⁶ So Oakland is a hub for community events and gathering. For more, visit www.sooakland.com.

pretend not to see each other. But in the moments we do decide to acknowledge the presence of our own, my new home feels a bit more like home.

...

You two are looking so beautiful this afternoon, she said walkin' slowly past us. Right outside my place, right around the corner from MacArthur Bart, where Oakland's babygirl had been stabbed to death in the neck.²²⁷ One year later, this lady, with swirls of grey hairs hangin' from her hot pink headwrap, a gap in every other tooth, walkin down MLK like she own it. Thank you so much, Keisha and me say with a smile. So are you! And I am loving how you laced up that knot round yo curls. She smiled real big and wide. "You know," she said, leanin in, as if to prepare us for the rare round the way secret she was about to share, "this a t-shirt on my head." She whispered in a subtly sarcastic thoughtitwas! kinda way. "Foreal?!" Keisha exclaimed with shock and marvel. "Yup, cuz I'm artissticcc." She drew out the word, motioning wit her hands a diva like stance, extending her neck up to the sun for God to acknowledge her glory. "And this some pants on my head!" I chimed in, touching the red roped up bun shaped knot wrapped around my blonde-black waves. "See, you know how we do it! You artistic too!" We smiled and laughed and wished each other well as we parted ways. Keisha sighed, "Girl, I love our people."

This was what Dr. Yaba Blay would call a Professional Black Girl moment an encounter when two Black women, across age and class lines, can see a common creativity between us and know that in some way we may have found just a glimpse of home in each other. Not a home to sleep in, not a roof or a shelter, not a solution to the conditions of displacement, but an encounter that reminds us of belonging and divinity, and site of belonging in the wake of the ruins.

These moments in passing act as a break within the break²²⁸, a refreshing reminder of the creativity that the door²²⁹ made possible, in the midst of im/possibility. These moments, between neighbors and strangers and friends, become a signaling of home in the hearts of each other, in the art of each other.

When my neighbor says *I am artistic*, she affirms a sense of pride in herself. She affirms her beauty, and the beauty of her wearable sustainable reusable art, the ghetto genius of the wardrobe headwrap that both she and I had mastered. She reflected me in that moment, reflected the everyday round the way embodied praxis of the *but still* - but still we create, but still we be art. Two Black women walking MacArthur with pink and red knots on our heads, like pink and purple ribbons of Black girlhood. However insignificant that encounter may have been for her, it meant everything to me.

a hood tour

[With My Homegirl Emeka Jensen²³⁰]

Black women often have a complicated relationship with the beauty supply store. And when say beauty supply, we ain't talkin' bout Sally's, we talkin' bout the hood beauty supply stores, the ones that sell the shit that Sally's don't got. The complexity is this - on the one hand, it is a space where

²²⁷ Nia Wilson. Nov. 10th, 1999 - July 22, 2018

²²⁸ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013).

²²⁹ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Vintage Canada Press, 2002).

²³⁰ My doctoral sis Emeka is a PhD student who studies Black geographies.

we gather to curate new visions of ourselves. On the other, it can also be a site where we experience antiBlack encounters with nonBlack (often Asian) workers. In Oakland, California, there is only one beauty supply store owned by a Black woman, Essence Beauty Supply, but because of the antiBlackness within the beauty supply industry, she is unable to carry a large variety of items and has struggled to stay in business. Additionally, what makes cheap prices of beauty supplies possible is the exploitative nature of the work conditions in “third-world” countries, and the waste and debris of these supplies often cause great damage to the environment. Even still, the beauty supply store represents a significant part of Black women’s everyday experience - it is a site where Black women reclaim our understandings of beauty and invite ourselves to reimagine the definition of beauty for ourselves, on our own terms.

...

My sis Emeka and me bonded over round the way girl shit. Earrings. Hoops. Hair weaves. Beauty supplies. The first day we met, she said *sis I love them hoops*, I said, *girl, I love yours too*, and we been sisters ever since. We work real hard at holdin’ each other up and holdin’ each other down, two round the way girls from other round the way cities tryna make a home of Oakland.

She came to The Bay from The Chi, searching for some glimpse of home in a hood that felt familiar. *Yes! Ree, that's it, every day round the way Blackgirl methodology. That's it. That's what I been lookin for out here. I haven't been able to find language to describe, like, yea, I be seein' Black folks and they be cool and kind, but, you know, like where my sistas I can theorize and kiki with, who I can go from the campus to the beauty supply sto' with?*

I give her a hood tour of The Town I fell in love with and promised her we round the way ghetto geniuses are here, waitin’ to hold her in an embrace of baby-haired edges, EcoStyled toothbrushes, blue gold head scarves and knock off handbags. She come scoop me in her whip and I laugh about how I never ride in cars no more. How I stay on that bus route. I realize how much faster it is in a whip, but how much less you see, how much I appreciate moving slow in this city. How the bus lets me pace myself and notice more.

We begin and end with the beauty supply stores. We theorize an analytic of West Oakland versus East Oakland based on what kinda weave they sell at which hair store. The beauty supply that got the knock off Burberry bags and the one that only got colored hair. The one that got an entire assortment of beads and the one that only got clear and gold. The one with rhinestoned gems to attach to the braid and the one that only got the basic clamps without the bejeweled studded blinged out stick on diamonds. The one that got all different shapes and sizes of bamboo earrings and the one that only got door knockers. The one with the star shaped bamboo hoops, the dollar sign bamboo hoops, and the heart shaped bamboo hoops is the one with the most selection of everything. They the ones that got the fuzzy flip flops with pearled accents, the rain boots and the flower patterned head scarves of every size. We decide that the more selection of bags, boots, and beads that the beauty supply have, the less gentrified that neighborhood is. The more barrettes and bows and ballies they got, the more round the way girls they probably got living around that way. We decide that's where we tryna be, always, where the ghetto girls with them rare colored beaded braids be at, the ones that got ombre patterned fish tails and twisted locs with red, black and green yarn on the ends to match her politic. *Are you gon' talk about the beauty supply as a site of Black women's healing?* Emeka asks me as we pull up to our first stop. I say, “girl, I am now!”

Emeka is a Black Geographer who study race and space and place. Her Bay Area home has Chicago streets pasted to the walls - the literal street signs from her old hood are hung up in her bedroom and plastered on the walls above the couch. Aware of our embodied movement through the city, we think about who we are as we move. She understand, like Hunter and Smith do, that a chocolate city is a chocolate city.²³¹ That everyday round the way Blackgirls all across Black America live by a similar methodology, a similar ethic, a similar etiquette and code. There are details that differ - in the Chi *as the street numbers go up you gradually gettin' deeper into the hood - we call it the Wild 100s*, where in The Town, when them numbers go up, you more in the hood and they call it Deep East, we grew up callin' em ballies but out here they call em knockers, that a palm treed project can't be the concrete jungles of what's East of here. But the essence be the same. The basis be the same. The slay be similar, the vibes be similar, the love be the same. The head nod, the fist lift, the recognition of each other, it still be the same. We know that real recognize real, that a sis who yo sis embrace you when she see you even if she don't know you. That it all be feelin' different yet it all be feelin' the same, soon as we find each other we find a glimpse of familiar, a sense of subtle safety, a source of home.

I take Emeka to my old hood out East. Ask her what she know 'bout Fruitvale and she say nothin' but the movie. Nothin' but Oscar Grant's death and his community's love. Say she could *feel that shit from the screen*. We pull up to Fruitvale's beauty supply and find all the bags and flip flops and slides and barrets. *Now this the type shit I'm used to. This the hood that ain't been totally gentrified, this is exactly what I been needin'*. I tell her 'bout Britttsense, the artist whose creative theory of Black space-making made my work shift, how her billboards of Black being became landmarks throughout The Town, how her photographic witnessing of Black hair made me center hood ethics as care.

At the beauty supply in the West, I tell Emeka that it's time to get focused, 'cuz I gotta figure out my new 'do. Me and Emeka map out the curation of colors and textures that's gon meet and merge on my head. We collectively curate the vision for the art. Her creative contribution is the consultation. She is one of many committee members called upon for this particular art project, one of many commissioned to collaborate on this life size canvas. With my appointment just a few days away, I can't decide so I call them all. She and my mama and my sister and my hair dresser and my boo all become central pieces to the puzzle of my 'do. Each one with a unique expertise on style, length, size of each braid, bead color, barret choice. Each with their own unique eye for the fine art that is to be made on my scalp.

Pink purple silver and blonde? Is that gon' be too much? Too tacky? Too ghetto? Too ratchet? Straight or curled ends, beads and barrets or ballies, or both? We pull every shade of purple and pink they got, trying to imagine what each would require of my hair dresser. We decide to go for all four colors, because fuck it, why not? I'm turnin' twenty-seven and I should go all out. I laugh about how I feel younger at 27 than I did at 17, but wiser still. Younger like more carefree in my skin, younger like lighter and less weight. Younger like colored hair and beads and ballies and barrets at the same damn time. *This me tryna reclaim somethin, tryna reclaim everything I couldn't have back then - my girlhood, my colors, my innocence.*

I show her the pictures of my HBCU girl hair flip days. Them featured in Ebony Magazine as a top ten campus queen days. When I wore puffy white pageant dresses and feathered curls. Shoulder length silky press and patten leather loafers with a cardigan and pearls. Show her how I used to

²³¹ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

move through the world - a round the way girl at heart suppressed by respectability. *Different geographies bring out different things in us.* She read my whole life with that one.

As we shop at the hood beauty supply for platinum blonde braiding hair with purple pink highlights, I laugh at all the ways my round the way girl womanhood had changed. How choked up I use to get tryna defend who I was and how I was with some circle shaped pearls and a Southern girl smile. How fearful I use to be that they would label me booji when really I was just me, a girl with a ghetto way of walkin' and talkin', who never knew how to blend in, who had no idea how she made it to all them stages - third place in Miss HBCU and queen of the whole Morehouse College. A ghetto girl. A round the way unpolished talk like she ain't got no sense move like a malcriada²³² like she ain't got no home trainin' like she wasn't raised right like she never learned how to fit into femininity. Raw. Raunchy. Unkempt. Unfiltered. Too real. Not poised enough. Always pretty enough. Always light skin enough slim enough petite enough. But never poised enough. Never classy enough. Never knew which fork or spoon to use at the receptions. Never knew how not to dance when my song came on at the galas. Never knew how to exist in a world where I couldn't be ratchet. So I was always that girl - look on the outside like she blend in with them but soon as she open her mouth, soon as she take one step out the crowd, you realize she ain't never know how to act. Ain't never know how to keep the ratchetness in tact. Never knew how not to be herself but always strugglin' with herself.

Oakland taught me how to project on the outside who I always been on the inside. Oakland girls gave me permission to be bold in my Black. Bold and bomb and bamboo hoops and round the way and allat. Let me leave out my baby hairs and get the extra long braids. Oakland embraced me in my learning to curate a self that sits well with me, a self that speaks to my interiority, a body that is adorned with all that makes me feel Black and ratchet and worthy.

Different geographies bring different things out of us, Ree, so it makes sense. It makes sense that you looked like a Spelman girl at Spelman, and it makes sense that you look like a Oakland girl in Oakland. Something about that truth made me feel flimsy, like flip floppin with the moods of the winds of the places where I inhabit. But I tell her how Oakland feels most like me, how that Spelman girl never felt like *me*. That I ain't no chameleon just blending in with trees. I am finding myself and shedding myself and this place don't let me do that.

We pack up our purses and assortments of horsehair and head back to my home. And I feel grateful for the girlhood that summoned me through the search for ballies and beads. And I feel gratitude for a sister who lets me journey into the interior geographies of me, and I pray a prayer of thankfulness for the Oakland with the decked-out beauty supplies, for the parts of The Town that still honor us.

bbqin' while black

["The Family Reunion WE All Have Been Waiting For"²³³]

²³² Lorraine Avila, *Malcriada and Other Stories* (Dominican Writers Association Press, 2019).

²³³ For more, visit @BBQingWhileBlack on Instagram.

BBQing While Black is an annual cookout at Lake Merritt birthed as a spatialized response to antiBlack gentrification in Oakland. BBQ Becky, a white woman who called the police on a group of Black folks cooking out at the lake in 2018, went viral when a video of her call to the cops spread across Chocolate Cities throughout the nation. BBQing While Black has since become a staple event for the Black Oakland community, particularly the Black folks in The Town who were born and raised in the Bay Area.²³⁴

...

Left out house for the 18 towards Lake Merritt in a CamiCoLace²³⁵ off the shoulder crop top Oakland tee with a polka dot ruffled skirt and a pink lip, and a lil round straw bag with yellow die from West Africa. Hop off downtown. Traffic heavy. The folks is out! The folks from round the way is round the way today! I hop off and walk the rest of the way. Pass Nipsey memorial. Long, sad eyes painted blue greens, bandana shimmering blue. Bay Area got love for the marathon, and it continues.

Turn the corner towards Cleveland Cascade, the landmark on the flyer, the spot that Google Maps has marked “terraced park that once had a fountain.” I wonder what happened to the fountain. Wonder how many Black women at the lake remember that fountain. Wonder how many made they first kiss there. How many marked they first scotch to hop there. How many turned they first rope for double dutch there. Wonder why Google Maps is invested in the memory. As I turn the corner, I see a cascade of Black folks, folded brim fitted hats with nike sneaks to match, red hair cut in crisp bob and red patterned laces. I see a sea of Black. Whole left half of the lake look like SpelHouse homecoming. Whole hood came out for this one!

On the periphery of the concentrated group of Black folks were a few scattered people of color with their one Black friend, and the booji Black tech folks who didn’t get the memo that this was a *hood* event. “I saw a woman with green hair to match her green shoes!”, an Asain friend said to the Black tech guy in a condescending tone. They kept their distance at the periphery, gazing into the crowd as if we were on display. But the most beautiful thing was that we weren’t on display for no one but ourselves. The closer I got into the center, the more ratchet it got, and I was beaming every step of the way. Heard the Hyphy Town tunes my students danced to at all our end of year parties. Heard the oldies I grew up playin’ in my Mama’s jeep. Gold rim grills. Gold tone hair. Braids and beads. The works!

This is the Blackest I have ever seen Oakland. I see now why my students say, “Trust me, you ain’t seen the Oakland I call home.” Why my homegirls say, “Sis, you will never truly get to see my city.” *This* is a glimpse of their Oakland. This right here is that Heavenly Blackness, that round the way, from the Town, born and raised Blackness. I grew so used to spaces they called “Black” being hyper multicultural and erasing Blackness, that I had my expectations low. But when I walked around the lake today, I saw nothing but US! Felt like Atlanta all over again. Felt like home. Felt comfortable in my fit. Felt like I fit in. Felt free enough, felt seen enough. Let myself breathe and be present. Soaked it all in.

²³⁴ For more, visit @bbqnwhileblack on instagram.

²³⁵ My older sister has a clothing line, @camicolace, and I rock her styles every chance I get.

I walk to a circle of dancers, playin' Soca and salsa. Wonder if they feelin free free free as they look. Long locs swing and sway with the winding of hips that hold back for no one. See a student leader from the org I use to work with. Do not recognize her at first, because of her shades, because of the way she got her hair twisted up in bantu knots, not braids like usual. I see a beautiful sis in yellow pants with poppin hair and say I love yo style, and she say, "Hey Ms. Ree!" Hug. Say she doin' good. I tell her how I am proud of her. She say she is proud of me too. "Poetry slam tonight, you comin through?" I say text me the info sis.

See my homegirl from campus, the Black woman with purple laid finger waves I met on the 6 last year. Allie. Transfer. Daughter wanna go to Spelman. Hit me up sis, hit me up! Took two classes I taught. Today she has her purple short cut combed up into a swoop. Today she is fly, as always. She say she heading out, but that Ima have a good time, because it is so much for me to get into! Said hey to Mista Fab, the hood celebrity who rap, sell clothes, and post inspirational videos on Instagram Live. Said happy birthday to the little Black girl whose Mama set up a tent for her party, and thought about how lit that must be, for her to turn nine and celebrate herself in the midst of all this love and warmth.

"This is the type of jump rope mommy used to do when she was your age," the pretty poised woman said to her daughter as she watched the ghetto girls jump double dutch. She did not join, but she smiled in nostalgia, as if remembering the childhood scenes she had not returned to. All the round the way girls standin round cheer and chant as they rotate turners, jumpers, and hype squad. I stay on the sidelines as the hypesquad, having never been able to grasp double dutch at all them recesses when my homegirls from Philly tried to teach my country self how to jump. I gave up on it, but always loved being the cheerleader on the side. *Yaaassss boo, you better fuck it up in the rope!*

Becky from round my old way came up beside me and started cheerin' too. She had been runnin' round tellin' folks all across the lake that they had made this whole entire gathering just for her, talkin' bout *they named this after me, BBQ Becky, like this whole cookout is for me!*" And we all got a kick out of watching this Black woman reappropriate the intention of the day, reclaim her name and assert her space and her right to be celebrated.

Came up on Brittsense tent. Black woman from Deep East Oakland who wear gold grills. Who billboard on the corner of 40th and Telegraph I walk pass everytime I hope on the 6 bus. I tell her. She smile. I thank her for representing for me everything my dissertation project hopes to represent - Black women making space for healing in the wake of displacement. Tell her that billboard reminds me we still here. We still Black. We still strong.²³⁶ We still unapologetic. She smile. I say I ain't from around here, but around here surely adopted me. Say Oakland remind me of home, say Philly feel a lot like here. She light up. Say she love girls from Philly 'cause we be seeming like Oakland distant cousin. Philly jawns get love in The Town, because Town girls know we come from similar vibes. Even in the intricacies of our cities and their identities, real recognize real and familiar recognize itself as such. I end up talkin' for two hours by that tent, with Britt and Black folks who come and go and join in and bring a friend and dig in to the power of the melanin she convenes through her art. We lose track of time talkin' bout all things Blackness, all we celebrate 'bout our heritage round this way. Homie hold up camera phone and take our pic by Britt's poster - The Power of Melanin. She grit her teeth to show the gold. I think she is the dopest.

²³⁶ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.

I spend the whole bus ride home flippin' through them pages. *The Power of Melanin*.²³⁷ A photo book about Black hair. The strength of it. How it brings us close. A mother and a daughter, a hair dresser and her client turned kin. A text about the aesthetics of hood Blackness. With images of Black everydayness embodied, in rollers or locs or twist outs, buns and beads and barretts, bonnets and waves, next to items in nature, as if to say we reflect the sun. As if to assert that we illuminate all that is natural, all that is sacred, all that is Godly. *Dear Ancestors*, the opening pages read, *I ask you to keep our people uplifted & aligned through all destruction, displacement & distractions*. Situating displacement as an ever present threat to the power of melanin, Britt prays a prayer for ancestors to "heal us . . . [from] our trauma & triggers . . . to guide us back to our Roots . . . To help us acknowledge our existence beyond the flesh but through spirit . . . [and to] rise us up from these conditions."²³⁸ She traveled to Chocolate Cities across the nation, what she calls 222 Forgotten Cities, to capture in New York and New Orleans what she captures in Oakland - everyday round the way living.

Her work embodies what I work to name, that the ghetto is sacred and the sacred is ghetto. That the everyday slay is an affirmation of divinity. That we, in the intricacies of our curated and embodied designs find ways to honor ourselves, our gods, and our ancestors on our bodies, in the flesh, in the midst of fractured longing, in the wake of displacement. We make space and time to show ourselves and know ourselves more deeply in everyday acts of affirmation. We wear pride in our scalp and holy in our beads, and mother nature, who is a Black woman ancestor who teaches us how to breathe, gets reflected in all of her delicacy through the power of the unconditional love we wear upon our skin.

black joy parade

[A Celebration of Black Experience]

According to www.blackjoyparade.org, the "Black Joy Parade is a hyper-positive non-profit based in Oakland, CA that celebrates the Black experience and community's contribution to history and culture with its signature parade and celebration, partnerships and events." For the third consecutive year, the Black Joy Parade has attracted tens of thousands of Black folks from all across the Bay Area and beyond. Defined on their site as a "A hyper-positive parade and festival to celebrate the Black experience past, present and future,#" it is a feel good/ vibe out kinda block party that extends from 14th and Alice to 19th and Broadway, shutting down the entire city center. It features over one hundred Black vendors, performers, and organizations, giving Black Oakland a space to celebrate, commemorate, and remember.

...

At the bus stop by the corner of MacArthur and MLK, I stand with my Black Panthers Free Breakfast Program cropped hoodie on, with the ruffled flower-patterned sleeves that Melody made me covering my arms, and a gold fanny pack I picked up from the beauty supply for damn near free ninety-nine wrapped around my waist. My blondepurplepinkgold knee-length braids, with the barretts and the beads on the ends, are tied up into two ballies on the top of my head, makin' babygirl pigtails that match my babyhair swirls. My gold hoops hang to my shoulders, and my orange

²³⁷ Brittsense, *The Power of Melanin*.

²³⁸ Brittsense, *The Power of Melanin*, xi.

lip tops off the look. I stand with one hand on my hip and the other on the Lays bag as I pour the last bit of crumbs into my mouth.

As I cross MLK to catch the 18 bus, I hear Lady V from school yell out the window, “Ree, you headed to the parade?” Lady V and me just met a few years back, but it be feelin’ like we knew each other for lifetimes. She is almost 68 and I am 27, but we experience sisterhood in healing. Our intergenerational exchanges make way for transformation inside me. She comes to hella healing circles I host, and I serve as her mentor for grad school apps. I be so inspired by her love for her people, her insistence on self-actualization, and her determination to keep stackin’ up degrees until she can’t no more. Lady V believes it ain’t never too late to start over. She went back to Merritt College, at the campus where I now teach, at the age of 63. She teach me lots about loving our mothers, forgiving our grandmothers, and believing in second chances.

Lady V done lived in The Town for much of her life and she tell me stories about the shifts. She used to be a bus driver, and she maps routines routes of The Bay ‘cross space and time in the conversations that she shares with me. And Lady V and me always run into each other in transit. On the 6 bus, on the 57 bus, on the street. So, seeing her at the corner wasn’t no surprise ‘cuz the universe always bless us with each other’s presence in that exact type of way. On this day, I laugh at my luck as I hop into her 2002 Honda Civic. It’s gone be a real good day at the Black Joy Parade, I can already feel it in my bones, ‘cuz Lady V made me sure of it.

“My kids and all they kids there now waitin’ on me, them children been talkin bout it all month!,” she laughed. I thanked her for the ride and thanked her for the love as she let me out at 19th and Franklin. As I hopped out the car, I ran into another homegirl from campus. Another Black mother goin’ back to school and affirming’ her right to be well. Her three-year-old daughter kicked and screamed with excitement in the Afrocentric patterned stroller. “Girl, she so happy to see the feathers and fur, the drop top convertibles and the colored floats. She in Blackgirl heaven!”

I watch Black women tap dancin’ down 12th street with their childhood friends dressed in fairy wings and fruit-punch cherry-colored wigs. As I cheer on the dancers from Oakland Tech High School, I see one of my former students from the Black Girl Magic Self Love Club. “Ms. Ree! It’s so good to see you!” She leads a group of Black youth down the parade isle, wearing matching tie dye T-shirts with the words “Black Girl Glow” printed across their chests. They chanted, “Black Lives Matter! Black Girls Matter!” The smallest lil mama in the front of the line rocks a zig-zagged parted updo with finger-waved baby hairs and afro puffs on both sides, with clear ballies holding together the thickness of her curls. Her clear ballies looked just like the ones I had holdin’ together my braided pigtails, and I smiled at that fact. She is the loudest and most passionate of the group, and in her little frame, she demands the space she walks as her own. Hand on her hip, head held high, she hits a two-step to the tune of the drum and breaks it all the way down to the ground. “Get it lil sis!! Get it girl,” all the Black women around us affirm. I clap and snap and stomp along, feelin’ lifted by the spirit of the convening.

I feel like I’m walkin’ on clouds as I witness the magic of the moment, all us Black folks shuttin’ down twelve blocks of Oakland’s downtown to make space for unapologetic, unfiltered expressions of Black joy. Forcin’ bus lines to move different, forcin’ cars off they path, fuckin’ up the city coordinates for the sake of our joy. Forcin’ the whole city to make space for us, to expand for us, to extend its boundaries for us. As a not-from-the-Bay Black girl, I watch Bay Area Black folks, comin’

from Antioch to Tracy to Stockton²³⁹, return to they home, even if just for a few hours on a Sunday, to dance through the streets that made them.

The few white folks who floated between the jerk chicken stand and the jukebox booth realized quickly that *this shit is for us*, that this space, while public, was private for a reason. In the middle of main street, in the center of the city, but closed off to anyone foreign to the familial vibration of Black Joy. I watched white folks escort themselves off main street and towards the gentrified cafe. What pride we felt in blocking traffic, forcing the city to make room for us to do what we rarely have the chance to do - be “Black and free in public.”²⁴⁰

I turn the corner down 20th street and stop at The Healing Village, a large parking lot transformed into a therapeutic space of rejuvenation, held by Black women with degrees and certificates wide ranging, from sacred medicinal herbal medicine to psychology and theology. The chalk marks this space of sanctity with blue markings that read, *Holy Ground*. The Ifa Priestess holds a child in the far end of the golden tent next to the shrine of her ancestors. The therapist closes the curtain to her makeshift office for a private session with a couple in crisis. “Free healing! Free services for healing!,” shouts a woman at the front table who collects names and emails of those seeking long term care beyond this moment. “Do you mind if I take a pamphlet?” I ask. “Yes, please do. Here is a list of the practitioners providing free services today. Are you interested in reiki? In a reading? In therapy? In spiritual cleansing?” As the incense burned beneath the debris of garbage collecting on the other side of the street, I stood amazed and in awe at the way my people had cultivated an intimate healing space in a public vacant lot in downtown Oakland. This was the very creative artistic praxis I had known all my life, the informal infrastructures of Black liberatory space making that made our survival possible.

I carry Hanu at my hip. My stuffed-animal unicorn healer, my emotional support animal/ mascot/ inner[blackgirl]child²⁴¹ channeler. After a healing circle sis suggested that a furry friend could help me heal and reclaim my inner Blackgirl, I bought Hanu, my sacred stuffed-animal, and partner in slay. With her pink/ purple/ coral spiked hair matchin’ mine, she help me walk through the Black Joy Parade channeling all the inner Blackgirl carefreeness that I could muster up in my spirit. My inner[blackgirl]child²⁴² tells me to be a glitter glitter girl. I say okay and put extra bright iridescent dots of yellow gold and bronze on the lid of my eyes. I put glitter on my cheeks and shimmer on my nose, I do the most with the make-up, with the whole entire look, and I let the little girl in me feel so fun and free. *Them knockers in yo hair bringin’ me back to my childhood!*, them round the way girls say. *Sis, you really out here matchin’ yo unicorn!*, my homegirls say. They want to know more about my Hanu. I tell them who she is and how she saved me. I wear her like I wear my sleeves, let her model Black girl healing on me. They say, *damn, I should get me one too. A stuffed-animal. Somethin’ soft to hold on my chest and keep me warm on them days when I am feeling alone*. My body and her body be a canvas, a curated display of what it might look like to sankofa²⁴³ our Black girlhood, to go back and fetch what was lost from the little girl who never got to be a child, who was forced to grow up too soon.²⁴⁴

²³⁹ When one can no longer afford rent here, these sites on the outskirts provide housing prices that are a bit more affordable. Bay Area gentrification has forced Black folks into the outskirts of Oakland. Suburban style areas like Antioch, Tracy, and Pittsburg have been populated with waves of Black folks in the past thirty years, creating a gap between Black folks who were successfully pushed out and those still holding on in Oakland. Alex Schafran, “Origins of an Urban Crisis: The Restructuring of the San Francisco Bay Area and the Geography of Foreclosure,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 2 (July 2012).

²⁴⁰ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*.

²⁴¹ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

²⁴² botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

²⁴³ Sankofa bird is a Ghanaian symbol that I have tattooed on my left sholder. It means “to go back and fetch it.”

²⁴⁴ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

I run into one of my braiders, Sakina, right outside the photo booth. She see my blonde and colored braids and smile real big, remembering the last time she did my hair and how hesitant I was about color. *Sisss, you really out here expressing yaseelf, on yo own terms. I am so proud of you, so happy for you. I see that little Blackgirl in you just shining al the way through.* One year ago in this same season, I sat between her hips and cried about the unraveling of my life as she unraveled the strands of my kinks into blonde braids. Told her I had to do somethin' different with my hair, somethin' different with my life, be more me on the inside, more me on the outside, break free from somethin', from everything. Afraid to shift shit like this, this drastic. Colored hair to match the colored soul. Scared of being seen as ghetto. Scared to be the round the way girl I always been. She said she see me, one year later, embracing me. Blonde braids longer. Pinks and purples woven throughout. Unapologetic.

As I walk toward center stage, I see my otha homegirl hairdresser healer friend, Peaches, raise her hand up to the heavens. She is standing right in front of center stage, and my sis Lauren and Sol Development transition from vibin' music to Jesus music. I made it to the stage right on time. Source of Light Development, that's what they call theyself, my homies turned friends turned family from church who make songs to free our spirits. I heal to they music in my darkest hours and cite them on every single syllabus for every single course I teach. I thank God on the regular for the power of they creativity, for the healing arts they make possible.

Just because you by yoself don't mean you really alone comes blasin' through the microphone and I feel my heart feel seen, 'cuz them words hit different when you strugglin'. As I sway to the songs I know so well, yet feel most heavily in moments like these, I grab hold of Peaches' hand and we sway together to the tunes of the spirit. My spirit shifts. *God keep on blessin' me*, Lauren say. The rapper say somethin' bout joy and pain being present at the same time, at all times. How sometimes we be up and sometimes we be down and then sometimes we be down again some more. They cheer bout they first album called SOL of Black Folks turnin' one this year. And I clap and pray and praise and shout, "That album got me through!" And they mourn the loss of Kamaui Sol, the first born daughter of Karega and Felicia - two of the four souls that make up SOL Development²⁴⁵. Kamaui Sol, the babygirl who died the day she was born, whose Black girlhood was made im/possible, like so many Blackgirl angel babies, birthed into the darkness of a world that never knew how to love them. Kamaui Sol. Her mother and her village and the whole of SOL Development curate a world of love for that angel to be held in, a covering of peace for her spirit to live into, even in the wake of her afterlife. This is one of the first times SOL Development has performed since the loss and they let themselves mourn. Publicly. Collectively. In healing. Each song initiates a ritual of healing, and as we witness their grief from the front of the stage, we are welcomed to witness our own grief too. I hug and cry and rock and sway with my homegirl by my side. I am seen and loved, even in the midst of my ugly tears, and SOL Development is too.

After the set is over, I see Baby Lala backstage. Baby Lala is Lauren's inner[blackgirl]child alter ego who speaks in a high pitch tone, in contrast to Lauren's baritone vocals. I always know when Lauren shifts into Baby Lala by the glow up in her eyes and the smirk that gets painted across her lips, even before she speaks. *Baby Ree! We so happy you here. We love you sis!* After the joy and the pain of the performance, it feels beautiful to hug my friend. To tell my sister that I see her. Love her. Feel her. That I appreciate her gift and how it blesses me. As I affirm the power of the performance, I think

²⁴⁵ Felicia has written a book about her journey as an angel mother, entitled "SOL AFFIRMATIONS: A Toolkit for Mother's Who Are Investigating Grief's Process. Kamaui's parents also have a podcast called The Sol Affirmations Podcast on the Black Love Podcast Network. To learn more about their journey, visit solandlove.com.

about Lauren. Baby Lala. Britt Britt. Kamaui Sol. About the beauty and the pain of all our girlhoods. About the spirit of the Blackgirl soul. About how moving and powerful and inspiring it is to watch Kamaui Sol's parents keep her spirit alive through song, even in the gravity of their grieving. And I think about how Lauren keeps the baby girl inside her alive through voice, through music, through song. I keep on replaying the rapper's voice in my mind - "you can be up, you can be down, you can be down again some mo." Like Black life is Black grief and Black mourning, and at the same time it is Black Joy too. And at the Black Joy Parade, we get to be honest about that truth, we get to welcome ourselves into the complexity of it all, into the layered experiences of those emotions.

Lauren tells me thank you for witnessing her healing music, and then Baby Lala asks about my Hanu. *Who's your furry friend? I love your unicorn. I want one just like that too!* The squeakiness of her childhood voice makes me crack up laughing, makes my inner[blackgirl]child light up and get warm and tender inside. Baby Britt Britt, the little Blackgirl in me, loves to watch Lauren transition in and out of Baby Lala, to witness this bold, brave and beautiful Black woman reclaiming the joys of her own Black girlhood, even in her moments of grieving. After Baba Lala pets my unicorn, Lauren says *Come thruuu with all this Blackgirl joy sis, if there ever was a visual definition of Blackgirl joy, this whole look is itt.* I laugh and smile and hug my sis real tight one more time, and affirm for her again that these melodies of healing, in the midst of our pain, reverberate from spirit to crowd and shift the soil of Oakland.

There is a space, in a room, in a door, on the inside. I let my soul glow, on the inside. Tank and the Bangas come on stage next and jam all night long, boppin up and down, gettin down, slaying, sangin. From New Orleans, an adjacent chocolate city, from which hella Black folks in Oakland claim roots. They spatialize self-care in the wake. Turn into the interior of the self and locate a glow of the soul on the inside. And the Black Joy Parade ends on this note.

After eight hours of marching, messin' up a two-step routine at the old folks' section, munching on macaroniyamscollardgreens, and making memories with my folks, I hopped on the 18 bus and headed back to my West Oakland home, feelin' good and full in my belly, body and soul.

melody made

[On Sisterhood + Design]

My PhD sis, Melody, was in a doctoral course in New Media. She was assigned a group project to interview someone interesting, and after three interviews, design a surprise gift that this individual could use in their everyday life. She convinced her group of nonBlack male colleagues to select me, and utilized their labor to develop a gift that brightened my whole life, and my closet.

...

Melody made me ruffled patterned sleeves. Made white boys in her class listen to my story and brainstorm a gift for me. Melody made Hanu a ruffled choker to match my sleeves so when I carry her up under my arms we be twinnin. Me and Hanu wear what Melody made to the Black Joy Parade, to match my unicorn boots. Them boots my sis at the healing circle say *was made for unicorns.* The sis who say, like all my homegirls say, that I *stay matchin' my unicorn.* I tell Melody in my interviews about this, how everyone see Hanu in me, how Hanu make me feel healing and whole

and free, and she give us matching gifts. Me and Hanu walk the parade in all that love, all that warmth, all that comfort of knowing someone made something just for you to feel beautiful in.

Melody made sleeves with seven different layers of all the colors I say are my favorite - neon yellows and bright pinks and turquoise blue greens. She sew love into each ruffle. She have them white boys from class install some speakers beneath the seams, to play my favorite playlist of Chillhop beats. She put a sensor in Hanu's choker, so when I hug her the music plays.

...

Melody made space for her feet to dance to a drum beat. At the corner of Telegraph and 20th, at the let out of First Friday, Melody made me keep up with her hips, tryna sway along to the groove she set the tone for. "Girl, I was just thinkin bout you and them sleeves today, I almost threw em on today but decided to save em for the parade!" She smiles in delight at the ways in which her production of wearable art brought me Black joy, how her curated Black feminist interior / exterior / digital design of care brought me some sense of freedom.

Some girls who looked like my students came close and start dancin' with us, turned up and gasin' us up and swingin they hair to our tempo. *I thought you knew them*, she said as they walked to the other side of the drum. I tell her this just be me in Oakland, makin new friends every other day with some fellow round the way who dig my slay.

I see Melody the same day I see Nia Wilson in the eyes of her sister and her other sister and her mother's sister. Posted at a table at First Friday sellin I AM NIA WILSON t-shirts. I tell them about South Africa. How I was in Johannesburg as a mentor with a group of Black girls from Oakland when I found out. How we sat around that Airbnb and them girls, same age as Nia, same grade as Nia, same friends as Nia, cried and cried and cried about the impossibility of their lives. How they theorized the wake with they own understanding, about Black death lurking at every corner, about all the Black kids they know who died before Nia, who was connected to Nia in some way. One by one, they draw a link from Nia to each life lost. Each of her sisters hug me. I tell them I will share with them my poetry, the words I wrote to remember the girl gone too soon. Moments later I see my baby girls from South Africa who is all grown up now. In college. Tryna be women. Tryna be well. I tell them how much that night meant to me. How I just met Nia through her sister's eyes. We hold each other for a second in the sensory memory of that pain. I thank them for finding glimpses of joy in the midst of ongoing precarity.

Part Two: The Home + The Self



Figure 8. how hood girls healing make home, captured by @parrisxo / @sistersofthesun / @lizettelondon (Adanna Perry, Lizette London in Her Element, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

interlude two: black feminist interior design + homespace methodologies

blackness, belonging and home: a theoretical analysis

In Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods's introduction to *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, they assert that "physical geographies are bound up in, rather than simply a backdrop to, social and environmental processes . . . [thus] . . . the materiality of the environment is racialized by contemporary demographic patterns as shaped by historical precedents . . ."²⁴⁶ In an analysis of post-Katrina New Orleans, they examine how this site of deep rupture might be used as a case study to understand more broadly how antiBlackness shows up in space. They argue that Blackness has both racialized and spatialized implications, in that race produces the spaces that Blackness is confined to and enclosed by.²⁴⁷ Black folks inherently experience spatial instability as a result of the histories and legacies of enslavement and displacement that have, for centuries, shaped our relationship to the cities we inhabit. They argue, "the politics of citizenship, specifically the rights and protections of

²⁴⁶ McKittrick and Woods, "No one knows," 1.

²⁴⁷ McKittrick and Woods, "No one knows."

those residing in the democratic nation-state of the United States, are clearly not available in some communities, which suggests that . . . black and poor subjects are disposable precisely because they cannot easily move or escape.”²⁴⁸ In *Lose your mother: a Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman echoes this sentiment, stating, “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship.”²⁴⁹ This crisis is deeply geographic, in that it is a crisis of home, space, and placelessness.

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharp explores what it means for Black being to live in the “no space.”²⁵⁰ She theorizes the wake as the ongoing site of Black mourning, and argues that “to be in the wake is to live in . . . the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship.”²⁵¹ The tent city on the margins of the gentrified city is a site of the wake, and the precarity of having *nowhere* to live and *nowhere* to go and *nowhere* to call home, is “living in the no’s,”²⁵² the facts of displacement and the living in and as the displaced of diaspora²⁵³ [is] living in the no’s.”²⁵⁴ Thus, the no space is the space of the displaced. The no right to land. The no legitimate claims to anything that is your own. The no space is the site of rupture, of never knowing solid grounding. It is the gap between where we live and where we stay, in the words of Hartman, who in *Lose your mother*, unpacks the distinction we Black folks make between the two. To *stay* in a place is a temporary in the meantime in between time site of dwelling that does not extend the enduring label of *live*, of homelife and assuredness, due to the deep knowing of the site’s inability to hold Black life.²⁵⁵ I argue here that Black life in the no space is a geographic impossibility that informs placelessness and homelessness in a theoretical sense, and additionally informs housing insecurity among Black women in the Bay Area. Wake work, then, becomes a survival tool, a way to imagine what is possible within and beyond antiBlackness where we were never supposed to survive, thrive, or *be*, anywhere.

If we know that antiBlackness has seeped into the very ecology of the Americas, and that therefore the spaces we enter on this land might always already be inherently antiBlack, then we also know that we have remade and reshaped this same terrain to work in our favor. Like maroon ancestors, curating quilombos of care²⁵⁶, navigating the wake with Black spatial imaginaries that exceed the bounds of the land. If we look at Black communal connection as its own type of ecology, we see the poetics of the ways we move and navigate in relation to each other, precisely because “the act of making corners, neighborhoods, communities, cities, rural lands, rivers, and mountains sacred is central to [our] defense and the defense of the communities that love and cherish [us].”²⁵⁷

We find hope, home, and belonging in each other, like homegirls finding safety within our own and each others’ bodies and flesh. Like Barbara Smith’s framing of homegirls in *Home Girls: a Black Feminist Anthology*, the term homegirl itself becomes an affirmation of selfhood, sisterhood, and communal care amidst the wake of displacement. A homegirl praxis serves as wake work and home making, as it extends space for the excess of Blackgirl life²⁵⁸ and makes room where there once was

²⁴⁸ McKittrick and Woods, “No one knows,” 1.

²⁴⁹ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 133.

²⁵⁰ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 7.

²⁵¹ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 16.

²⁵² Sharp, *In the Wake*, 16.

²⁵³ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 19.

²⁵⁴ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 16.

²⁵⁵ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 87.

²⁵⁶ osceola ward, “Classroom as Quilombo: Literacy, Ancestral Memory, and Everyday Resistance,” in *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators* (AK Press, 2021).

²⁵⁷ McKittrick and Woods, “No one knows,” 5.

²⁵⁸ Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

none. Homegirls become safe havens for heavy bodies to dwell, bossoms to rest burdened heads, a soft places to land. I think here about how homegirls find home, what home means to us, how we exist in our complexity and our fullness in the homes we make and take for ourselves.

...

I work to expand urban renewal scholarship towards a reconsideration of the ways in which homelessness and domestic violence are framed within discourses of displacement and gentrification. In my framing of domestic violence, I in no way aim to erase the realities of layered domestic violence experienced by unhoused Black women. Unhoused Black women are oftentimes hyper vulnerable to intimate partner violence, in that their need for protection while living on the streets may lead them to remain in relationship with partners who cause harm. As one homegirl named, “The threat of yo man beatin’ up on you ain’t nothin compared to the threat of some stranger out here in these streets.” While not minimizing these domestic violence narratives, I work to challenge the conditions that exacerbate unhoused and housing insecure Black women’s susceptibility to harm and violence on personal, communal, and structural levels. By opening up these terminologies, we can more clearly articulate the violence of the state and the power of the people to curate wake work even in the backdrop of this violence. In other words, I argue that round the way Blackgirls’ creative space making processes ontologically challenge hegemonic logics that animate “urban renewal” efforts. I make broader claims for theorizing cartographies of interiority alongside discourses of spatial inequality, which often decenter narratives of healing, autonomy and resilience.

K. Animashaun Ducre’s *A Place We Call Home: Gender, Race, and Justice in Syracuse*²⁵⁹ and Keisha-Khan Perry’s *Black Women Against the Land Grab: the Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*²⁶⁰ both help us think about the racialized and gendered implications of home for Black women. While both are set in vastly different geographies from each other, and from Oakland, they offer insights into the ways in which Black womanhood complicates Black women’s relationship to homespace and security. Ducre exposes the particular structural neglect Black women experience within urban housing markets, using intersectionality to interrogate shelter insecurity. Perry points to Black women’s spiritual connection to home, and the centrality of homespace to their culturally informed self-care practices. Both Perry and Ducre help us to understand how the rupture of homespace causes deep ruptures to healing, as Black women lose ties to sites of land-based ritual and home-based healing amidst displacement. I am particularly interested here in what Ducre and Perry’s work can offer to a broader discourse on unhoused and housing insecure Black women in Oakland.

In *Homeless Women: Beyond the Bag Lady Myth*, Esther S. Merves argues that, “Whereas the economy is more likely to be blamed for homelessness among men, a woman is more likely to be blamed personally for her failure as a marriage partner or parent. A homeless woman is more of a social outcast than a homeless man because she violates the stricter prescriptions of the proper role for women.”²⁶¹ She goes on to state that “homeless women seem to be more ‘out of place’”²⁶² than their male counterparts. However, Merves’ centering of white-male-dominant notions of femininity erase the nuances of social imaginaries of Black women’s place in the city. To the white-male-dominant

²⁵⁹ K. Animashaun Ducre, *A Place we Call Home: Gender, Race, and Justice in Syracuse* (Syracuse University Press, 2012).

²⁶⁰ Keisha-Khan Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab: the Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

²⁶¹ E.S. Merves, “Homeless Women,” in *Homelessness. Topics in Social Psychiatry*, ed. M.J. Robertson and M. Greenblatt (Boston, MA: Springer, 1992), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-0679-3_18, 229.

²⁶² Merves, “Homeless Women,” 229.

gaze of the gentrified San Francisco Bay Area, unhoused Black women are, in some ways, in place on the corner, in the tent, beneath the underpass, as this particular geographic positionality deems them marginalized, invisibilized, and ostracized from the social landscape of the dominant city narrative. It is everyday practice in this particular white-male-dominant Bay Area culture to casually walk by encampments and tent cities where Black women reside without an utterance of human acknowledgment, and while this may be the case for many cities with unhoused folks, there is a particular way that unhoused Black women become hyper-normalized in Oakland.

While much of the traditional studies done on unhoused and housing insecure women, like Mervers', do not center Black women as theorists of their own truths, my work is written within a tradition of radical scholars like Margaret Marrietta Ramírez and Kelly Knight, who research unhoused communities with care. I write against dominant narratives that position unhoused folks, and particularly unhoused Black women, and the margins of discourses that are reportedly for and about them, and write into a growing body of work that honors the humanity of the unhoused. In conversation with McKittrick and Woods, I think about how unhoused Black women are often relegated to the status of "unknown," yet argue that "those who 'no one knows' might also be a map towards a new or different perspective on the production of space."²⁶³

Margaret Marrietta Ramírez's "Take the houses back/take the land back: Black and Indigenous urban futures in Oakland" provides a poignant overview of the housing crisis in Oakland, and how it is disproportionately impacting Black women. She also details how unhoused Black women "resist these crises in their cities, in organized, creative, and mundane ways . . . as they make demands of the city and/or build autonomous spaces amid mass dispossession."²⁶⁴ In her exploration of Moms 4 Housing, an anti-displacement movement led by five unhoused Black mothers, Ramírez maps the ruptures of Black life in Oakland and exposes the layers of antiBlack harm caused by the aftermath of gentrification.

There is a geographic pattern of movement Black folks in the Bay Area have forcibly undergone which mirrors that of gentrification patterns in many other large cities across the nation. However, due to the geographic configuration of the Bay Area, and the intensity of the tech industry's imposition onto Black life, these movement patterns have been exacerbated, dramatically illustrating how capital moves along race lines.²⁶⁵

Oakland's dwindling Black population over the past twenty years has been a result of the Tech Boom, the 2008 foreclosure crisis, and the histories of antiBlack geographies of displacement that have continued to leave Black folks precarious to the shifts in markets and values. As stated in *Roots, Race & Place: A History of Racially Exclusionary Housing in the San Francisco Bay Area*, "while the booming tech sector, globalized finance, and other forces shaping housing in the region are new, racial exclusion in housing is not."²⁶⁶ In other words, legacies of dispossession haunt the Black geographies of Oakland. The "ongoing crisis of citizenship" in The Town is a continuation of past lives that have been mapped onto the present.

²⁶³ McKittrick and Woods, "No one knows," 5.

²⁶⁴ Margaret Marietta Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back: Black and Indigenous urban futures in Oakland," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1736440>, 2.

²⁶⁵ Schafran, "Origins of an Urban Crisis."

²⁶⁶ Eli Moore, Nicole Montojó, and Nicole Mauri, *Roots, Race & Place: A History of Racially Exclusionary Housing in the San Francisco Bay Area* (HAAS Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, 2020).

According to the 2019 City of Oakland Homeless Count and Survey, there were 4,071 unhoused residents in the city of Oakland in 2019, a dramatic 2,761 increase from 2017, and 70% of those unhoused are Black.²⁶⁷ These demographics are a stark contrast to the Black Oakland of the past that so many of our elders and homegirls remember fondly. Texts like *Abiding Courage : African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* by Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo and *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* by D.J. Merch explain how Oakland's Black population migrated, grew, and transformed in the post-war era. In the 1940s, Black folks from Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, fled the intense violence of the Jim Crow South and came West with hopes for a better life for themselves and their families. Wartime demands for shipyard labor brought tens of thousands of Black folks to The Town. "In the Bay Area as a whole, the Black population grew from 20,751 in 1940 to 149,809 in 1950."²⁶⁸ Murch details how, in the 1950s, Black migrants from the South continued to arrive in droves to Oakland with hopes and dreams and desires. Black folks and their families made a vibrant home of Oakland for generations, from the shipyard workers to the Black Panther Party to the children of the Hyphy movement. Until 2010, Oakland was a booming, vibrant chocolate city with a majority Black population. Yet, "4% of the city's Black population was lost between 2010–2014, and the census estimates that only 23% of Oakland residents [were] Black as of 2019."²⁶⁹

Black Oakland natives have since been forced to relocate to the outskirts of The Town, to places like Tracy, Antioch, or Stockton. As Dominique Walker, one of the Moms 4 Housing activists, reflects, "My family's not in Oakland anymore . . . they're in Antioch, Richmond, Stockton, Vallejo, wherever they can find cheaper rent. So I've known [how bad the housing crisis is here] because every time I've called home somebody's moving out."²⁷⁰ In response to this ongoing crisis, Walker and four other Black mothers moved into a vacant West Oakland home in order to protest the conditions they had been forced to live within. Since "West Oakland is the site of decades of Black dispossession . . . Moms 4 Housing's . . . [repossession of] a home in this neighborhood speaks to these violent histories and geographies of racial capitalism that have sought to contain, disinvest and now banish Black life in Oakland."²⁷¹ These unhoused Black women activists brought national attention to the housing crisis in Oakland that was disproportionately impacting Black women, many of whom were working and unhoused.

I am someone, I deserve a house. This is not something I want, something I desire, this is something I deserve. I deserve to have a place to rest my head, to lay down and to rest my soul. I deserve this, we all deserve this. I am a human being . . . I have lived in this world for over 40 years. I have lived in this community, I have walked up and down these streets. I grew up here, I deserve to live in Oakland.

– Tolani King, co-founder of Moms 4 Housing, December 30th 2019²⁷²

In naming her deservance of a home, as a mother, a human, and a native of this city, Tolani King stakes her claims to the city even as it seeks to push her out. Her desire to have a place to "rest her soul" speaks to the spiritual need for solace and safety, so that her interiority might have a soft place to land. In the words of Cat Brooks, beloved community activist and leader, "we have the right to

²⁶⁷ Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 4.

²⁶⁸ Moore et al., *Roots, Race & Place*.

²⁶⁹ Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 4.

²⁷⁰ Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 4.

²⁷¹ Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 8.

²⁷² Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 4.

take what we need . . . to do what we gotta do all over this city . . . if the city's not going to do it, goddamn it we will."²⁷³

displacement + the im/possibility of blackgirl homespace

Home is a fickle hope for poor Blackgirls with nowhere to go. Home is a fairytale of what you could have if they felt you had the kind of life that was deserving of it. Home teases you into believing you deserve it, keeps you dangling between hope and desire, longing for a location to retreat. Home is a lingering ephemerality for round the way Blackgirls like us. If home meant safety, security, freedom from surveillance and displacement, then could we Black folks ever truly know home here? How we "Black people imagine home . . . and how we speak of it . . . [is always tied to our] dispossession,"²⁷⁴ always tied to the imposed viscosity of national disbelonging that looms over the spaces we remake for our survival. "It's why . . . [we say] we stay here, but we don't live [here] . . . It's why we never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call [our own]."²⁷⁵

*It really is criminal. You know what I'm sayin, like fareal.
Like I still don't know how I'm surviving out here.
Ain't no answer for me. I don't have no answer.
Like, if I could run away, I would.*

-Peaches²⁷⁶

Because the predicament of Blackness in the afterlife of enslavement²⁷⁷ requires the constant spatial instability of Black life, we contend with geographic insecurity by finding ways to grow comfortable in a state of flight.²⁷⁸ Flight, as in running away or dreaming of running away, as in "having never resided in a place that you can say is yours"²⁷⁹ and knowing there is no place that can give you that. It is the looming impossibility of homespace. It is the scarcity of housing, and the fear of your home being swept from right under your feet.

Pushed out²⁸⁰ from The City to The Town. Pushed out from The Town to the outskirts.²⁸¹ Antioch the new Black.²⁸² Drive six hours there and back. Both ways. Everyday. How you heal and sustain? How is one to develop a praxis of being well in a place that might not be yours tomorrow? When there is no stability of home, when life is in flux, how does one find stable grounding here?

The most callous of Blackgirls cry for the memory of what was once theirs to claim—a townhouse that was theirs until it wasn't, a Town that was home until it wasn't. In the Bay Area, even the best off Black folks fear the pushout.²⁸³ In Oakland, tent cities remind you of who once had the house you can barely afford to live in, who was forced to make home of concrete on the same street where

²⁷³ Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back," 9.

²⁷⁴ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 87.

²⁷⁵ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 88.

²⁷⁶ Peaches. Bay born round the way girl displaced from home.

²⁷⁷ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 133.

²⁷⁸ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 11; Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your mother: a Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

²⁷⁹ Hartman, *Lose your mother*, 88.

²⁸⁰ Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (The New Press, 2016).

²⁸¹ Schafran, "Origins of an Urban Crisis."

²⁸² Schafran, "Origins of an Urban Crisis."

²⁸³ Brandi Thompson Summers, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* (UNC Press, 2019).

the structure that was their home is now occupied by some non poor, non Black family, or some Black family like me.

Living and breathing in Oakland mean you barely makin' it when you a broke Blackgirl with nowhere to go. Who got money for rent? Who savings can stretch enough to nestle them into a somewhere to be? Who got time to heal when health insurance ain't covered and the hours-long commute to and from yo job don't give you much space or time to breathe?

Never enough air to breathe, no room to grow, no corner of earth hospitable enough to allow you to put down roots. Negroes [be] drifters, nomads, fugitives, not settlers. [Never] had . . . been allowed 'me' and 'mine'. Even when you had the hubris to believe that you had staked a lasting claim, built a homehouse with enough space for your children . . . [to say] I made this house with my own hands, and this is yours, and within our gates no white man rules . . . massag[ing] them into feeling safe . . . one day a white man could ride up to your front porch with a piece of paper in his hand that said none of this belonged to you.

-Sadiyah Hartman²⁸⁴

I define displacement as a state sanctioned domestic violence, a deep violation of the Black domestic sphere projected upon the sacred lives of Black women in Oakland. The state strips Black folks' capacity for homemaking by refusing access to stable living conditions. Black women's particular vulnerability to housing insecurity,²⁸⁵ and the gendered, racialized implications of precarity for unhoused Black women's bodies, makes displacement a deeply embodied and dislocating trauma that fractures processes of Black women's self making. Thus, I ask, if Oakland is "a city . . . in danger of losing its soul,"²⁸⁶ then what forms of danger might Black women's bodies/ souls/ spirits be under? If domestic violence is defined as "violent or aggressive behavior within the home,"²⁸⁷ then how might we imagine the violence of displacement that is projected onto the homes of Black women as a spatialized violence that takes place within the precarity of home and on the body/ soul/ spirit simultaneously?

Displacement uproots disjointed imaginaries of home that Black folks still cling to, "pil[ing] physical displacement on top of cognitive and social displacement."²⁸⁸ "Living in and as the displaced of diaspora,"²⁸⁹ the psychosocial weight of Black placelessness and Bay Area dispossession forces notions of home in flux, challenging round the way girls to grasp hold of a sense of self making a front the backdrop of perpetually imposed erasure. Thus, I ask, if "homes . . . [are the] spaces that confine the real pressures Black women face from the outside world,"²⁹⁰ how do everyday round the way Black girls imagine and cultivate home, albeit ones severely limited by state sanctioned domestic violence?

Additionally, I challenge notions of homelessness by asserting that my homegirls, both unhoused and housed, do in fact have homes. "The home is the most articulated landscape expression of the self . . . Aspects of . . . [the] self develop in relationship to place (people make their homes), but

²⁸⁴ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 142.

²⁸⁵ Ducre, *A Place we Call Home*.

²⁸⁶ Werth and Marienthal, "'Gentrification' as a grid of meaning."

²⁸⁷ Domestic violence definition. Oxford Languages. 2022.

²⁸⁸ Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab*.

²⁸⁹ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 9.

²⁹⁰ Stephanie Y. Evans, Kanika Bell, and Nsenga K. Burton, *Black Women's Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* (SUNY Press, 2017), 70.

places set a brute limit on what individuals can make of themselves (homes make people).”²⁹¹ Yet, unhoused and housing insecure Black women in *The Town* push up against these brute limitations by making home within and beyond themselves. Rather than defining home as solely a material site of dreaming, I argue that home is both the production of a physical space (both indoor and outdoor, enclosed or exposed) and the production of one’s own interiority. One could live in a house and be homeless, just as one could live on concrete and discover home there, just as one could live in flight and carry home in every step/ in the body/ on the spirit. Hence, Black women who lack access to formal structured brick and mortar living spaces do in fact have homes - material, metaphorical, and metaphysical homes that are curated within the limitations of their materiality.

In a way that “does not idealize homelessness nor merely metaphorize it,”²⁹² I point here to the generational patterns of placelessness projected onto Black life in the afterlife of enslavement, the assumption that “Black bodies are . . . ungeographic [and always already] out of place.”²⁹³ While displacement may be used to refer to the contemporary process of gentrification-based forced removal, placelessness can be used to refer to the ongoing disbelonging that informs Black American life. The condition of Black placeness produces and exacerbates both homelessness and housing insecurity, not only in a metaphorical sense, but also in a very real and literal sense. To be unhoused or housing insecure within the context of Black American life is to face the threat of both houselessness and homelessness. While the treacherous precarity of houselessness threatens access to shelter, the peril of homelessness threatens one’s access to a self proclaimed imaginary of what might be possible beyond enclosure.²⁹⁴ In the eyes of the state, we round the way Blackgirls might all be deemed home less, in that we ain’t never had no home, i.e., safe space and site of belonging, within the confines of the nation.

I am careful here not to enact a violence of erasure. In no way do I see unhoused Black women’s experiences as synonymous with all round the way Blackgirls regardless of class status and housing status. I do not want to, in any way, conflate those experiences, nor do I want to minimize the vast difference in experience between unhoused and housed Black women. What I attempt to do here is stretch the ways in which we understand and define these terms in order to invite us all to humanize unhoused folks as they humanize themselves, and to acknowledge the ways in which gendered and racialized dispossession has forced us all into a collective disbelonging that is shared across Black women’s identities, even as the disbelonging of unhoused Black women is rooted in a social death²⁹⁵ that we who have never been unhoused could never know.

While there is a stark difference between national homelessness/ statelessness/ disbelonging and lack of physical shelter, what all of us round the way Blackgirls do share is the experience of never having known true stability, true security, true safety and assuredness within the confines of how we have been forced to know home for ourselves.²⁹⁶ By “being together in [this particular form of perceived] homelessness . . . ([this] state of dispossession),”²⁹⁷ we recognize homelessness as a projected placelessness, a way of being out of place within the context of the systems and structures organized for our demise.

²⁹¹ Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 34.

²⁹² Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.

²⁹³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

²⁹⁴ Woods, *Development Arrested*.

²⁹⁵ Jared Sexton, “Time, Temporality and Violence in the International,” *Tensions Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011).

²⁹⁶ Sexton, “Time, Temporality and Violence in the International.”

²⁹⁷ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 11.

Making home, then, is a commitment to the personalized production of space even in the wake of perpetual placelessness. Whether it be a tent or a couch, a stoop or a studio, the act of homemaking for unhoused and housing insecure Black women offers a radical contestation to gentrification narratives that reaffirm our right to have a home here.

To make home is to curate, with one's own cartographic sense, with one's own architectural genius, a map into oneself. Our clinging to home, and the material reimagining of it, stakes claim to the spaces of our own making. It asserts that we have a right to space, a right to place, a right to know home for ourselves.

Finding home for round the way Blackgirls means turning towards new modes of defining oneself and one's place within a city that seeks to erase your presence. It means home is cultivated within the round the way, within the unruly, within the praxis of nonconformity. Though our homes may be fractured and fragile, they exist. Even when the spaces we are forced to live within fail to hold us, we force them to stretch and expand beyond their limitations. We rearrange the logics of placelessness by making home within the places they never knew joy could live. We redefine space by redefining home by holding on to the homespaces we cultivate on our own terms. Using what I call a praxis of Black Feminist Interior Design, we curate home in the wake of displacement to make home space within a tent/ a room/ a city block/ a sister's arms, and within our own interiority.

black feminist interior design

*Where do we go?
Where are our dreams?
Where is our pain?
Where do we heal?*

-Ntozakhe Shange²⁹⁸

In Elizabeth Alexander's *The Black Interior*, she frames Black creative visuality as a space of the inner self, arguing that the curation and design of a living room space provides an entry into the interiority of the Black person who designed it. She asserts, "In the spaces we designate and create, the self is made visible in the spaces we occupy, literal 'black interiors,' the inside of homes that black people live in."²⁹⁹ She then asks, "Are the living rooms of those homes, the spaces most consciously arranged and presented, representative of not only living space but of one's self, one's authentic self?"³⁰⁰ She plays with interiority, using the term to refer to both the interior of the home and the interior of a Black self. By engaging the Black interior as a dream space of artistic vision, Alexander invites us to ponder on the possibilities of expansion found in the praxis of making one's home as a reflection of oneself.

Inspired by Alexander's framing, I conceptualize Black feminist interior design as a process of spacemaking that takes place on the physical body and within it, inside the physical location of curation and beyond it. I argue that home is in fact a literal, tangible, material site of selfhood that is produced and replicated in the self and beyond the self simultaneously. Additionally, I draw upon a

²⁹⁸ Ntozake Shange, in *Moon-Marked and Touched by the Sun: Plays by African American Women*, ed. Sydne Mahone (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1994), 323. via Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Graywolf Press, 2004).

²⁹⁹ Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 9.

³⁰⁰ Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 9.

body of literature within Black material culture and feminist visual culture to read objects as sites of knowledge production within the home and on the body. I place Robin M. Boylorn's *On Being at Home With Myself: Blackgirl Autoethnography as Research Praxis* and Ntozakhe Shange's framing of the "metaphysical dilemma" in conversation with Alexander, Cox, and McKittrick to broaden understanding of Blackgirl home space.

The process of making a material home - placing objects and keepsakes in an intentional order throughout one's own homespace - makes the curation of an interior home/ a self space possible. I view the curated homespace as "an altar where [Black women's] intuitive and artful arrangement divines power: the power of beauty itself; the power of precious objects put together to add up to more than their mere sum; the power of the stories behind each object." I argue that when the body enters and exits a curated site of home, it "create[s] space for the soul to show up,"³⁰¹ allowing for expanded possibilities of self making in the midst of state violence.³⁰² The design of the interior home makes space for the design of an interior self. This process of curating home is a Black feminist creative space / place making praxis - a cultivation of a Black women's healing space that allows for alternative modes of meaning making, providing new material and metaphysical space for Black women to occupy.

In *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, Ntozake Shange writes, "but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ i havent conquered yet."³⁰³ Shange's use of metaphysics points to an im/possibility of self making that is posed as a dilemma, a problem to solve, and eventually conquer. Her merging of alive, woman, and colored as an intersectional identity whose very combination of intersections marks one beyond the physical realm honors the complex messiness of Black women's lives, and the ongoing struggle to, as Aimee Meredith Cox names, "stay . . . in the body."³⁰⁴ A central feature of this metaphysical dilemma is that "the body, like the notion of home . . . can be by turns a space of safety and protection or one of instability and expulsion . . . if [we] rely on socially determined assessments to define [our] self worth, [we] would be exiled from their own bodies and any home spaces [we] might establish for themselves - a state of eternal homelessness."³⁰⁵ Yet, when we allow ourselves to be "deeply in [our] bodies as [we] transcend [them . . . we carve] stories, meanings, memories, and images in space that surely emanate from the physical being, but somehow appear to make the body irrelevant, despite its virtuosity."³⁰⁶

The relevance and irrelevance of the body that Cox names here might offer one solution to the Black woman's metaphysical dilemma, in that it invites us into and beyond our physicality simultaneously. It allows us to know outside, within, and beyond our embodiment in order to merge material and metaphysical worlds so that we might expand our access to depths of selfhood interiors that exist far beyond what can be seen on the skin's surface. The body becomes a tool for moving beyond itself to access the interior of spiritual, ancestral, and metaphysical knowing, somewhere deep beyond the flesh. In other words, "the body may be the space to which we may finally come home, or where we make a new one . . . staying in the body may very well mean moving in and,

³⁰¹ Goler, *Increasing Wellbeing through Contemplative Practices*, 238.

³⁰² Smith, *Afro-Paradise*.

³⁰³ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (Scribner Poetry, 1975).

³⁰⁴ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

³⁰⁵ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

³⁰⁶ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

most importantly, beyond it to locate new ways of imagining oneself and of remaking one's surroundings."³⁰⁷

Boylorn, like Cox and Shange, engages home as a metaphoric entry point into the discourse of gendered, racialized selfhood and offers an expansive framing for how we as Blackgirls might relate to this interior "metaphysical dilemma." She explores her own interiors of self and home, of "being at home in [her] skin, avoiding the pause, accepting the contradictions, fucking with the grays."³⁰⁸ The gray space, an interior site of, what Shange might call, the "metaphysical dilemma," becomes deeply generative for Blackgirls' self making and healing. It is the site that cannot be mapped or seen within the self, the liminal interior space, the sites inside that exist somewhere between black and white.

Thus, when placing the everyday round the way Black girl's body, home, self, interior and metaphysicallity in conversation, I arrive at this praxis of Black feminist interior design that is in some ways a response to the metaphysical dilemma of Black girl selfhood which Shange poses in poetic prose. Everyday round the way Black girls are reclaiming self and space and home through the body, by staying within and moving beyond in simultaneously to curate new worlds for themselves. The inner and outer lives we make room for our spirits to know new freedoms, even if they are fickle, subtle, and temporary.

In *Embodied Avatars: Geneologies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan explores various forms of "self-abstraction" that Black women performance artists engage to experience "self-transcendence, most especially from [their] body's racial and gender particularities."³⁰⁹ While some may argue that this could serve as a tool for address Shange's stated metaphysical dilemma, my work thinks about what it might mean for Black women to not have to perform versions of alternate selves to be free. McMillan cites Simone Leigh's *Breakdown*, a videographic commentary on the weight of Black women's performativity, and the grave impact it has on our mental health. He argues that the film's "skilled aesthetics of failure and solemn suggestion of the psychological toll role-playing has on black diasporic women"³¹⁰ shed light on the complexity of Black feminist performance. In accordance with Cox's assertion that "perhaps we can develop collective strategies for living fuller, self-defined lives without the threats of extinction that attempts at living in this way generally incur when you are young and Black," I argue that the everyday round the way Blackgirl provide a potential model for such a life.³¹¹ While still contending with these consequences, she still finds fugitive modes of freedom and meaning making that feel true to the core of who she is. This self affirming attempt at living a fuller life is a form of radical healing.

Centering the cultivation of Black women's interiority as an architectural praxis, it serves as a radical act of self sustaining resistance to external geographies. The spatial autonomy Black women display in our movement about space, and our reconfiguring of place, defy normative cartographies where our bodies are mapped on the margins. We "shift the space . . . to our social choreography . . . mapping our movement [to the music] of the environment."³¹² We bring ourselves, full and fragmented, when and where we enter³¹³, demanding recognition of our full humanity. Yet we realize

³⁰⁷ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

³⁰⁸ Boylorn, "On Being at Home With Myself," 48.

³⁰⁹ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 102.

³¹⁰ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 202.

³¹¹ Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 8.

³¹² Cox, *Shapeshifters*, 29.

³¹³ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.

that we first must step into our home and embrace the magic that is *me/ we/ us*. We center our self knowing here, at the intersection of pain and pleasure, joy and grief, boundaries and transcendence, in the safety of our own homes, even if that home can only exist within. Even if the “material world is a house that is only as safe as safe as flesh,”³¹⁴ we find meaning beyond the meat of our bones, beyond corporeality, in the essence of our own interiors.

Sheila Bridges, a renowned Black woman interior designer, models my layered entry into Black feminist interior design with her two books - *Furnishing Forward* and *Bald Mermaid*.³¹⁵ Reading these two texts together, we see the ways in which a practice of material interior design informs her practice of designing her own Interiority. Her memoir grapples with self making as a form of healing, and illustrates the necessity for Black women’s wellness through acceptance of self. While I am inspired by her work, my project is most invested in the informal production of home. While she is formally trained and formally recognized as an interior designer, I am most interested in the informal processes particularly engaged by unhoused and housing insecure Black women.

In other words, I center the informal and often unrecognized sites of Black women’s interior design. Rather than focus on traditionally recognized sites of curation, I center my homegirls’ creative processes of designing material sites of care against a backdrop of ever pervasive antiBlackness that dictates mobility. Just as Katherine McKittrick locates Black geographic genius in “the last place they thought of,”³¹⁶ so too do I find genius in the geographic practices of my homegirls. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick uses Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* as a site of analysis to highlight Jacobs’ praxis of radical space making, as she finds fugitive forms of liberation within the “disabling, oppressive, dark, and cramped surroundings”³¹⁷ of an attic that she has curated as her home. What might be seen as despicable, unlivable conditions became a site of refuge and remedy for Jacobs as she awaited her freedom. The tiny cramped living quarters offered a mini quilombo of sorts, an escape from the limitations of the built environment and social world that relegated her to enslavement. I draw upon McKittrick’s framing of these radical Black feminist geographies to read the home making practices of round the way Black girls who, like Jacobs, make space for their soul’s liberation in the ongoing afterlives of enslavement.

For the round the way Black feminist interior designer, no matter the limitations of the physical site of curation, the home is made as a healing space is made as a self is made - with care, with love, with intention. Whether the home is a tent or an encampment or a studio apartment, the home is designed for healing. I center the everyday round the way aesthetics of interiority to illuminate “the light-filled site[s] of creation”³¹⁸ within neglected spaces of the city, “space[s] that might not have been thought of as anything other than . . . basement hole[s],”³¹⁹ the sites and sounds, navigation and maneuvering that occurs on the underground, in the underworld³²⁰, in the forgotten pockets of the city, in the spaces that those invested in the formal might never think to look when searching for a radical theory of life making.³²¹

³¹⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi.

³¹⁵ Sheila Bridges, *Furnishing Forward: a Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime* (Bulfinch Press, 2002). Sheila Bridges, *The Bald Mermaid: a Memoir*. (Pointed Leaf Press, 2013).

³¹⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 41.

³¹⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 41.

³¹⁸ Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 13.

³¹⁹ Alexander, *The Black Interior*, 13.

³²⁰ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

³²¹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 41.

I engage interiority and exteriority at material and metaphysical scales by observing the tensions between the sites of injury and sites of healing that we remember within and outside of ourselves. The interior worlds of safe place (material) and self space (metaphysical) forge a dialectic relationality and inform the ways Black women affectively move about environments where we feel free to be our full selves. The self space is enhanced by the safe place because it serves as the material location where Black women go to release, recuperate and recenter. Such spaces allow us to unpack the layers of trauma that external worlds have caused, while making room for the decentering of those sites of injury so that we might recall who we were before they told us who we were.

And for some of us, home could never be safe. For some of us, we could never claim to know safety. For the unhoused Black women who never had access to nothing like shelter and covering, the thought of safety may be only an imaginary. And yet, moments of care are curated within homes, even if only in moments of ephemerality.

Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that “the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self”³²² because “we have never been allowed to fully be ourselves.”³²³ Our praxis of Black feminist interior design shifts the power back to ourselves to define ourselves for ourselves, in our own time, on our own terms, in our own space, in our own lives. In this process of redesign, we begin to remember that these bodies are the safest homes we will ever know, and that we are the only ones who will save us. For “if going home is denied [us] then [we] will have to stand and claim [our] space, making a new culture [in a new home] . . . with [our] own lumber, [our] own bricks and mortar and [our] own feminist architecture.”³²⁴

entering homespace

I enter and exit home spaces as method. I take note of what is there. The walls. The color of them. The absence of them. What is hung up. What is strung across. Whose painting. Whose picture. The carpet and the rugs and the healing at yo feet. The dirt. The concrete. The fur and the patterns and the tunes from the record player. I write about homes, my own and the homes of my homegirls, to get at the intimacy of Black feminist interior design as a method that makes space for one’s own interior design, as in makes space for a Black woman to design her own metaphysical interiority in conversation with the physical, tangible interiority she curates in a home.

I engage autoethnographic Blackgirl poetics as a narrative method to reveal my own relationship to home.³²⁵ My homes becomes a site of research, as I study my own process of curating my home as a healing space for myself and for my homegirls. I am the artist and the art, the curator and the muse. What I create with my own two hands becomes an entry point into the study of space making, as my praxis of Black feminist interior design informs my relationship to this text. I examine the objects in my home and the conditions that inform my entry to my home. I travel deep into the interiority of myself as I draw parallels between my relationship with my home and my relationship to myself, modeling the interconnection between homespace and self space. Hence, I am at home in the field. My body is the field and my home is the field. I am in multiple spaces and times at once, as my healing requires me to remember the homes of the past in relation to my home of the present. I think about the home I grew up in, its inability to hold me, and my desires for the current home to

³²² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1987), 460.

³²³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 108.

³²⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 44.

³²⁵ Boylorn, “On Being at Home With Myself.”

serve me in ways that I am unable to serve myself. This dialectic exchange between self and home becomes the primary site of interiority.

I enter the space of home within myself, preparing my spirit to receive the weight of my homegirls. I tell stories of Black female body/ mind/ soul/ ancestry/ spirituality in place through my own lived experience, focusing on the material and metaphysical home as a site of place shaping and self making. I think about the body as a home³²⁶, and the home making practices that occur outside the safety and comfort of walls and doors.

“Black mapping . . . [frames] . . . how Black people make place in response to and critique . . . [of] gentrification processes.”³²⁷ Thus, I map the intimacy of my homegirls’ geographies, exploring how they come to know themselves in space, and how they make and produce space within the limitations of the state. I weave narrative, creative curation, and critiques of the city to illuminate hidden stories of Black women on the margins of the urban landscape, whose infrastructural genius makes their survival possible.

For the woman who has no home that is safe, she may find home in homegirls. She may call them homegirls because they are the girls who make her feel at home. She may find home in their hug, in their acknowledgement of her presence, in their embodied movement through her world. She may find home in their thankless effort to love her when she feels most unlovable. Either way, she will be at home with these homegirls because they make a space for her that is healing.

My home and the homes of my homegirls become my archive, and while there is deep trauma in these archives, there is also deep healing. I view home space as a reflection of the Black woman who makes it. I reflect on the process of making and sustaining home within self/ within residence/ within city/ within nation/ within world. I unravel the process of longing and vulnerability that has defined the reverence I have for my own home, the only place where I am fully safe to feel a range of emotions, safe to be a range of versions of myself, and juxtapose this safety with the feelings of impossibility for unhoused neighbors.

*soul talk*³²⁸ *with homegirls at home*

I invite my homegirls over. For art. For tea. To braid my hair. To watch Lemonade. Tell em bring a journal and a tune. An inspiration. And we make space for ourselves and our words, our worlds and our wounds. They invite me over. To get my hair done. To do some healin. And we have a moment of memory and recollection. We make home a healing space, collectively.

The place matters. The space matters. The site where we find ourselves exchanging words and phrases about feelings and healing, it matters. Meetin’ at a coffee shop aint the same thing as meetin’ at home. Home is curated for healin, so we can slip into ourselves and slip into each other more easily when it’s quiet, when we close enough to feel each other’s heart beat, when fingers in hair, when fur print pillows line each back, when seated on the floor in the living room, on the couch, in the corner next to the altar space. In the same spaces I meet myself, I meet my sisters. They invite

³²⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

³²⁷ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 33.

³²⁸ Hull, *Soul Talk*.

into the spaces where they meet themselves. The corners of the room, the grounding of the tent, the zipping of its lining. The space on the ground where the jewels are made, the necklaces and bracelets and rings are made, where the crystals are wired into copper and the clay pounded into stone shaped orisha. The little space in the corner of the room where she sleeps, she invites me into that space and I see here more fully here. She see me more fully there.

We curate a homespace of Black girl soul talk, a space for us to exchange in the ways we always do. The hair braiding session/ the healing space that is home/ the bedroom turned art studio, the interior, intimate sites of our everyday round the way convenings, each serve as the site of the interview, each become “the field”. And we don’t call it no interview, we just call it an intellectual witness of what we always do, how we always be, a witnessing of the intimacy between us, behind closed doors, beyond the surface, a capturing of a moment in time of our friendship, an offering of a glimpse into our sisterhood. It is not staged or performed. It is not conducted nor is it forced. It flows from a space of rich exchange between Black women who been in community before a research project, who will remain in community after a research project.

I think deeply about where the interview takes place and what we are doing as we engage the interview. I curate a healing space in my home for some interviewees. For others, I am seated between their legs as they braid horse hair into my scalp. Each of my interviews are intimate and comfortable, ensuring that the two of us are in a setting we might normally frequent together, doing what we would normally do together.

I listen to Black women when they speak. I let them lead a dialogue on healing by having a conversation, a connection, an exchange led by my inquiries into their lives. I let Black women take me on detours, reminding myself that the project is not more important than their healing. I allow their words to guide me to spaces I had not known needed visiting. I let Black women’s truths be the center of my yearning.

Sometimes I pull out my journal and write down the words and phrases me and my homegirl exchange between braids during my hair appointment. Other times I don’t. Sometimes we just kickin’ it and she say some profound shit and I say *damn girl, I gotta add that to my dissertation!* Sometimes I hold what she say in my heart and decide the white man’s institution don’t deserve that piece of her genius. Wherever we are, whatever time it is, we just be goin’ and goin’ far off into the night, discovering and rediscovering ourselves.

I also think about how Black women researchers can support each other in research processes to enhance reciprocity. For example, Keisha is my fellow round the way PhD sister, and she interviews me as I interview her ‘cuz we both got the same exact project due in the mornin’. We hold a sisterhood dialogue that we both journal about and can both use for our perspective projects. Seated in the canopied corner of my cozy tiny bedroom, we work to break the rigid formal interview by simply holding space for each other how we always do. It feels more healing that way, and we both want to know about healing. We do not ask one pre-written question after the other. We talk, like homegirls do. We talk on top of each other. We finish each other’s sentences. We laugh at the trauma that tried to break us. We censor ourselves in the unspoken ways we each recognize with head nod and gesture, because we see the subtle discomfort of the academy having hands on our Black trauma for consumption. She gives to me and I give to her and our words dance in and out of each other. In the time of that interview, we grew even closer. We made time to talk of the things we

had been afraid to say when seeing each other in passing. We forced this research process to become liberatory.

round the way blackgirls in community with poor black women

“Everyday round the way Blackgirl” is a class-informed presentation of self, in that the origins of the aesthetic choices and maneuvers are historically rooted in poor Black folks’ survival tools. Yet, being an everyday round the way Blackgirl does not necessarily signal one’s class position. While it might make others presume one’s socioeconomic status, the term itself does not point to a person’s class. This text’s investment in the round the way girl is a rejection of normative politics of respectability, which are rooted in class based expectations of performance, requiring folks to present themselves in ways that align them with a middle class sensibility in opposition to a hood sensibility.

As expressed in my Methodological Prelude, I do not use the terms everyday round the way Blackgirls, ghetto Blackgirls, hood Blackgirls, and poor Black women interchangeably. While I do see these terms as related, they are not synonymous. Everyday round the way points more to the linguistic and aesthetic presentations of hood ethics. While it is a geographic term that points to the sites in which these embodied representations are produced, I use it most throughout this project to signal the bodily interpretations of these hood ethics that get passed down between homegirls, cousins, and communities. Thus, my use of everyday round the way is about a way of being in the world as, what Yaba Blay calls, a “Professional Black Girl.”³²⁹ This way of being is rooted in a celebration of ghetto culture and hood ethics. When naming poor Black women, there is an explicit pointing to the conditions that capitalism creates, and the im/possibilities of survival informed by lack of access to housing, health care, and state sanctioned networks of support. While ghetto and hood are at times used interchangeably, they point to the relationality between the aesthetics of round the way celebration and the conditions that produced them.

Most of my everyday round the way Blackgirl homegirls featured in this chapter, and this work at large, are or have been on the spectrum of housing insecurity at some point during my data collection process.³³⁰ Many of them are either poor or working class women struggling to find their footing and stability in a city that was not built for them. Some women, like me, have been barely gettin’ by broke graduate students whose financial status is tenuous, but whose positionality as future PhDs provide levels of social mobility that the never-went-to-college hair braider may never have. And the never-went-to-college hair braider’s social mobility is enhanced by her place on the spectrum of housing insecurity - living in a car and not on the street, living on the street for only a day and not for weeks, months, years. Thus, even if the graduate student income is not a feasible living wage, there is an understanding that this unlivable wage is temporary, and the possibility of future social mobility marks class position drastically differently from the hair braider and the unhoused Black woman with whom the PhD Black girl (me) is in community with. Even when a Black woman graduate student and a Black woman who did not finish high school may both be earning a similar income and be at similar spectrums of housing insecurity, the graduate student’s upward mobility positions her for class privilege in ways that a non-degreed Black woman may never know.

³²⁹ Yaba Blay, Professional Black Girl, <https://professionalblackgirl.com/> (2019).

³³⁰ As stated in the Methodological Prelude, I engage housing insecurity on a spectrum, and define it as any Black womxn who at any point during my data collection process fell within one of the following categories: unhoused, living in a car, living in a tent, living in between homes, having no security place to live with guarantee of sustainability and longevity, having a desire to live on their own yet currently living with family or friends due to an inability to afford rent, home payments (rent or mortgage) that required over half of their monthly income. This spectrum speaks to the impossibility of housing security for Black folks, and Black women in particular, amidst contemporary Bay Area gentrification.

Thus, I do not use everyday round the way Blackgirl interchangeably with poor Black woman. While this work is about everyday round the way Black girls and their navigation through The Town, it also centers unhoused and housing insecure Black women. Most of them are poor. Most of them struggle to afford rent each month. Most of them are feeding families that they cannot afford to feed. Most of them are struggling to survive.

In this chapter, I specifically center poor Black women's struggle for housing as critical to my argument because I am particularly interested in how the limited access to resources makes homemaking an im/possibility. Yet, I aim to illuminate the space making models of care that inform the ways in which unhoused and housing insecure Black women make their home in the wake of a housing crisis.

...

What is required of me methodologically is an autoethnography rooted in rigorous honesty. In this chapter, more than any other chapter in this text, I grapple with my own positionality as an everyday round the way Black girl who is not a poor Black woman, who has felt brief spurts of housing insecurity at various points in my Bay Area life, yet who has a heightened level of housing security due to the stability of my guaranteed graduate income. Thus, I grapple with my own privilege of being housed, juxtaposed to my homegirls whose housing is unstable, precarious, or nonexistent.

This text centers everyday round the way Blackgirl as a sacred identity of belonging, and while I do proudly identify as a round the way Blackgirl, I do not identify as a poor Black woman. This is where the "we" breaks to become "they," when the "us" I use so often in this text meet its end.

My class identity has shifted and molded a lot over the course of my life. My mother was raised in Detroit, in the hood, "on the other side of the tracks," as she'd say, by a poor Black single woman. She raised my sister and I with a round the way sensibility that was rooted in the class status of her upbringing. We grew up with a deep ethic for rejecting the exclusionary Black middle-class values that left my mother on the outskirts of belonging at her magnet Cass Tech high school. We grew up proud to be "rough around the edges"³³¹ and a little bit hood. And we grew up identifying most with the hood folks from around our way because they always felt most like home, like our cousins and our mama and our aunties and dem. But, we did not grow up poor. My mother's trauma of growing up poor made her raise us in ways that reinforced a fear of poverty-informed scarcity which, at times, resulted in a lack of financial investment in our basic needs. However, we never grew up poor. My mother owned her house in the suburbs, we went to private school (on scholarship), and even though these were hard to have and hold as a single Black mother, my mom provided us with a middle-class upbringing that prevented me from knowing the struggles of poverty intimately. Higher education, moves, and marriage have challenged my perception of my class status in my adulthood, in that they have provided upward social mobility that have led to shifts in my own perceived socioeconomic standing.

Additionally, my privilege as a doctoral student and writer of this text separates me from my homegirls, in that I have the privilege and the power to tell stories about them in ways that they do not. While I work to practice reciprocity and center their voices, it is my name on the dissertation,

³³¹ Kendall, *Hood Feminism*, 2.

not the radical unhoused and housing insecure Black woman theorist whose words make my work possible. The privilege of being housed, and being the writer of a dissertation about unhoused and housing insecure Black women, is one that I reckon with often.

I had not initially intended to write a chapter about home, and I had not intended to write about unhoused Black women as central to this text. Therefore, my method of round the way Blackgirl theorizing initially included me more explicitly as a part of the community I study. Yet, the unhoused women in my neighborhood who became dear friends demanded I tell this story differently. Their presence in my life forced me to expand my methodology to attempt to hold the complexities of their lives. It challenged me to think more critically about what it means to be an everyday round the way Blackgirl who is housed and privileged, who writes about the precarity of those whose lived realities differ drastically from my own. Even as they are my neighbors, even as I am in deep community with them, I am in no way affected by displacement in the ways that they are. While I work to hold space for their lived experiences, I cannot relate to their experiences because I do not live within the same precarity that they do.

There is a place where our shared identity begins and ends. The shared identity begins at Black and woman and round the way, and ends there, because other identities like class privilege, social mobility, housing status, and health care access inform the gap and the distance between relatability. Black womanhood be enough to be in community, but could never be enough to say I know how it feels. Where shared identity begins is where we meet and bond and find love. Where it ends is the site at which the terror of social death³³² begins, and that is a place that I could never ever know.

My beloved ancestor neighbor Slim, who was unhoused at the end of her life, once reminded me, *you writin' 'bout some shit you never lived before, and that's okay, just name that shit.*

I have never known what it feels like to live outside. I have never known what it feels like to have no place to place yo things. I have never known how it feels to be aging, to not have no house nor home, to not have nowhere to use the bathroom. I have never known the fear, the terror, the violence of the streets, of being a Black woman without the safety of shelter. I have never ever known that life.

I have known how it feels to be loved by Slim, and how it feels to love her back. I have known how it feels to love her and her neighbors, and the neighborhood we share, even when the distance between us feels so expansive, even when we are only two doors down. It is from this place of love that I attempt to write words that would honor the lives of the unhoused Black women who I center here.

My autoethnographic approach to this chapter, and particularly when discussing unhoused Black women's lives, requires me to process my own privilege, move out of the way, and make room for unhoused folks to speak their truths. Yet, this is the limitation of my methodology. I could never tell a story about unhoused Black women in the ways they could tell their story for themselves. But, how many of them will make it here to tell you their stories? How do I make room in this work to attempt to do justice to their narratives, even if and when I fail/fuck up/ miss the mark? In what ways would it be more socially acceptable for me to "miss the mark" with unhoused Black women as opposed to Black women who were not marked for social death in these same sort of ways? And

³³² Sexton, "Time, Temporality and Violence in the International."

what does that marking and naming mean for how I must approach my writing and thinking through this work?

*Death by design.
The rent is too damn high
and we don't have spaces for pleasure.*

-Kerby Lynch³³³

³³³ Lynch, "Mourning in Two Acts."

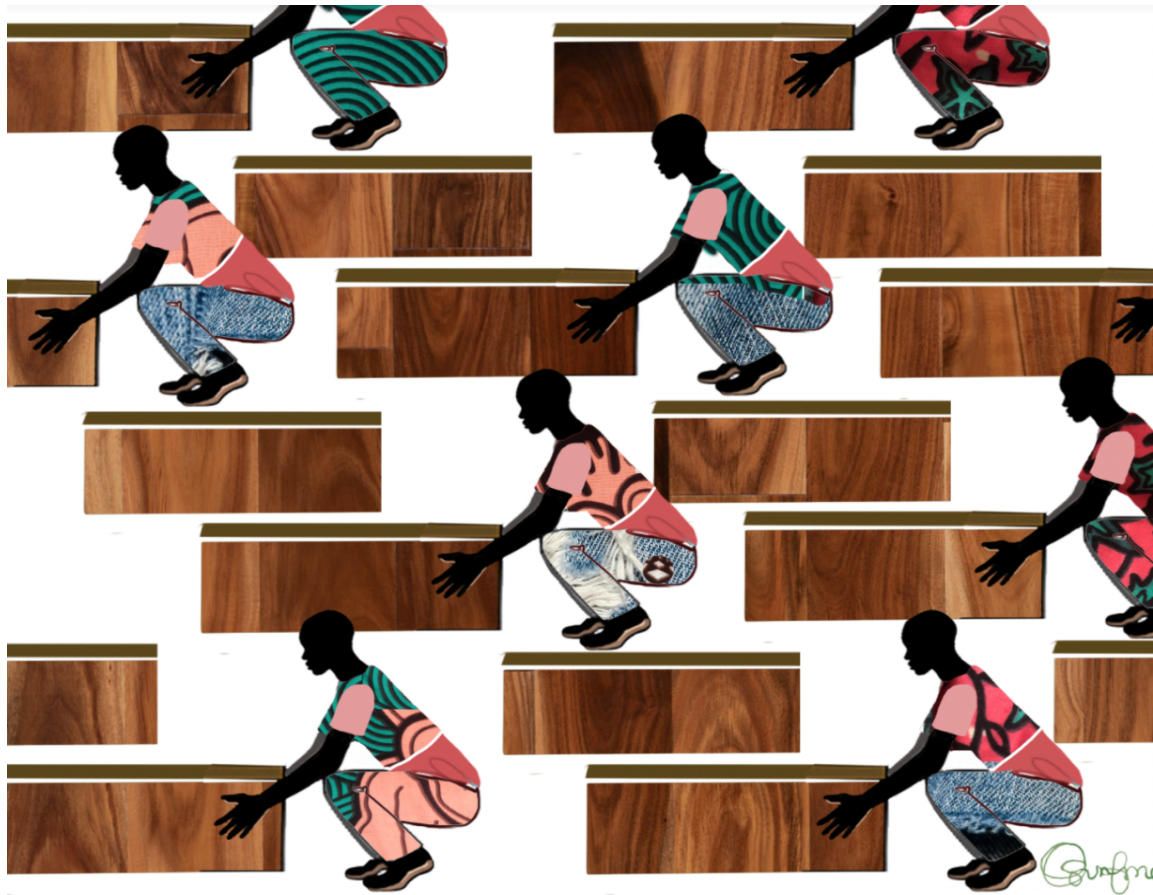


Figure 9. brick by brick, im building me a home, captured by nimot (Nimot Ogunfemi, Ujima, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

chapter two: my neighbors, my homegirls, my homes: healing at home while housing insecure in oakland

...

Damn near all the women I call my homegirls be in between homes. All the round the way Black girls I know be uncomfortable in the limitations of they homespace. All of us be suffocating in the confines of the walls with no windows, the rooms with no doors, the ceilings with no release. Everything closing in on you. Enclosure³³⁴, and no escape from it. No breath in it. All us just be tryna find ways to cultivate me space in homespace that be crowded, confining, constraint. Oakland don't afford no Black girls like us home. Oakland don't let us homegirls find solace in the comfort of no corners. Oakland be im/possibility.

Yet we find fugitive ways to escape away into the walls, into our healing. We force the space to emerge into a place where we can be, comfortably. We call to ancestors to open up this place, to expand the brick and mortar, to let Black girl meness bleed beyond concrete.

³³⁴ Woods, *Development Arrested*.

designing for care

Place a mirror here, a mirror there, makeshift windows into one's own self. Try to hang up a lamp where the window was, a draping graffiti art where the hole in the wall still bulges, a purple blue violet indigo throw to line the ground so her feet can float on something. Orange walls. Blue gold crossings. Baskets instead of bins. Fire lit candles instead of glade plug ins. She smells and sees and bes herself at every turn. With five rugs, ten plants, and two bookshelves, with a pot of fake flowers and a poster of Fannie Lou, with a set of African print pillows and a circle shaped makeshift table, we find a way to proclaim a space we can call *home*.

We make homes outta spaces that wasn't never pose to be. Homes out of graduate lounges and beauty shops. Make safety in the crevices we have access to. Make oasis in the leaking of a life. The homes we make outside of home. The back corner of the beauty shop where Sakina secures her privacy. Closed door. Her art on the wall. Her art in her hands. Creating art and viewing art simultaneously. Her beauty shop an art studio. A space where braids become art. Curated creations on a head, taken home, inspiring home, in self, in space, in a tiny studio apartment where it ain't never enough room to breathe. The plants that hang from the ceiling. The mirrors reflecting art back to art. Designing the interior of my scalp in the space she interior designed.

My homegirl meets me at my home and I meet her at her home. Both spaces designed with care. I am as safe in her home as she is in mine. Even with her Auntie in the other room. Even when her baby laid out watchin' cartoons. Even when the dishes still in the sink and the clothes ain't been washed and the carpet ain't been vacuumed. Even when she at a temporary spot till that refund check hit, till she can gather enough coins to stretch them funds for rent. I am safe in her presence. Safe in the space her body makes for me. Safe in her intention to welcome me to a room, even when it is under construction. Safe because she is learning to make home in her body, as am I, safe because she is my homegirl.

My home is a safe enough space for us to heal. I make it that way on purpose. I buy a murphy bed with university funds to flip the sleeping area onto the wall and make more room in the tiny itty bitty square that is my bedroom. I lay furry fuzzy blankets on top of hardwood floors so we might feel the fur beneath our toes and be reminded of something tender, something soft inside ourselves we had forgotten.

Keisha come over and sit in the corner where I do my journaling. I set up the canopy so her feet can fall right into the fur fleece mat. I place the pillow at her hip for comfort. This is supposed to be an "interview" for my research methods class, but we just flow, like the old friends we always been. Sakina come over and make my space an art studio. Stagin' her royal silk fabric across hardwood floors to force my space to hold her, to reckon with what she needs to create. Alexis come over and make my space a beauty shop, edge control portioned out in rattail combs laid out on the corner of my nightstand, horse hair spread out in strands across the same floor where Sakina returned to the paintbrush. Peaches come over to my temporary home when I'm in between homes and touch up the twists she did the week before because life got crazy and the ends started slippin' out. Me and Peaches make home out of the graduate lounge, cuz she in between homes and I'm in between homes and neither one of us got no couch to let me sit on to plat them twists into my scalp. We sit

beneath the *Waiting to Exhale*³³⁵ picture that reminds us to breathe, where I get a guilty pleasure out of having my hood friend from round the way in the hallways of my PhD life, blasting SOL Development's SOLs of Black Folks³³⁶ album, Bay girl through and through. Little does she know of Vèvè Clark, whose shrine lines the wall of the small square room. But she feels the energy and acknowledges the ancestral presences in the space. And all the cramped tight spaces I inhabit become multidimensional, multimodal, multipurpose, always bending and breaking and reconfiguring to meet our creative Blackgirl needs.

the homes our mothers made

While creating in the corners of my home, we each speak of our mothers. Without warning, without prompting. The art conjures up those mothers, those mournings, those memories. We each speak of the home she tried to curate. The home she lost. The healing she could not do. The burden of Black womanhood and its weight on the home. The burden that she left us. The home that was hard to hear one's own spirit in. The mother whose mental illness wreaked havoc on the home. The mother who could not make the home safe, even when she tried.

And here we are, all young women tryna make our own home, wondering how to do the thing we were never taught to. Even as we recall how our Mamas "ma[d]e livable moments, spaces and places in the midst of all [that seemed] unlivable."³³⁷ how they "worked at joy,"³³⁸ how they "adorn[ed] with flowers whatever shabby house [they are] forced to live in,"³³⁹ how they "ma[d]e a small path through the wake [by bringing] beauty into [a] house in every way [they could],"³⁴⁰ we all recall the im/possibility of bringing a Blackgirl up in a home where a Black mother could not breathe. How the loss of the home and the loss of the self became a model of how to be Black and woman and wounded and never fully at home in the world.

Peaches preach a story so many of us say. So many of us asè to. *My mom . . . like her shit is all the way scattered . . . and I feel like my shit is all the way scattered everywhere . . . She just was . . . struggling. She didn't know what she was struggling with. And she lost her house, that was her baby, besides me. So I just really feel like she was not equipped to deal with that in the way that she thought she could.*

And history repeats itself in us. *We out here being our mama's daughters. We really are our mothers' mothers - our mothers' children, daughters, alla that!*³⁴¹ As we try to break the cycles of harm we learned in the homes that could not raise us, we find our mothers in our mirror. How did she get there? What has she come to remind us about how to be home in the wake of im/possibility?

. . .

I had returned to crochet in memory of my mother. The day Sakina the painter made my bedroom into an art studio. When she did her painting and I did my crocheting and we made a healing space out of home. I was workin' to convince her that she was an artist, to reclaim the part of herself that

³³⁵ *Waiting to Exhale* is a classic film about Black women's journey to breath and wellness.

³³⁶ SOL Development is an Oakland based musical group that is widely respected within the community for their uplifting messages of hope, peace, and transcendence. Their work can be found at <https://soldevelopment.bandcamp.com>.

³³⁷ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 4.

³³⁸ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 4.

³³⁹ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 239.

³⁴⁰ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 4.

³⁴¹ Peaches. Around the way Blackgirl healing.

made her feel most free. And in workin' on her, she made me work on me. *You a artist, too!* So as I skimmed the isles of Michaels for her paint and brushes, I saw some yarn and hooks on sale, and realized I better reclaim my practice, too. I transform my home into an art studio to hold her, to hold me, to hold us. We paint and crochet together, tightening stitches and stacking steel toned colors on top of each other, layering crayons like we layer care, clumped together like the threaded bobbed and weaved weight of our recollections. The space my mother made in her depression to return to the girlhood thing that made her happy, and the space Sakina made for me to return to my mother through hook and stitch, let me make space for myself to remember with my hands how healing feels.

When yo hands learn hook and yarn from yo mother, they never really forget. Yo hands remember, like yo mother's hands do, that makin' somethin' for yoself is a healing praxis. The space between my fingertips and each stitch that shapes itself into wool clothing contributes to some space I make in me. The stitches make themselves into clothing and I make myself into an opening up of worlds. I try on each sleeve and see myself leaning into the blouse as I lean into myself. Like quilting, this praxis keeps me tied together, crocheted into a fabric of fumbling hands, of Nisan and cat nip and tangled up yarn that tore the tangled up heart of my mother back together again. Like my mother's mother, I get a black cat who loves to lick the balls of yarn I collect in a corner of my living room. She named hers Nisan. I name mine Kimathi. She understood the necessity of an emotional support animal before there was language for it.

My mother grins when I tell her I don't picked up the hook again. Tells me how she only reclaimed that lil thing she use to do with her high school homegirls once the catastrophe of losing to life leave you no other choice. When I was seven and I saw the woman who birthed me braid herself into depression. When the facade of having healed halted her on the inside and made an unraveling of her. When she dug up some memory of the girlhood she had forgotten and picked up the stitch and started the way she always would. With a hook and a ball of yarn and a stitch. "Yo hands just go soon as you get into it." She taught me and my sister to model the movement of her hand. I carried the teardrop she released into ruffled yarn, I carried it with me into my praxis.

As I sat with my homegirl on my bedroom floor, transforming my room into an art studio, I felt my mother in each stitch. I pick up that lil thing I use to do with my high school homegirls only when my world requires me to put myself back together again. To make somethin' for myself with my own hands and to call that care and healing. I say we like them women who quilt, who pull together coils of somebody's afterthought and make warmth. We like them women who know they hands got healin' powers, like the layin' on of hands into fabric, like the formation of colors on clothes.

Alice Walker searches for her mother in the metaphors of flowered gardens. I search for my mother through every stitch. Alice Walker and Christina Sharp and Audre Lorde all speak of mothers who made homes for their daughters the best ways they knew how. Sarah Broom speaks of the Yellow House, the pride her Mama took in having her own. The interior decorations of a dilapidated home. A father who died and the house that died with him, a house left staggering in mourning, a home drenched with the residue of silenced memory. We all know that our mothers have grown things and killed things inside of themselves. We all wish our mothers would embrace themselves, embrace us, more fully.

mapping homes + heartbreaks + healings

On 61st and Shattuck, right across the street from Sankofa Middle School, I lived in a lil co-op for folks of color tryna make a life while in a fight with minimum wage. It was a house full of artists and creators where folks lived cooperatively and in harmony - shared responsibility for the garden, the cooking, the dishes. I would sit out in that garden and grow my own soul. Listen to the windchimes and write poetry. Learn from my self-proclaimed witch of a housemate about crystals and herbal home remedies. She'd help me make my body an altar, weaving wires and cords around yellow gold stones, saying, *wear this ring for protection. Wear this necklace for peace.* And we would exchange stories about how we got well at the garden, and how much healing there was still left to do. I would sit out at that garden for hours and hours, studying how insects crawled into dirt, journaling about heartache, writing songs about moving on and releasing what no longer served me. I would open my bedroom window and sit on the roof and tilt my head up and watch God.³⁴² This home was my introduction to Oakland. I loved it there, but I was only approved to stay for half the year, and I had to leave that December.

In preparation to part ways with the place I had made home during my first five months in Oakland, my housemates and I hosted an artists' circle. Titled it "The Fireside." Made lil flyers and texted it out to all our homies. Had hella community come by to say they last goodbyes. Parted ways with creation as communion. Me sharing poems from my diary that I never ever read out loud. Neighbors opening up. Housemates unraveling paints and portraits from the cobwebbed corners of their bedrooms. Homegirls showing sides we never knew. Making and sharing art at our makeshift open mic night.

While we sat in a circle around our fireplace that night, there was a fire that broke out on the other side of town, and from the depths of Oakland, we could hear the tears of rage rearranging the city's psychic sense. December 2nd. 2016. The Ghost Ship Fire.³⁴³ Rage and flames and fires. We sat around our fire and messages flooded in all at once about a fire in Fruitvale. Just a few BART stops away, at a place that was a home with intentions like ours - to create and live free and survive in this wake - thirty-six artists and activists died due to "death by design . . . [because] the rent is too damn high and we don't have spaces for pleasure."³⁴⁴ That night, as we grieved and mourned the loss of lives like ours, we faced the stakes of Oakland - of not having no place to stay, not having no space, not having no room, not knowing enough air, not being able to catch yo breath, not having what you need to create, to breathe, to be.

And I remember being unable to emote. Unable to wrap my head around how thirty-six creators could have died like that, how sharing and creating turned to flames on the same night that we shared and created around flames, contained in warmth and safety. I could not comprehend how friends of my friends burned to death in a fire, from the same desires of the home that we had made - to be safe from the harm of precarity. I said goodbye to that co-op that night, saddened by the state of my departure, and transitioned into a new home closer to that fire, closer to Fruitvale, closer to new waves of community.

...

³⁴² Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

³⁴³ "Ghostship was a warehouse fire of an underground artist community, murdering 36 of the community's best minds . . . Burned out and burned down, the memorial stays . . . Eventually they will tear it down and build condos." Lynch, "Mourning in Two Acts."

³⁴⁴ Lynch, "Mourning in Two Acts."

healing at home
a love letter to
blackgirl sanctuary³⁴⁶

you started as a blank canvas
uncurated
uncultivated
uncushioned
quiet
squeaks of your hinges haunted me
hardwood floors felt cold and callous
cutting through the thick of my skin
beneath my feet

i couldn't read you
i couldn't reach you
yearning for some form of recognition
from you
to see me and set me free
here
lay me to rest in the rawness of your warmth
i saw potential in you
past the painful sleepless nights you caused
crying babies out my window
crack babies out my window
cracks in the paint at my window
can't see the sun out my window
cried in my baby's arms
as i stared out the window
of this strange widowed place
that felt as vacant as my heart
yet from here
is where we created *art...*

³⁴⁶ This poem was first published in *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child* with Nomadic Press in 2021. botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

//

on move in day
in order to keep sane
i decorated.
decorated every inch of every corner
placed petals of dead flowers
in the cracks of your crevices
just to remind myself
there is life after death,
there is life after death
carried couches and chairs
down east oakland sidewalks
to make you my sanctuary
to shelter myself from you, in you, with you
you would become who i needed you to
cause i needed you to
be it one week or two or three
i would make a home of you

//

i made my way through life through you
the day i declared.
i dared face the darkness you held
in the hollowness of your heroes
whose honest scent lingered behind
like a black widow in her wilderness
whose blood still boldly buried beneath your concrete
i could feel her fumbling in my garden when i'd sleep
i sent for you
but had to go through her first

and she never feared me
until i remembered that i must not fear her
she was the wicked of the past i left behind
she was a reflection of the darkness in me

//

that day at the meditation center
alice walker reminded me
with her soft hands and calm smile
embracing me carefully
"you have the power, sister"

the power to cultivate a garden

to pull from the powers of my mothers
to pull from the depths of the dirt
and dig out the gem
to know that light always wins
and i will always be light so long as i choose
and now i am light
and now you are light too.

II.

you
physical space of sage and scents
you who ignites metaphysical space
inside my inner place
of sage and scents
you are the light that reflects my light
so i must never fear you
even when i fear me
even when i can't face myself
you give me space to embrace myself

the booty shakin
book reading
journal writing
red lip rockin
poet
scholar
activist
and you let me be
all of these things
all at once
with no pressure to compartmentalize
in a world that demands i compartmentalize
you are the only place in the world
where my world is my own
you let me walk into my world
with my name on it

you let me be
thirteen year old ree
playin
patty-cake-pick-a-boo-little-Sally Walker
you let me wonder what life might be like
if this world loved black women
because in this alternate universe
that you and i create
this world loves black women
like me

with my tongue out and my thighs out
in my two tone
red bone
high yella skin
home is here
healing is here
you cultivate home inside me

III.

my sacred sanctuary of healing
you see me in all of my rawness
and you love me most here
in the darkest part
of my deepest dungeon
where the demons live and lurk
you meet me here
and embrace me here
and remind me that i am
Holy
with my ashy knees
and sheabutterless, uncreamed,
coiled, kinky hair
frizzed and napped
the kitchen at the nape of my neck
collecting dust
cause i'm depressed
and dry
and stale
and lonely
but you see me
and you seek me
and you reflect me

//

during the holidays
when i ain't have no family
you was my family
tucked me in extra tight that night
and nestled me into your warmth
you helped me trim the tree
and tie the bow in a knot
draped the lights across each branch
hung the stockings and danced with me
to all my favorite nostalgic slow jams
like This Christmas and Jackson 5's
santa kissing mama under the mistletoe

and on the part when Michael come in and say
"no, no I really *did* see mommy kissin' santa clause"
when i recited every word
you didn't even laugh at me
you just let me be
weird and quirky and crazy in my own way

you knew that's the song i use to sing with mama
and you comforted me for my loss
you let me laugh at myself
and love
and grieve
and get better
and get worse
and get restless
and retreat
and retrieve
and conspire to kick myself out my own world
when i become too much for me

but when i wanna return
you always welcome me back
with open arms
no harm ever done

IV.

some say you are but a figment of my imagination
but i once imagined you
at a time when i struggled to imagine myself
and you became reality
and i retained reality
many may not believe in your power
but your power is simply the power within me
reflected back to me
reflections of myself at every angle i turn
you become the depiction of my highest me

a memory of ancient black motherhood
that always birthed green
always planted seeds
out flower pots surrounded by poisonous weeds
the slave mama
who always made somethin out of nothin
the poor mama
whose hands danced away poverty
with sprouting tulips and purple pansies
who never had a lot but always had a home

who turned a hut into a home
who made space to belong

//

and don't every black woman deserve this,
a space she can call her sanctuary?
to sit still in her magic
and make meaning of her life
to let her truth form before her
to cultivate the vacant space inside her heart
where art is awaiting creation
where her ritual of righting wrongs and singing songs off key in her shower can occur
a place where her life can occur

where do black women go
when life lets us down?
we go home
and shouldn't our homes
be spaces of healing,
if nowhere else in this world
will be?

to kneel at our altars
and pray to our ancestors
and rejoice to our gods
and give grace to our enemies
and meditate away negative energies
and embrace positivity
don't we deserve that space?

yes we go home
to heal
we find home inside a little lot of land
where we proudly place our name and say
i curate my healing here
i escape here
and that little plot of pain in our hearts
ceases its tension
even just for a moment...³⁴⁷

At my home on 14th and 30th, every neighbor to my right and to my left was a Black woman, and we had healing circles in each home. Redecoration parties. Paint parties. Pain parties. Pity parties. We sat up on that roof and watched the sun set, sisters passing joints and making room for each other to breathe. Black women educators tryna help Black girls heal and help theyself heal at the same damn time. Black women artists and dancers and creators and creatives just tryna figure out

³⁴⁷ This poem was first published in 2021 by Nomadic Press in *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*. botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

how to be well. We would share laughs and loves and journal entries, visions and hopes and dreams. We would tag team on projects we made to hold our pain, like videos and visuals and shit. We'd just be making stuff together and seeing what would come of it. Sharing photoshoots and feng shui, shoes and clothes, furniture and frustrations.

When my homegirl Alexis come over to put blondpinkpurple plats in my head, she say she been real real heavy. She take her time placing each strand over the other, and give herself the space she need to be seen and heard and felt. I listen and lean into the weight of her. Wack ass white ass job. Family drama. Mama. Death. The weight of tryna be well when all you wanna do is some stupid ass shit like make a bad decision and not face no consequences for it. And why can't we call that wellness? Like, wondering what is the balance between levity and mourning, and why healing always gotta be so heavy when you a Blackgirl with gut wrenching memories of the childhood you never had access to. Like, why we can't just find ourselves in joy, why we always gotta grapple with so much pain pain pain? *I hate to see a carefree white kid. I envy them. I wish I could give every Blackgirl what they have.* She plats her anger into my skin. I welcome it. Confusion. Uncertainty. Insecurity. I welcome all the ways her words need to be held in the hues of my braids, because she is tellin' all of my story.

When Sakina come over, I tell her I had just dreamed of her and a fish. Her first exhibition feature. Her father and her mother. She struggles in this life and in the next to embrace herself as artist. Because there is not enough space to paint at her Auntie house. *Maybe I could turn her lil patio into my studio. Maybe I can set up a chair as an easel.* . . . Because Blackgirl burdens to be something significant. Something more. No one knows what to do with a Blackgirl from East Oakland who is both a braider and a painter, a scholar and a sculpture in and of herself. She so free she wanna fly away and be elsewhere. Wanna run to places she won't be found. Just discovered in the truth of her spirit. Free spirit. She have this conundrum of care free Blackgirl spirit. I tell her I had dreamed about her. The fish, she tells me, some memory of her childhood when she was said to always be swimming the other way. The opposite direction. The one who never fit in. I welcome the strokes of her paintbrush in the hardwood of my floors. I welcome her fury, her fish-like navigation through the mercy waters that were never smooth enough to carry her home into herself. And the next day, I welcome all the ways she wishes to paint her passion into my head, designing a complex mural in the messiness on top of my mind.

An architect of my scalp, she smiles before every braid, curating on my head a reflection of what I curate in my home, a reflection of what I curate in my heart. She braids healing into my head and into my heart and into my home, holding my memory in each strand, capturing the energy of my affective movement through the world with each part/ knot/ twist turned to braid. When we finish, there is seventeen hundred strands braided into seventeen hundred stories shared over the course of an evening turned morning. In the curated home space, there is room for my healing to grow, for her healing to meet mine and to be reflected. The intricacy of the geometric, cartographic roadmap she narrates at my roots reminds me of the journey it takes to return me back to me, to remember what my healing requires, a door into a self that leads me home, to the home I curate inside of me. The self and the soul and the scalp and the home merge into each other, cultivating multidimensional healing scapes for me and my homegirl who braids reflections of my life into meaning with each part.

And in my final days in Funktown, at our New Year's vision board party, as I copy pasted a picture of my face that I found in a magazine, I felt the earth shake. I experienced my very first earthquake in the comfort of my homegirl's home. She guided me under tables and chairs and taught me how to

breathe. We stayed up way past midnight's moonshine and spoke on the spirituality of these things. How the earth shakes. How the spirit moves. What was moving and shaking in me. What the universe was calling me into. And after one whole year living and loving in that space, I transitioned out of that tiny little room and into a new home with my husband.

...

At the corner of MLK and MacArthur, I moved into a teal green fourplex and made intimate friends with a different side of Oakland. Walking distance from First Fridays and the Black Joy Parade. Twelve steps from tent city at the underpass. And twenty two steps from the beloved Marcus Bookstore, the oldest Black bookstore in the nation that is still alive and well, still operating and honoring the legacy of Black writing. MLK and MacArthur. Crunched between the hipster haul of coffee shops and tap shacks, with the ghosts of displaced mourning etched into the pavement, with the folks with no homes making homes of these streets at the edge of dystopia.³⁴⁸

I wrote most of my dissertation from this place. This home that grounded and uprooted me at once, that forced me into growth, into a constant state of grieving, into face to face with new stakes. MLK and MacArthur, right down the street and round the corner from the death of Nia Wilson, the site at which a white man slit her throat and cut her life. Two doors down from the mourning grounds of 37MLK, an encampment of unhoused Black women displaced from what was once home.

HEALING AT HOME WHILE UNHOUSED IN OAKLAND

...

My feet take seven steps down Martin Luther King Jr. Way. Take a right turn. Take two steps at the side of the gate. Request entry. Delphine is there to open the gate every time. Her hand made locs fall gently into her smile as she bends over the lock and unlatches its hold.

I remember the first day the women came to take over the vacant lot. A crooked multicolored sign saying somethin' bout houseless rights and safety for the poor. Two doors down from my teal green fourplex, this garden of a home space multiplied more and more each month. It started with one sign sayin' somethin' 'bout Blackness and borders. Then came a couple Frida Khalo pillows, a couch with wheels, a pretty mustard colored calligraphy of faces and names they insisted the entire community remember. Signs and more signs. A welcome banner at the front gate and one at the side gate. Sayin' somethin' bout QTPOC and free love and we all deserve to be housed here. Somethin' 'bout whose lives matter where. Somethin' 'bout houselessness as a crime to humanity.

It started with some words written on a colored page about how we treat who we see on the street, a neighbor who used to live two doors down, now knees to the ground of grassed concrete, crying to a God who still hears her. The woman who learned to make a house out of home, who learned to live home in each step she take towards her home grown grounding. The woman whose home became interior, who made a home with wooden sticks and brickless tents. Who made some home of herself.

³⁴⁸ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

It started with some bold ass idea to take over the empty lot and put love in it. When Slim got pushed out her home of fifteen years and Shell said fuck it sis, I'm ridin'. With a woman of color imaginary that could never be contained within brick and mortar. Yes, this Black woman deserves a house to put her home in. Yet, in the meantime she make home right here where she stands. Right here in the forgotten lands, the abandoned, stranded and still strong woman who forced Oakland to reckon with her precarity.

Each day I walked down MLK, down the block towards the stop where my 57 bus come, I can't not notice them. The growth. The expansion. The one by one placement of donated items. The matching tents. The greenery growing from beyond the gate. The golden string lights draped. The signs and the signs that multiply. Each day I walk by something different. Some piece of some paper turned the other way. A new book shelf. A library. A kiddie pool. A play place. Two new dogs. A living room. Ten more tents. Street names. Flowers. Spray painted gates.

And I remember the first day I met them, the radical healing activists of the 37MLK garden village community, who demanded that every human who pass by this corner contend with the cruelty of their conditions, who forced the street to stretch to meet their needs.

37MLK

[The Tent Village Community of Love and Peace]

In The Guardian's January 2020 article, entitled "The Oakland women who took over a vacant lot to house the homeless," 37MLK is described as "a tent village created out of deliberate and coordinated intent; by community organizers taking over a vacant lot for the sole purpose of setting up a homeless encampment. It's a community response to a housing crisis that has led to many black elders being pushed out of the neighborhoods they call home." I learned the layout of my new neighborhood by building community with houseless folks who were the only Black neighbors I had. They taught me the landscape of the city, the history of the city, and its impossibilities to hold them.³⁴⁹

...

You live right here? She asks as I insert my key into the lock and open the gate.

On no other day would I be up and out at nine am, except for today because I needed to hop on the bus and grab some blonde dye from the beauty supply on 24th and Telegraph. As I hop off the bus back and enter my home, I see her and her pit and her homegirl.

You Black, ain't you? And you live here? I notice a familiar sparkle in her eye, and a subtle warmth in her smirk, that says I don't trust easy but I am curious about you. *How old is you? What, you 'bout eighteen?* She is curious to know how a young Blackgirl got this spot on this corner, at this height of the gentrification pushout³⁵⁰.

³⁴⁹ Vivian Ho, "The Oakland women who took over a vacant lot to house the homeless," *The Guardian* (2020).

³⁵⁰ Morris, *Pushout*.

“No, I’m 26,” I say with a laugh. I look up from the lock and suddenly remember where I had seen this familiar glow, this familiar smile. “Hey, I remember you! I met you down the street at the encampment a few months back.”

Back in October, on our weekly walk round the neighborhood, me and my boo noticed a gated community that was growin’ two doors down from us. We saw a make-shift outdoor library welcoming radical texts. We saw chickens and gardens and art. We saw signs that read, “We are your neighbors,” draped in golden string lights. And we met Shell, who organized the encampment and organized this movement, on behalf of Slim, her homegirl who ain’t got no place to stay all of a sudden since she got pushed out her home.

Slim tap my shoulder all familiar like, like even though she don’t trust easy she just might wanna make friends. *Yea, yea, I do remember you now! Listen, we tryna get things together over there. We tryna organize and set things up. We tryna reach out to the neighbors to see who can help.* “I been meanin’ to come by to see y’all, cuz I got a bookshelf ion want.” *Yea, yea, we could definitely use that.* “What else yall need over there?”

Anything a house would have, she say. Anything a house would have.

I hear an unwavering commitment to homespace curation in the assuredness of her voice, an affirmation of her right to make self-proclaimed sanctuary, even if it is unsheltered. *Anything a house would have.* I repeat those words to myself out loud as I run up my stairs and prepare to rummage through my things. While her and her homegirl wait for me outside my gate, I search my closets and drawers for *anything a house would have* to support her and her homegirl in making home.

I come back out with four pillows, two blankets, and a ziplock bag of candied apple muffins my boo’s mama had made for us. As her homegirl lifted her head from behind her hair and stretched her hand to hold new items for her home, I realized her smile and warmth was familiar to me too. It was the lady with the hot pink headwrap who me and Keisha had seen a few weeks back. “You changed ya hair, it looks so cute, I love it!” Today, she was sportin’ a coca-cola red bob with a clean cut bang. *Mmmhm, I remember, when I seen you and ya cute friend right here outside yo gate.* She had just been on my spirit earlier that day, because I wanted to share with her the poem I had wrote about how much that encounter meant to me, how much her seeing me had meant to me.

“What is your name? I wrote this poem about you and I wanted to share it with you.” Rosa, she said with pride and grace. *You do poems? I do poems too. I write all kinda things. I do all kinda things.*

They tell me ‘bout all the newspaper articles written about the vacant lot that became a sanctuary for unhoused Black women. The number of stories featured in a number of papers about Shell and Slim and Rosa and they homegirls. The one they show me first is Street Spirit³⁵¹, the Bay Area newspaper dedicated to publishing writing written for and by unhoused residents in the area. Slim’s poems was featured in there last month, the one she wrote for a friend strugglin’ through depression, the one she recite to herself in her tent and remembered from when she first wrote it in the ’90s. She hand me a copy and say I can have it. I take it home and put it in a real special place.

³⁵¹ “Street Spirit is an independent newspaper in the East Bay dedicated to covering homelessness and poverty from the perspective of those most impacted.” <https://thestreetspirit.org/>.

Then they tell me 'bout the paper for this month, the October issue, the one about *the ghosts of homelessness*, the one that featured they collective theory of the palimpsestic³⁵² remnants of inequality, they analysis of home and homeless haunting. The paper is hanging up on the outside of the gate, like art for the whole city to see, decorated in spray painting and leave clippings. A statement of declarative authorship, of rights to a story and rights to a land.

I spend the afternoon there, learnin' about the history of they hood, they community. They tell me 'bout they plans for a Halloween party that is rooted in a ghostly analysis of Oakland, one that proclaims the past is never past and that Blackness can't never be erased in The Town. The Halloween party as a site of recollection, of remembering the dead concrete killed by concrete, the streets, the state. The party is a recalling of what was here before Blackness was forced out.

I tell Shell about my dissertation on Black women's healing spaces and the aesthetics of care, Black feminist interior design and surviving displacement. *Our aesthetics is our survival*, she say. Give gentrified Oakland somethin' nice to look at so they can't trip off the encampment too much. She say if it ain't beautiful it will be shut down. She say Black women deserve it to be beautiful, because they interior forced to be exterior and hyper visible and she wonder about making the forced publicness of they home feel even just a little more hidden, more sheltered, more sacred. They spray paint gate to camouflage, to give Black women more privacy, to protect them how they can from surveillance.

Like maroons³⁵³, who learned to make home out the hand-me down holes in each other's hearts, Slim hangs around The Town with teeth too tight to breathe. She demands what she deserves - a right to life. A right to ice. A right to a plug to charge her phone up. Access to dignity. To have her humanity honored, acknowledged, affirmed. Like maroons, who made mockery of the state by staking claims to the underworlds of the forgotten scapes, she signs her calligraphy into the concrete to counter all contestations of her identity. *I am here and you will not unsee me*.

She is the daughter of the migrants. The Louisiana folk song lullabies about some field in some Angola prison. She is more delicate than the magnolia from her grandmama's home, but she don't always let you know it. Rarely let herself show signs of being weak or in need, na, not in these streets. She got to be the strongest of the sisters. Distrust is a way to secure safety, so when she opens up, it is a gift. A treat. A blessing. She is the legacy of the ladies who loved life into the homes she grew up in. She gets down on her knees in her tent and thanks God for them all.

Like maroons, she moves through the dismal swamp of sideways blues that bombard blue collar comfort. The slip from safe to unwell happen so quick. Her unwanted territory suddenly desirable. Her house no longer her home. Now she make home in the interior of her tent. No space to vent. No air for ventilation. No life to live beneath a freeway. Yet she makes home here. She gathers her girls from the neighborhood and makes home here. In sisterhood. In community. In love. She convenes the colored girls who got pushed out they rainbow³⁵⁴ and she takes up space in the lot across the way from where she lost her house. She makes home here, in the traveled dust of these palm trees. In the open mess of a middle ground. She grows plants and raises chickens and chants about all she is deserving of here.

³⁵² Smith, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness*.

³⁵³ Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2015.

³⁵⁴ Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*.

curatorial praxis

37MLK's infrastructural cartography, designed in circular fashion, with each tent adjacent to the next, creates a common gathering area in the middle of each woman's home. The encampment has become an outdoor oasis for unhoused Black women who collectively assert their right to safespace and livability in the city. Its curatorial genius - the neon string lights, Frida Khalo pillows, and flourishing garden - transforms the formerly vacant lot into a safe haven of communal care. Even in its precarious ephemerality, #37MLK is a life-affirming artistic innovation within a context of social death. By cultivating a model of urban cooperative homespace, #37MLK residents challenge the limitations of the built environment. They remap the city by remapping their bodies and homes onto contested space, commanding their right to "live within their own map,"³⁵⁵ a microscopic enclave that speaks back to the macroscopic harm imposed onto their livelihoods. To name self made, cardboard delineated streets after their sheros, to grow trees in soil they stake claims to, to remap a vacant lot and rename it home - these radical practices make visible the violence of Oakland's antiBlack city map by demanding Black folks have a right to something beautiful here. In their own self-affirmed cartographic practice, these women embody Hunter's and Robinson's claim, that "Black mapping . . . [frames] . . . how Black people make place in response to and critique . . . [of] gentrification processes."³⁵⁶

...

Each Black woman of 37 MLK³⁵⁷ cultivates fertile grounds for care in the enclave where she dwells. With a refined curatorial praxis of compiling rare Oakland artifacts, she takes what she can get, from a neighbor or a street corner or the house she once had, and blends together the colors and patterns and paintings of those places, and merges them together to make her new home. The objects themselves, the energy and memory they carry, compiled into a collection of home, become an exhibition of care in the wake, a making of self and home in the midst of state sanctioned domestic violence - violence projected onto Black women's bodies / minds / spirits/ souls, the violence of the domestic sphere, the violence of having no concrete walls to protect you from the wind.

These Black women be art in and of themselves. These Black women decorate their home with their bodies, make their home an extension of themselves, refuse to let house(less)ness define them, find ways to make self and make space and make home in the debris. These round the way Blackgirls of all ages curate the body as they curate the home.³⁵⁸ The body and the home a reflection of each other. The skin and the tent both covered in that which is borrowed, owned, owed, that which she brings new life to, objects that retain her asé.

She make her home by walkin,' wearin' too tight pumps and a rainbow wig with a hot pink hand purse to match. She finds herself in the shelves of the makeshift library, before it is torn down by the wind. She warms herself in her home, until it rains so deep she could swim in the puddles that become rivers on top of her tent. Her home has been destroyed so many times. Yet, she keeps "coming up for more life,"³⁵⁹ refusing to drown in the hurricane of Oakland's im/possibilities.

³⁵⁵ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

³⁵⁶ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

³⁵⁷ Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*.

³⁵⁸ Sarah Broom, *The Yellow House* (Grove Press, 2019).

³⁵⁹ Avila, *Malriada and Other Stories*, 34/

Each time I visit I am reminded of the ephemerality of this place, the possibility and im/possibility of it. The inability to keep anything or anyone stable. Everytime I come, there is a different combination of collected art on the fence, in the tents, on the ground. Every time I come, there is a collection of new embodied art spray painted on a chest, a new woman with a new boo, a new elder with a new friend. Yet, everyone is temporary. Everything is uncertain. How do you build home in the midst of that type of precarity?

Theirs is a home of memory. Theirs is a site of recollection. The story each object has to tell, the story that these Black women demand each object remember, their stories of loss and longing, of triumph and tumult. The wayward lived girls³⁶⁰ with stories etched into the fabric of their tents, the stories they demand this city witness. The dirt and dust that line the seams of each object, the soil that tells the stories of the forgotten.

This lot will never be the same. These objects will never be the same. Even after these folks are long gone, they have altered the sense of this space, and demanded that the gate itself remember. Because of 37MLK this city will never be the same because the space will demand we remember.

37 MLK taught me how to dream. Taught me how to paint possibility onto a canvas when the canvas can't be tamed, when the place you live is as wild as the home you own, the home inside you that you take everywhere you go - the tree stump and its lingerings, the weeded patch of dead plants, gravel and gateways and chained fences. 37 MLK is a liberatory healing model for all Black women tryna get free, tryna make a home out of nothin'.

...

Carrie invites me into her home, to come and see her art. *Carrie Chism. Like Shirley. Surely you know about Shirley.* She talk real fast and with her hands, so you can keep up with every point. She say lots of deep things about life and dirt and soil and skin color and the ocean, but I am not sharp enough to keep up. It is a puzzle, a maze to map out, and if you miss one point, you lose all the wisdom she has just offered you. The skin on her face is as smooth and clear as a baby, so you do not know her age until you see the thickened wrinkles that line her hand and dance into each other with no breaks.

She had noticed me before I entered. Seen me through the gate walkin' down MLK and yell through the bushes and leaves, *I love yo hair!* She does not know that I am headed to her home, to see my homegirls who live in her complex. I enter the gate to see her, with yarn filled locs danglin' above her eyebrow, banded and bobbed all around. "Thank you so much, I love yours too! That is so cute." She got 'bout five different shades of each purple pink and blue, each loc hidden beneath colored yarn woven into her scalp. I ain't never in my life seen no style like that! *How you even do that?!* She lean her head forward and show me the intricacy of that design, how her hands wrapped each loc, how her not havin' no mirror ain't stop her from bein' precise with the measurements. *I had it longer before, the bang like right over my left eye, swoopin down, you know?* She motions with her hands how low the bang went, into her cheek and danglin' right below her smile. *I jus got in the mood to cut it even more. But yours, yours is beautiful, makin me wanna get my hair back. I use to have locs that long, I jus got bored and cut em off.* She reached for my blonde/ pink/ purple braids, admiring the barrettes and beads.

³⁶⁰ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

I compliment her necklaces. Five different danglin' patterned strings of shells, skulls, stones and leaves. She lets me know that she got some stuff she sellin'. I say I been needin' some jewelry. In her turquoise flower-patterned bra and her Hello Kitty booty shorts, on the hottest day of 2020 thus far, she led me into her home to see her art. Showed me the skull shaped necklaces she had hangin' from her sombrero hat. The two paintings she had hung up in her tent. The stream of lights she had hangin' across each side. I am amazed by the layout of it, the curation of it, the home she built of her art.

These all the different pieces I got to sell. Mostly skull heads and I am not sure if I want to wear them across my heart. I am still not brave enough to not fear death. She works with death as medium, skull as medium, an intimacy with ghostly haunting that I could never know. A heightened awareness of death at yo doorstep. A lingering knowing that she never really knowing exactly when it will be her time.

Then she shows me a clay based rectangle on a black cloth string. I am drawn to it. *Songbird. It's something to do with a songbird.* I say I want that one, thinking 'bout all the songs I make up in my home to sing to myself when I am blue. *You know who you are, you know whose you are.* Songbird, I realize that I am in fact my own little songbird, my singer of tunes to ignite my healing. She places the symbol around my neck, moving the braids that get caught between the string and my skin. *And I have these, they coins with years on em. When was you born? And yo boo?* I had told her about the engagement, the excitement, the fiancé. *This is for y'all, congratulations on doing a big ol thing like gettin' married.* She find one the year 1990 and one the year 1995. *In between the year y'all was born.* I say we both born '93, three days apart, Aquarius. *That is truly somethin' special, y'all really kindred spirits.* She strings each coin onto a red clothed string and places them in my hand. I say I will return with the cash, say I rather not take the gift without giving her the cash. *I love you! It don't matter. Go head.* She say *Songbird is 25 but the gift, that's free.* I hand my hunny 1995 and wear 1990 and Songbird on my chest for the rest of the evening, the rest of the week, the rest of that whole season.

...

And who is this mermaid? Delphine ask when she first meet me. Her bandana'd locs and lavender glitter eyelids motion towards me. I smile at the resonance of unicorns and mermaids, how all the strangers who become homegirls call me one of the two. Shell had been sayin' me and Delphine need to meet, cause she into all that I'm into like making a space and curating a home and thinking deeply about the objects needed to do all that. Shell say she a artist with a radical Black feminist praxis, too. *When I first came here, it was like a butterfly. But now it's not that. In my mind, in my spirit, it's not that no more. But I don't care, I'm not going nowhere, they need me here. I always dreamed of this, since I was a lil girl, building a structure, some place beautiful to call a home that was wide and free like this, and now I get to do it.* An architect in her own right, Delphine is determined to rebuild this place. Days after the shooting that led to the death at her front door step, and months after the encampment's beginning, Delphine is reinvigorated to rebuild this place. She points out the new additions she don' made thus far. The paper winged butterfly she found and placed at the entryway. The temple-like column just outside her tent, at the entrance of the gate, to let folks know they steppin' into some place important.

I tell Delphine I wanna start a Black women's healing circle for art making for folks within the tent. *Healin' space? Yea, come on. We need it. Bring it on. The hooks. The yarn. Bring it.* She say she love to crochet. Sharie do too. Sharie seven months pregnant with a tiny little bump on her tummy, her last pregnancy a miscarriage, 'cause she was houseless and pregnant and vulnerable. 'Cause the state

refused to put her in a safe home when she asked. Delphine and Sharie get excited about me gettin' yarn and hooks from Michaels. *Hella hooks*. Delphine say. *Make sure you get bella hooks cause I stay losin' em. Them the type things you can jus lose so easy*. I ask her what kinda yarn she like. *Reds on down, greys on up*, she say, noting the relationship between colors and weather. *Season changin', so we gotta go with them range of colors, the ones that make you feel like how it feel outside*. She show me with her hands how nuanced the spectrum of each shade is, how necessary it is to do reds on down, not reds on up, darker reds, not lighter, lighter greys, not darker. The depth of the shade matters. The care is in the detail.

...

So this is really where you live, Delphine said as I took out my trash that night. "Yes, ma'am." *Wow, that really is his grandmother's house*. "Whose?" I had heard her mumble somethin' of the sort under her breath when I pointed to the teal blue house next to the turquoise one. *Somethin been drawin' me to that house, I keep lookin' up at it. You ain't seen me starin'?* I say no, thinkin' she couldn't tell which teal I meant, green teal or blue teal, thinkin' my pointin' and attempts to distinguish between the house next door and the house right next to the one next door was failing me.

So when she said somethin bout *his grandmother's house*, I did not know she knew which house. That was before I knew how well versed she was in the spectrum of colors. Delphine, the woman who crochets, knows the difference between teal and sky blue, turquoise and greyish green. Delphine, the lady who say her favorite color is sky blue and lavender, who don't fool with no darker shades of purple, because now all of a sudden everybody tryna be on purple jock and she *ain't no bandwagon dick rider*. Delphine knew a teal house from a turquoise house, knew the house between hers and mine from the house that is mine.

Him, the guy who live right across the street in that car over there, this is his grandmother's house. This is where they use to stay. And she owned that big cafe on the corner. This is his grandmother's house.

My heart drops. Suddenly this shit ain't theory no more. Suddenly it's palimpsest³⁶¹ made real. The brown skin man with long locs and thick socks who I don' seen round the way, live in a car across the street from the house his grandmother owned, the house he grew up in, the house that is now split into fours, one fourth of which I now call my home, one fourth mine, for just a fragment of time, mine, chopped and screwed mansion made into a fourplex.

Feel like *Last Black Man in San Francisco*. Like Oakland hella next on the list of dystopia.³⁶² Like this, right here, is dystopia. Heart sink.

I wonder how it feels to watch some other body occupy the shit that was once yours. I always knew. I always knew it was somebody's. But not a body across the street, living in the car, witnessing my life in they home. Wonder if he ever wanted to let us know we lived on stolen land. Wonder what it feels like to watch our life through a window he once was on the inside of, to peer through a window from the outside and be unable to see the window from within.

³⁶¹ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*.

³⁶² Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

Landlord tell me they don' had this property for five years. Say five years ago they had to call the sheriff to *come get these squatters, these homeless, who had made theyself at home here.* Then they flipped and sold it. Just for folks like us.

This sure is his grandmother's house, Delphine proclaims. The *is* declaring present tense. Still is his grandmother's house. Still hers. Still hers. She and her lineage just lettin' me visit.

Well, it's nice to know, it's nice to know your neighbors, Delphine say. Like it's nice to know it's us. Like, if it had to be somebody to take his grandmother's house, it's nice to know it is us. Like Slim askin' at my door on the first day she met me, *You live here? You Black, ain't you?* Like our taking up of space on this block at this moment is some sort of loss and some subtle win, in some way, too. Like, at least one unit of one of these houses that once belonged to the folks who are house(less) is occupied by some Black folks. Some Black folks who speak to Black folks when they see Black folks on the street. Yet still, Slim and Delphine and Rosa and Precious and the brown skin man with locs only see a home they once owned through the windows.

Delphine wave and say a few words to him from cross the street. I wave too, a gentle wave of distant recognition.

. . .

The encampment is a gathering of complex stories and complex lives. Its streets are paved with pain and promise. Each tent it's own oasis. In the middle, the common ground of community space. This makeshift living room, where chairs are placed in a circle, where food is distributed and books are exchanged and information is passed along about who passed away and who still holdin on. A site of gathering, a central locale of convening. Each tent it's own home, but the encampment holds together each burden in the middle of the circle. It is the shared living room of the home. The meet up. It is where the classes are held, where bible study meets, where grace is said with bowed heads and peaking eyes, it is where the memorial and the announcement occurs, where the healing space is held, where the dreams are held.

Part Three: The Circle + The Sisters



Figure 10. let all the girls say, heyyy sistaaa, captured by @kristinaxwill (Kristina Williams, We Too, Are Joy, Oct. 2, 2018, The Black Woman is God Exhibit, San Francisco, CA).

interlude three: methodologies of creative space making

*Some people might go home to a place that still is not designed for them,
and so I feel like when you design a space for Black women,
that's what influence Black women to finally be Black women,
so they can finally say, hey, I finally get to be myself.*

-Zaniya³⁶³

³⁶³Homegirl, in reflecting on the Self.o.lo.gy Sunday healing circle.

***black women and sisterhood:
a theoretical analysis***

When Black women gather, there is rich potential for transformative healing to occur. Within the circles I frequent, I witness the unveiling of that transformative healing in the processes of naming harm and reclaiming healing as our birthright. At the core of our collective creative power is a girlish³⁶⁴, ancestral, and spiritual knowing that grounds and guides our hearts' desire for healing. This internal compass towards wellness exists within a genealogy of Black women who asked themselves and their sisters, as Toni Cade Bambara did in *The Salt Eaters*, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"³⁶⁵

In this chapter, I explore a range of Black women's healing spaces that held me in my exploration of deep wounds as I journeyed towards self-recovery. I read Black girlhood alongside Black womanhood, ancestorhood, and spirit work. I look at the girlishness of Black women's communal art practices - the ways in which memories of our own Black girlhoods become central to the ways in which we engage in collective healing. I also explore the relationship between Black girlhood reclamation and ancestor work, and how sisterhood serves as a portal into deeper realms of embodied and metaphysical healing. While Chapter Four explores the metaphysical more deeply, this chapter opens up a dialogue about how the circle of sisterhood healing holds space for transcendence.

I study sites like 'The Black Woman is God' exhibit and the 'Twerk Church' circle, where Black women use booty shaking as a diasporic healing practice. While the exhibit celebrates Black women's divinity through visual art, 'Twerk Church' affirms Black women's bodies as the sacred art form. "Praise pussy," "free the cheeks," and "we heal different" serve as holy mantras for Black women's liberatory framing of bodily and spiritual sanctity. Each of these sites were what I call unconventional curations of care, in that they might not be the first place you would think of Black women finding church, home, self, God. Yet, as these sister healing practitioners designed for rituals of diasporic care work, they bridge gaps between the creative and the ancestral, the contemporary and the historical, the individual and the collective.

These communal sites of care exist within a long lineage of Black feminist care work and radical sisterhood that has sustained and fortified a foundation for the spirit work we engage today. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Black feminist sisterhood models prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s offered a new foundation for what it could look and feel like to be in sisterhood with Black women as we hold our shared oppression with care. These models provide a lens through which to read the sister circles I engage.

In *Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger*, Audre Lorde names the need for collective healing and communal care among Black women. As a "sister outsider," a Black lesbian woman with a longing for connection to sisterhood, she grapples with the gaps between herself and Black sisterhood, and names the ways in which failed attempts to connect deeply with the warmth of Black women's communal care might be deeply rooted in internalized hatred for ourselves. Lorde states, "the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feeling of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way."³⁶⁶ She argues that if you, as a Black woman,

³⁶⁴ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

³⁶⁵ Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 3.

³⁶⁶ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 49.

cannot love me as a Black woman because of who I am as a Black woman loving a Black woman then there is some blockage between yourself and your love for your own Black womanhood. In so doing, she exposes the internal work required to give and receive the gift of Black women's sisterhood. As one of my homegirls affirms, "Audre Lorde taught me that, we all is lesbians. If you a Black woman and you love Black women - romantic, platonic, in sisterhood, in kinship, in whatever way you do, then you a lesbian too! Being a Black lesbian is loving Black women deeply, loving yourself deeply, regardless."³⁶⁷

The Women of Brewster Place's "They Just Love Each Other" scene echoes these sentiments. The 1989 television series featured Black women's intimate home life and sisterhood, and while getting hair done in the intimate home site of the kitchen, two homegirls exchange reflections on what it means to them, as Black women who do not identify as lesbians, to love Black women.

Mattie: I loved women too . . . I love Ms Eva . . . I loved you my whole life.

Etta Mae: "Yea, but it's different with them, they love each other the way you love a man, or the way a man would love you.

Mattie: I loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man . . . Some women loved me and treated me better than any man ever did.

Etta Mae: I know but it's still different . . . I can't explain it, it just is—

*Mattie: Maybe it aint . . . Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, because they know deep down inside, it aint no different at all.*³⁶⁸

In this scene, Etta Mae and Mattie are grappling with the sort of internal work that Lorde names as a prerequisite for loving Black lesbians, and for loving oneself as a Black woman. This scene of the intimate sister circle invites us to expand our understandings of what sisterhood between Black women looks and feels like.

Lorde's *Eye to Eye* reminds us of the ancestral legacy of sisterhood that is ours to inherit and reclaim. She states that we are "African women [who] . . . know in our blood's telling, the tenderness with which our foremothers held each other . . . [and] it is this connection which we are seeking [in sisterhood] . . . traditionally black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever allegiances which militated against that bonding . . . we have banded together with each other for wisdom and strength and support . . . a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place—when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power."³⁶⁹ Here, Lorde names the diasporic praxis of communal care as one which we each have recollection of, and this recollection is what leads to the longing for that communal sense to be fulfilled. These "tradition[s] of closeness and mutual care,"³⁷⁰ I argue, are diasporic, ancestral, spiritual, and girlish, and they lay the groundwork for how me and my homegirls engage in our healing circles today.

³⁶⁷ Laura. Black lesbian homegirl from round the way.

³⁶⁸ *The Women of Brewster Place*. "They Just Love Each Other." 1989.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=36&v=nKQOcSaiw9s&feature=emb_title

³⁶⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 50.

³⁷⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 151; Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

In 1975, Ntozake Shange's book *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*³⁷¹ gave Black women poetic language for the slumber-party style sisterhood gatherings that made room for secrets, safety, and the exploration of spirit. In the stage play based on the book, we see multiple scenes of young Black women at a sleepover, wrapped in robes, with bonnets on and rollers in. In this stageplay depiction of her text, Shange illustrates a homegirl homespace that generates comfort and ease and allows for a collective healing model that is rooted in rigorous honesty, transparent vulnerability, and collective care work, or, what Christina Sharp might call "wake work."³⁷² While Shange's work provides a fictive poetics of Black feminist communal care, her work points to deep truths about sister circle healing models that transform the ways Black women come to know their pain, and their power.

Alice Walker's definition of womanist in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* also offers a poignant narration of self and sisterly love between Black women who love Black women. In it, she states that a womanist is

(Opp. of "girlish" . . . A black feminist or feminist of color . . . a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.

Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength.

Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. *Loves* struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.³⁷³

Walker's womanism serves as a grounding site of belonging for Black women whose complexities require spaciousness. By introducing womanhood, creativity, and love as foundations for belonging within this framework of Black feminist sisterhood, she affirms women's culture as a site of grounding for one's sense of identity and self. While Walker names womanist as the opposite of girlish, and positions girlhood outside of womanism, my work thinks about the ways in which we might welcome girlhood into womanism in order to connect more deeply with the parts of ourselves that laid the foundation for the women we became.

making home of communal spaces

How do Black women curate communal healing spaces and make them home? What do our intimate private lives look and feel like when designed with care? How do we take our home and reproduce it in communal space, wearing our home on our bodies and in the objects we bring into the space? How does the entire site of healing become an altar, a collective site of memory and healing that holds objects and materials, which hold deep and interior meaning?

I learned the answers to these questions in my time spent gathering with Black women in sites beyond our literal homes. Transporting objects and materials from the literal home space to the collective healing space is a process of deep care. For many Black women and girls, it means curating one's living room in the site of convening: setting up an altar space in the corner, laying out each

³⁷¹ Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*.

³⁷² Sharp, *In the Wake*, 7.

³⁷³ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

kente cloth and pouring water into each flower pot. These actions transport energies from one space to another, and in doing so, we trust that the space outside the home will hold all that is sacred to us. The space may be the community center, the backroom in the library, or Sista So and So's sixth-grade classroom. It may be the park across the street or the beauty shop basement. We find what space we can, whatever space we may have access to, and we stretch it and make it heal us whole, even if just for that moment.

This process of Black feminist interior design is reciprocal. The home space becomes a reflection of the self space and the communal space. The self space becomes a reflection of the communal space and the home space. Each space works in tandem and reflects the other. Each site is mapped onto the next. What I design in my home gets mapped onto my body, and I bring that knowing to community. When and where my sisters gather gets stretched and expanded by my presence, my interior, my being. In bringing materials from my altar, and placing them alongside materials from homegirls' altars, we stretch and expand the space, wherever it may be, and make it stretch for our healing. The affective sense of connection, meaning, and rootedness from artfully curated collective space inspires the design of my homegirls' homes, who curate home as a healing space to cope with the instability and uncertainty of our lives. These interconnected homespaces expand Black women's capacity to "become more fully present"³⁷⁴ with the self space of their interior worlds. These communal spaces of care that resemble the intimacy of home free us up to be more "at home with [our]selves."³⁷⁵

creative space-making as methodology

make a space
for blackgirls like me
and we will come
and we will come
and we will call it
our own

make a space
for blackgirls like me
and call that shit
methodology

make a space
with that lil bit of
cash you finesse
from that phd

for blackgirls like me
to feel whole. to
feel home

make a space
for us to feel

³⁷⁴ Goler, *Increasing Wellbeing through Contemplative Practices*, 231.

³⁷⁵ Boylorn, "On Being at Home With Myself."

seen
heard
nurtured
affirmed
reflected
in our souls

make a space
for us to be
make a space
for us to
breathe

As an ethnographer and an art researcher, I merge interdisciplinary methodological modalities to replace an investigative model of extraction with a model of exchange that is explicitly designed to generate data through reciprocity.³⁷⁶ Through the art and wellness activities I curate, communal care is embedded into the data collection model, as the process itself becomes an exchange of healing between participants.

For three years, I hosted a monthly healing space for Black women in the Fannie Lou Hamer Black Resource Center on campus.³⁷⁷ I used university funding to provide free gourmet catered dinners, to purchase decor for interior designs of the space, to give away free journals and candles, and to ensure every Black woman present had enough pens, markers, magazines, collage paper, and the works for whatever art project we were working on that day. These creative, experimental, and intergenerational sites of self-reflexive and communal care were birthed from a desire to hold space for the folks who held space for me. How could I give something sacred as I engaged this process of data collection? How could the process itself be one that was healing for the folks I engage? How could I truly implement a praxis of reciprocity that has healing literally embedded into the actual data collection model?

I learned from Black women how to curate a healing space by attending the healing spaces they curated on my behalf. Kickin' it in community taught me how to curate a space for folks to come kick it, a space that was safe enough to let oneself open up and be seen more intimately. It is an experimental methodology of care. To hold space for community requires one to become "a composer of energies."³⁷⁸ As the trumpet of emotions rages from the homegirl who just got displaced, and the drums of despair sound from the sis who just got let go from her gig doing hair, the holder of communal space must specialize in the negotiation of distance between Black women's levity and mourning. These encounters are ephemeral and yet, not depending on what is held in the hearts of the women when they leave. A little notebook or candle could remind them. The scent of lavender or the playlist. A little token of time spent basking in emotion, minding memory, making meaning of Black skin in stormy weather.

³⁷⁶ In *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, Aimee Cox uses "co-performative witnessing" as a method of study that "expand[s] the nature of the connections and commitments that emerge in the ethnographic process within methodologies." She argues "co-performative witnessing . . . requires us to do 'what others do *with* them inside the politics of their locations.'" My methods are an attempt at this practice.

³⁷⁷ For more information on the monthly healing circles, read: reelaviolette botts-ward, "#BlackWomxnHealing: An Intergenerational Space of Creative Communal Care for Round the Way Blackgirls in Academia," in *Building Mentorship Networks to Support Black Women* (Routledge Press, 2022).

³⁷⁸ Laura, Homegirl from around the way.

In many ways, I see my methodology as a fugitive praxis, one that utilized funds from the university to provide healing to Black women by remaining invested in my own healing as a Black woman. I often joke with my girls, “Girl, UC Berkeley is paying me to heal for six years! I literally get paid to go to healing spaces.” This feels like a sweet revenge, because the very systems that sought to break us have to contend with healing us. In this time I have here at the university,, I choose to do research *with* my people, navigating university bureaucracy to shift wealth from white supremacy towards Black radical self making. Like a fugitive praxis of undercommons³⁷⁹, I use the money and resources of this elitist white space to make opportunities for my girls to get put on, to provide a platform for their art to be seen beyond the normal limitations that this city imposes on them. This feels like a form of reparations, an act of stealing away from the institution, a chance to collect a little bit of coins, forcing the very systems responsible for our suffering to contend with, or at the very least, fund, our healing.

*So when we actually on campus and we stop in passing,
we can demand whatever space we in.
It kinda puts you in training to learn how
to make space and take space.
When y'all come in contact with one another,
when y'all take that space collectively,
you lose track of time, and you be like,
dang we just stood right here
and what was supposed to be a quick lil five minutes
catch up don' turned into twenty minutes,
and we don't even care that we taking up space
in the middle of campus to do our healing.*

-Tina³⁸⁰

. . .

As an extension of the monthly Self.o.lo.gy Sunday healing circles, I curated *This Sh*t is For US: an Exhibition of Black Girl Healing*. *This Sh*t is For US* was a week-long interactive art exhibit that used art-based creative space-making as a method for data collection. My intention was to expand my space-making praxis by centering collective curation and communal artistry.

The exhibit had three primary components. Firstly, I invited Black women community artists to display their visual art in the exhibit. Secondly, I curated a Blackgirl home-space installation within the exhibit. Thirdly, I invited Black women community members to attend three healing art workshops hosted within the exhibit, where participants produced a series of art projects that also served as data for my research. Each of these multidimensional artworks, and the encounters they engender, served as a core dataset for the dissertation.

Inspired by the everyday round the way art of my homegirls, this space-making method decenters the more formal sites of art galleries and museums and turns towards what most might label craft art, informal, or amateur art praxis. However, what I argue is that there is nothing amateur about our

³⁷⁹ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.

³⁸⁰ Reflections on the Self.o.lo.gy Sunday sister circle.

art. As Yaba Blay attests in *Professional Black Girl*, our everyday round the way art is *professional*³⁸¹. There is a very formal ritual to creating a self, a space, a home, and a life, and there is a way to honor and affirm that within and beyond the museum, exhibition, and gallery spaces.

While I began this project interested in thinking about formal museum spaces, I grew interested in how everyday Black women's creativity is centered and celebrated beyond formal sites and within the informal, mundane, and everydayness of Black women's lives. Like Zora Neale Hurston's centering of folk culture across her wide range of anthropological research, my focus on everyday round the way Black women's artistry acknowledges that there is creative power and transformation occurring within the lives of the women and girls who are often forgotten, ignored, and silenced, whose art may never be labeled art, and whose creations may not ordinarily be on display within a museum space like BAMPFA, yet their creations are just as worthy of celebration. Oakland's Black feminist art scene is vibrant and inspiring. Collectives like *The Black Woman is God* invite Black women into the spiritual divinity of our identities, and galleries like Betti Ono and the Ashara Ekundayo gallery offer Black women professional artists opportunities to display their work for desired and intended audiences. My work has been deeply inspired by these communities of Black women artists, in that their centering of Black feminist artistry affirms the necessity for Black women artists to have safe spaces for our work to live, although my focus was on Black women who were not "professional" artists, meaning that they may not have been professionally trained and may not engage art practice as a part of their career, or may not identify as artists at all, yet engage creative practices as healing arts.

Thus, the exhibition asks, what does an expansive politic of healing arts look like, one that makes room for all Black women to find home in their creative and communal sense? One that is not exclusive, one where all the hood girls can come and create and be curated on behalf of? What would it look like and feel like to curate in a way that affirms for all Black womxn and girls that our slay and our sway is art?

This particular art-based method of creative space-making also invited collective and communal processes of art-making to serve as the centerpiece of the healing experience and the research process. In curating an installation of Blackgirl homepage within the exhibition, I created a circular formation of healing out of our collective art practice and created opportunities for my homegirls to featured in an art exhibition at the number one public university in the world, and even though we know that don't mean much, it sure do look good on they resumes!

And every artist has her own story in my life, her own special narration of sisterhood that bobs and weaves into and out of the next. The interconnectedness of sisterhoods within sisterhoods make my networks of creative community possible. The love of one sister opens the door for the love of another, and my healing arts community just grows and expands like this. Each artist connecting me to the next, each encounter making way for another. Every Black woman who make art for Black women makes room for me to expand my own praxis of art-making, healing, and community.

...

A methodology of Black feminist space-making centers the needs of research respondents by curating a gathering site designed to meet those needs met in community. An extension of what

³⁸¹ Yaba Blay, *Professional Black Girl*, <https://professionalblackgirl.com/> (2019).

many social scientists call focus groups, this process is designed to generate data that comes from an authentic place of communal care. This praxis of reciprocity aims to hold space for those who make academic research possible. It attempts to replace the normative model of ethnographic extraction with a new model of exchange that explicitly values communion over academic gain. Radical scholars of color, like those cited in *Black Feminist Anthropology*, have critiqued this process, where a researcher enters a community and takes what is convenient for their research and leaves nothing in return. I write against the conventional focus group process by radically imagining what else can be made possible beyond the constraints of normative academic data collection.

This approach also attempts to address the slippages of motive and intention. For those of us who are invested first and foremost in our people, and not in ways to support the academy in profiting from our narratives, it becomes difficult not to collect academic data that in its origins produces the kind of hierarchical imbalance that we claim to dismantle. Space-making as methodology allows for the researcher to hold true to the values and intentions of their work by providing communal space for curated dialogue while centering the needs of the community over the needs of the research project.

It also requires humility. It requires a researcher to submit themselves to the process. It is designed to flow naturally and organically, the way communal spaces do when the academy is not inserting itself into the dialogue - not a list of questions to check off but a genuine posing of the question - *How you doin' sis?* It requires careful consideration of how you use the time. What is the best way to engage that might spark the kind of data you believe might better inform your approach to knowing them better? Beyond asking and answering questions, is there an activity, a project, a journaling exercise, a movement that could be done together that might foster a communal sense in the space, one that could help to make folks feel more grounded, centered, present, trusted?

Black feminist space-making requires a consideration of the physical space. Where will you convene and what meaning might that space have to the community? When community steps into the space of convening, how will it make them feel? Can you curate the space of convening to reflect the community you will engage there? Can you decorate, can you place an altar in the corner and pour libations, can you bring pillows and cushions and make it feel cozy like home? How can you incorporate creativity and art-making in your process of engagement? In turn, that requires consideration of your own internal space. Where are you mentally and emotionally before you step foot into the space? What energy are you bringing into the space? Will you be asking the community to engage in things that you yourself are willing to engage? Who you are in the space influences how you are received. How well do folks know you before they step into the space? Have you worked diligently to cultivate genuine relationships with the community, not simply for what they can do for your research, but for how knowing them might enhance for your life? Have you considered what you might be able to do to support their growth? If you have not had the chance to connect with them prior to the space, in what ways will you set the tone to ensure that they feel valued and cared for, that you, not as a researcher but as a human, are worthy of trusting? Do you believe that you are trustworthy? Have you checked your own intentions?

Entering into a space obviously remade for me is a form of Black feminist care. The welcoming is as into a home. The time it took to clean and sweep, to dust and mop, to rearrange furniture and alter the blinds for new curtains, and dust off the altar. The time it took to prepare a space to welcome me in, that is a method of space making by Black women that I receive.



Figure 11. the divinity of our sisterhoods, captured by jess (Jessica Allen, Divine Black Femme Supremacy, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

chapter three: holding + being held in communal space

The space will only go as deep as you have gone.

-Laura

circles

[The African American Female Excellence Initiative]

From 2018 - 2019, I had the honor of taking part in The African American Female Excellence Initiative Curriculum Development team, where I worked alongside Black women healers, educators, activists, and community leaders to create radical and liberatory education models for Black girls in the Oakland Unified School District. Inspired by Monique Morris' groundbreaking text *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*³⁸², which exposed the dire need for Black girls to experience safer schooling options, our collective met once a week to curate learning modules that would offer Black girls lessons on holistic healing and spiritual well-being. In the process of curating healing models for Black girls, I created long-long bonds with Black women and learned more about what I needed to heal the Blackgirl inside of me.

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All the women at all the spaces of healing be talkin' bout circles. Be talkin' bout how we all see and can be seen, by ourselves and each other, in circles. How the circle can't never be unbroken. How we hold each other hands and don't let go. All the women place the chairs/ cushions/ couches/ benches/ bleachers/ blankets/ pillows in circle formation. Organize the room in a round about kinda way, in a round the way circle, the rounding of each curve of hip seated, cushioned by a seat within a circle, held close in the warmth of the circle. Our seat at the table is a circle. The table is a circle. Each breath is a circle. Each life is a circle.

At the Sista Circle, Sista Kay talk about circles as an African tradition of spirit. How the Sankofa bird make a circle with feathered body and loop back into herself. I look down at my left shoulder at the circle-shaped wings tattooed to my collar bone and begin to understand what my twenty-year-old self was trying to teach me when she decided on the Sankofa bird tattoo. She was connected, deeply to a wisdom of circles that I had not known how to name.

The teachers in the circle talk about designing for justice - how the classroom is shaped, what's inside of it, how its materials are curated in the space, how all that matters for learning just like all that matters for healing.

Circles. Always set up them chairs in a circle. Them mats, place all them mats in a circle. Sista Kay say the ancestors move in circles. Say the village was always a circle. Each home one part of the circle. All them children know is circles. A circle within a circle within a circle within a circle. We each in the circle, we each got something to give and something to receive, we each leave a piece of something on the inside, we each gain somethin' in return.

Fractal consciousness, the whole life is a circle and every space the body enters is a circle. The circle of life imprinted on the ground, inserted in the girlchild's consciousness from birth. The altar is a circle. The home is a circle. And the girlchild knows that she, too, is a circle. She spins round and round in the circle of life and knows this is the natural order of things. Her home teaches her these truths as the root of her existence.

³⁸² Morris, *Pushout*.

While seated in a circle, we lean in as Mama Bee tells us a story about the Black women who used to map their way to freedom in circles, using braids and beans inserted in the corners of each plat to point to an escape route, or the circle-shaped quilts that lead to freedom. We talk about what's inside our circle. The difference between the middle school table where we normally meet and the kitchen table at Kay's compound-style community home with the garden out back. We change locations to shift energy. We realize space must be made for our "soul to show up,"³⁸³ and the soul don't show up in no funky middle school auditorium with no heat and no windows, unless it has too. The soul be safer to show up in the comfort of a home. Labyrinth, patterns, colors and feng shui. The senses. What is stimulated. What is taught in the corner of the carpet, what is known from the oval-shaped leaves drawn on top of circle print cloth. So, we go to Sista Kay's from then on and witness each other open up. Suddenly I see each sister differently, more fully, more whole, more true.

blackwomxnhealing

[The Self.o.lo.gy Sunday Healing Circle]

blackwomxnhealing's Self.o.lo.gy Sunday series is a monthly healing space for self identified Black womxn graduate and undergraduate students, hosted in the Fannie Lou Hamer Black Resource Center, sponsored by the Gender Equity Resource Center and African American Student Development. Our programming is rooted in a communal space making practice that centers art and aesthetics as tools for self reflection. From the interior design of the space to the interactive activities we engage, curation and creativity are the foundation of our radical healing model. Each session focuses on themes of holistic care in relation to embodied healing, mental health, self worth, inner child healing, ancestral healing, intergenerational wellness, and spiritual health. By facilitating a safe space for us to be seen/ heard/ felt by one another, we build bonds of support that help sustain us within and beyond campus.

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I learn from Black women healing how to make circles. How to bring sacred objects from home to a communal healing space. My homegirls teach me how to make a healing space a home, to take the home that is a healing space apart in order to transport it to a space where Black women will come to be fed and filled and felt.

They teach me a methodology of Black Feminist Interior Design as a wellness centered space-making strategy. They teach me to shift the atmosphere with incense and essential oils. Using soft fabrics, calming colors, dimmed lighting, and natural elements, they teach me to curate a healing space that feels as safe as home, as comfortable as a living room, as peaceful as a bedroom. I take what I learn and use it in the space I have access to.

We host our healing in the Fannie Lou Hamer Black Resource Center. The site of convening that was fought for by Black students in 2015. The space that was demanded and won. Fannie Lou herself was a round the way girl at heart. She wasn't never worried bout performing for her freedom, for she knew that any act of performance would strip her of her freedom. My homegirl AJ and all the other activists who made the center possible knew this about our beloved ancestor. And

³⁸³ Goler, *Increasing Wellbeing through Contemplative Practices*.

everytime we say the name of the center we say her name, and call forth her energy, and affirm all of those pieces of ourselves that are as unapologetic as Fannie.

AJ, the interior designer of the space, has a sense of site and sound. She knows what we need to feel free. AJ, the curator of our sacred Black healing space on campus, who made visions of Black liberation come true. She was tasked with transforming the blank space into something beautiful, and she filled emptiness with love. With lush green plant and soft rug carpet with Fannie's face and cozy chairs and a library for our favorite reads. AJ made a space for us to come, and we come and we heal, together. In this space, named for us, safe for us to *be*.

Once a month, every Self.o.lo.gy Sunday, I curate on top of her curation, map my creative praxis onto hers, stack my making of holy onto hers. Mix movement and motion, color and texture, place pinks and purple on top of reds blacks and greens. Add images of June Jordan and Vèvè Clark and Barbara Christian alongside Fannie Lou to expand our collective ancestral remembering.

Each session begins with some grounding form of knowing who we are in a space. Body. Mind. Soul. Ancestry. Spirituality. Each month dedicated to it's own layer. I decide what healing looks and feels like as I travel into my own self and peel back the layers of me. Every layer it's own story. It's own self. It's own life. I learn from Black women healing what layers of me there are to now, what layers we each must dig into if we are to reclaim ourselves. Each session is an excavation, a sacred and holy exploration, an experience of having been cared for, loved, and nurtured, a reuniting with the whole of the self. Each gathering is a coming together of all we carry, and a releasing of that weight, even if just for a moment. And the Oakland healing space expands beyond the borders of the city into Berkeley, the energy and vibe of Oakland's healing stretch deeper into the territory of Berkeley and defy the bounds of space as Oakland girls with Oakland sensibilities make their way onto the university.

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Curating a healing space is simply about orchestrating, my homegirl says at the start of our session on Soul, calmly leaning the weight of her hips to one side. I ask for her advice as I prepare my heart and mind to hold the circle for the sisters. *You are the orchestrator of energy*. She says the curator of the healing space tells the trumpet how loud to sound, the bass and baritone how heavy to play. You use the movement of your limbs to take it up a notch or down a notch. *The space will only go as deep as you have gone*.

I open up and open up and let myself unravel before the women who look to me to hold space. I decide I do not know the answer for how to be well, but I share what I have learned along the way. I take Hanu out my bag, my stuffed animal unicorn healer who I keep tucked away in hiding, how I do my inner child most times. I speak on the power of inner child work for "Black women with Blackgirls inside them."³⁸⁴ I tell them how coloring freed me up and let me see the little girl in me who was longing to be held. We walk into the home of our youth, into the bedroom, the locked doors, the kitchens and the pantries and the stair care and the living room. The meditation tells us to breathe. To hold the hand of our inner child as we take each step. I was so afraid of that home that I released her hand and ran. I left her behind. I left me behind. I tell them that this work, this digging,

³⁸⁴ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

this discovery, is not easy. That healing is in the mourning and in the levity. That we must account for what we lost. In the home. In the heart. In the healing.

In allowing myself to go deep, the circle went deep. The furs and the feng shui made it safer for us to dig up what was beneath the surface, and when I invited myself to meet me there, I invited others to do the same. My sisters shared tears in that circle. Spoke of loss and pain and remembering. The ugly things we tuck away in our backpacks and never pull out to meet. We grow safer and safer in sisterhood. And even though we know that the pain is ongoing and the trauma don't stop and maybe we are never truly safe anyway, these moments bring us clarity and hope and levity even when they are heavy.

During our final circle of the year, in our session on Ancestry, Talayon reflects, "The hood memorials and teddy bears, they was my first altar space. That was my introduction into ancestor work, into channeling that power for my healing. Seeing the way we remember and memorialize those loved ones lost, at the corner with a bear and a bottle, pouring libations in the dirt for the homies." Her hood taught her how to mourn. The land-based grieving rituals from round her way gave her a glimpse into a praxis for being well. She now knows ancestral ritual intimately, and makes it a foundational part of her healing process. "As a magician would keep their wands, that's where I keep my healing power, on my window sill. It is a living altar - it changes my room with healing. I have aloe, one of the first original healers, a succulent plant. And I ground myself in that energy" Talayon and the rest of the circle reflect on ways we remember ourselves, our grandmothers, our homes. And we theorize collectively about how ancestral healing and altar work make geographies of contemporary healing possible.

The circle becomes a safe haven of sorts, a strong enough container to hold what we carry, a saging out of stuck and stagnant energies. As the conductor of the curated space, I learn when and how to step up and step back. I learn how to be more silent and how to make more room. I learn from every single woman in that circle that there is still so much more healing to do. And that is the beauty of the journey, that we learn to give ourselves grace in it as we make peace with the fact that it is lifelong. I meet new pieces of myself in each reflection of my sisters' and I am reminded time and time again that I cannot do my healing alone.

This is the power of the circle, the power of the sisters. The invitation inward. The surrender. The release.

the exhibition

[This Sh*t is For US]

*this sh*t is for us: an exhibition of blackgirl healing* was a week-long interactive art exhibit that used creative space making as a method. For more, visit www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus.

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In the Spring of 2019, as an expansion of our monthly healing circles, we stretched the Fannie Lou Center into a site of Blackgirl Magic and curated *This Sh*t is For US: an Exhibition of Black Girl Healing*. We made a circle of our artistry and made room for our homegirls to have their hood art celebrated, even within the confines of the university.

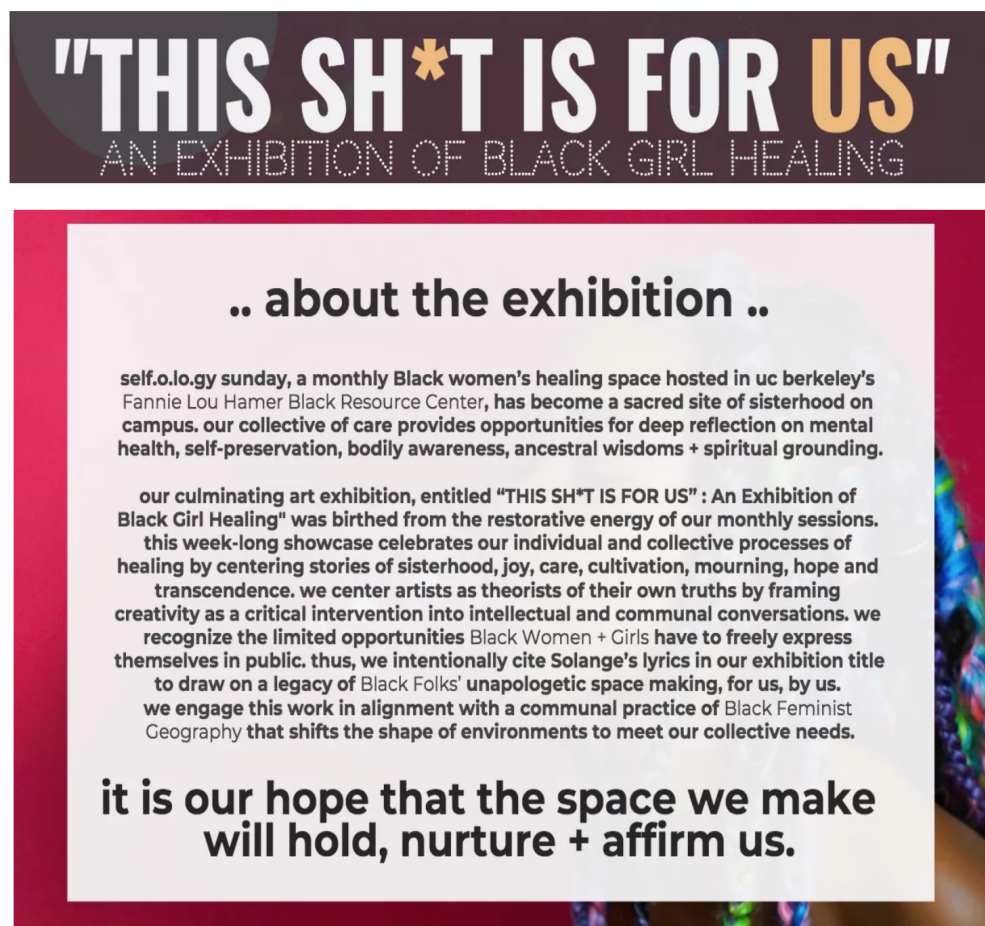


Figure 12. this sh*t is for us exhibition flyer, designed by @reelaviolette (reelaviolette botts-ward, Untitled, April 29, 2019, <https://www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus>).

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I feature Kristina's art in the exhibition. Her film. Her photography. We first met at The Black Woman is God (TBWIG) exhibition. One year later and we link up again. Same place. Same time. New Year.

TBWIG was one of the first safe havens I found that captured the rich essence of all the things I loved most about me. I watched a 30-minute segment entitled *The Revolution of the Angry Black Woman* and found the woman who was responsible for making the film. Kristina. We became friends, and she featured me in the next rendition of the project. Her work, and my first entry into the exhibit, deeply inspired my own Black feminist healing arts praxis.

That first day we met, I had walked up to Kristina and asked, "Is this your work?" She smiled and nodded. I let her know the deep impact it had on me, that it opened up a possibility for me to see myself as an artist, for me to create and let my art live outside myself. She thanked me sincerely. That night I got a chain email from the Worth Ryder Art Gallery announcing student exhibition submissions. I submitted a poetic video narrative I made a few years back, nervous and convinced I

would not be accepted. The following week I was preparing to see my art in my very first art exhibition. That is the impact Kristina's videography had on me, the impact that TBWIG had on me. That experience last year showed me what was possible for a Black girl like me to dream.

Kristina's debut piece for 'The Black Woman is God 2018' was a photo collage entitled *Black Girl Joy*. In colorful crayola style markings, with flower petaled borders that outlined the word JOY, she illustrated through her gift of photography a collective communal image that depicted a girl like state of Black female presence in Oakland. She pictured over 30 Black women and girls from the town, ages 5 to 75, with wide eyes and wide smiles. At the photo shoot, each girl / woman was encouraged to come as her most carefree self, to bring her best bright colored top, to style her hair in her favorite formation, to wear her most magnificent bright lipstick. With bubbles and butterflies, large round shades and curly up-do's, blonde braids and blue furs, the collage came together as a brilliantly vibrant visualization of how Black women and girls make life in the midst of the ever present wake we live. Black women, queer women, trans women, women with fro's, women with colored tips, girls with lollipops and bamboo earrings, head wraps and cowry shells, laughing lightly, enjoying each other's company across the corners of the cardboard frame. These still shots somehow felt like they were moving between and upon each other, like each Black woman was calling to the Black girl pictured above or below her, "I see you, sis! I see you, child! I feel you, daughter of the sun, I see so much of me in you."

This photography collage was a drastic shift from Kristina's piece at last year's 'The Black Woman is God' exhibit, entitled *The Revolution of the Angry Black Woman*. Her documentary instillation depicted the traumatic heart wrenching stories of Black women who revealed the ways their childhood trauma continued to impact their understandings of themselves in their adulthood. One by one, Black women from 20 to 80 years of age shed tears for the rape they never told, for the child that never healed, for the daughter who experienced the same traumas of the generational curse called Black and female in America. I was featured in a version of this film, and I remember feeling like I wanted more room for my joy. I shared the layered vulnerability of my body, the ways I had come to know myself through the world's perception of my shape as a child who never really felt her age. I answered her questions, about what I'd wish to say to those who harmed me, about how deep the pain cut. But I wanted her to ask me how I healed, how I found the strength within myself to envision myself beyond that. For me, at the time of this interview, healing was more about the transcendence than the trauma. I did not want to focus on the trauma, I wanted to focus on the *but still*, the perseverance, the ways we have always pushed through. After seeing Kristina's 2018 piece, I questioned the balance between the two, the trauma and the resilience, the suffering and the survival. I wondered, is celebrating what we cultivate from our pain normalizing our suffering? Is centering our suffering reinforcing it? I saw so much of my questions living themselves out in the art that Kristina produced.

Her centering of joy, of color, of light starkly contrasted her piece from last year which was greyscale, which shifted to color only occasionally, to reveal brown women wearing Black, signaling mourning. On the night of the 2018 show, she spoke openly to Black women about her process of painting these two seemingly contrasting pieces, that I now believe are two sides of the same coin that is Black girl/woman(hood). *I know how much we hurt, but I wanna highlight how we heal. Look how beautiful we are, look how we survive.* I felt her deeply. This artistic shift was a reclamation of her own journey and process and a Black woman healing her inner[blackgirl]child.³⁸⁵ In her processing her

³⁸⁵ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

own pain and possibility through art, she articulated the very tension of my project. Her sentiments sit at the crux of this layered complex argument that I am trying to construct - that we hurt and we heal, we experience trauma and we continue to cultivate ourselves and our sisterhood in the midst of this. Somewhere between these arguments is an understanding that Black girlhood is the site of trauma and the site of healing. These two pieces inspired my curation of *This Sh*t is For US*, and remnants of both were featured.

And I feature my homegirl Sydney's art, who I met at Lake Merritt in passing during my first few months in the Bay, takin' photo shoot pics in front of some brown lake water with some homegirls I pulled together. She threw on a tee and jumped right in because she knew my friend who was helpin' out. *Happy to help anything to do with Black women healing*, she said. Since then she been my homegirl. Always ready with a camera of her own, to be behind the scenes or in front. Shot the pics for my first book. For my website. For my first event. And when I told her about the exhibition, she was hype to send in art. She snaps shots of her sisters in colored braids and daily slay and I tell her how her art brings me healing. How it makes me feel so seen and reflected, how it invites me to be even more bold in my unapologetic.

And I feature my homegirl Ash's art, who I first met at Shayla's So Oakland Black Girl Brunch. She was the videographer and I was looking for someone to shoot me. Two days later she is at my tiny studio apartment and we are filming *healing at home*. She gas me up with every twerk and say my slay is holy and I am grateful to feel so seen by her lens. She captures the intricacies of my vulnerability in ways I never knew that I needed. She gas me up and hype me up and have me feelin' myself with my robe on. I have fun behind her lens and find myself in it, discover new ways to see me simply from the ways she sees me.

Each artist featured is an affirmation of community. A sister, a friend, a former student, a homegirl's daughter, a homegirl's cousin / auntie / bestie. The exhibition is intergenerational and invites round the way Black women and girls to celebrate themselves and each other in community. Kristina and Ash and Syd are featured alongside my undergraduate students and my friends from healing communities. And the exhibition transforms the space and expands the campus to make room for *us*, unapologetically.

...

My big sister Cameran, the artist, the maker, the fashion designer of @cami.co.lace, flies all the way from Atlanta to be there for this moment. Her and my mother say, "we would not miss this for the world." She was my very first sisterhood, my very first art teacher, my very first introduction to an everyday round the way healing arts praxis. We grew up as Black girls who styled baby hair swirls on each other's foreheads and labeled that shit an art form. We were the Black girls who made art of everything - we made high heel shoes out tissue rolls and cardboard boxes, we made make-shift Barbie dolls out left over scraps and crocheted outfits for parties and presentations. Our play time was a daily symposium on Black girlhood and amateurism in the arts, except we were convinced that there was nothing amateur about our art, and we stayed baffled by our parents' refusal to let us wear our creations out the house, arguing mommy and daddy down that the cardboard shoes were made to withstand the texture of concrete. My big sister and I, we both grew up to be Black feminist artists in our own right. And it meant the world to have her there for my very first exhibition, because she was the first Blackgirl to birth the Black woman artist in me.

She enters the exhibition space for the first time, and says she is most drawn to the way Black women draw eyes. She pays close attention to the ways my homegirls trace truth into pupils, how pen stroked almond-shaped vessels into a soul say everything. Lid. Lash. Liquid secreted and sinking into cheek. Lavender pale blue teardrop. Tortured are the eyes of Black boned Tomboys and barebacked babies, all the brown-skinned girls who draw brown-skinned girls with heavy eyes. Thick charcoal cracked up around the crack in her skin, the hole in her head and throat make a slit between those eyes. And yet, with these eyes, we say, "I see you, sis. I see you. This sh*t is for us." My sister stares into these eyes, all staring back at her, and she sees her baby sister as a grown up for the first time, she sees her sis anew. She sees the pain, the passion, and the power in my eyes and she witnesses the woman I grew up into. It was the art that made that moment possible. She photographs these images for me and gifts them to blackwomxnhealing.



Figure 13. photography from “this sh*t is for us” exhibition week, photographed by @cami.co.lace (Cameran Nichole, Untitled, April 29, 2019, <https://www.blackwomxnhealing.com/thissh-tisforus>).

twerk church

[A Free the Cheeks Experience]

“Free The Cheeks: Twerk Church is a high energy twerk class designed to empower women. The focus is on creating a safe environment where women reconnect with self, support one another and are free from the social stigmas placed on twerking and women’s bodies. The class focuses on the root and sacral chakras, more specifically, booty & yoni. Women are taught different ways to shake, pop, jiggle, gyrate & ASSolate (isolate) the cheeks while simultaneously unlocking the power & magic located within by embracing her sensuality.”³⁸⁶ In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick writes about “the space between the legs,”³⁸⁷ and theorizes Black women’s bodies as a geographic site of contention. Here, I think alongside McKittrick about the possibilities and potentiality of my own womb site as a space to reclaim and heal through the diasporic movement of Twerk Church dance.

³⁸⁶ Quote from Twerk Church website. For more information, visit wehealdifferent.com.

³⁸⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

...

*Dance is about “deprogramming and reverting back to the original,”
states Bobbi, co-founder of the #FREETHECHEEKS movement.
Within these dance classes, dance is directly linked to systematic freedom;
“you tap into your power and you free yourself and
[inevitably] you free your family.”*

-Lorraine Avila³⁸⁸

All the new booties in the middle of the circle! Breezy calls out over the TrapSoul playlist bumpin’ in the background. All the vintage booties, give a sis a round of applause! I step into the middle of the circle, shy and unsure of where I am at, but feelin’ the love and the energy vibratin’ from the clappin’ of ass cheeks and hands. Who are you, where you from, what’s yo sign? Embarrassed for not knowin’ my rising, setting, and moon, I make a slight shrug of shoulders. “All I know is I’m Aquarius.” I promise to look it up for next time.

I had hopped off the 18 bus from the border of gentrified Temescal to the heart of downtown Oakland, walked three blocks toward 14th street to arrive at In the Groove Studio. I had just left the white women’s twelve-step circle of tears and fears, of silence and quiet affirmation, to the noise and holler and scream of the round the way ratchets who compliment me on all the right things in all the right ways. The white women compliment me like a caricature of myself and I feel so unseen. I debate whether or not I will return, knowing I want to heal in community but knowing I must feel safe to do so.

I arrive at the Twerk Church and I see Sista Dye and Kianu, Kay from school and Neek from work. I ain’t even know before, but all my homegirls go to this church! The round the way girls, some I know and some I don’t, make me feel seen/ heard/ affirmed. Ask for my hair braider contact. Ask where I got my Aliyah pants. We begin in a circle, just like the twelve-step group. We go around and say how we doin’ and how we feelin’ without judgement, just like the twelve-step group. We each get space and time to tell our story and unwind, yet unlike the twelve-step group. But what these sistas offer that the white women could never give is a reflection of my healing back to me - embodied, emboldened, assured. We collectively share sage and scents, we pass around rose water and spray ourselves cleansed, we post up in a spot that is large enough for our arms and feet and we dance and we dance and we find healing in the motion of moods and moons and memories.

They talk about what every sign means, what combinations of human births to avoid. What seasons are for what people born on what days and times. A centering of birthday booties, the birthday as a historic moment of Black girlchild entry into the world, the sign as a signaling of selfhood. Who you are and what aspects of earth you are made of. I find out about Cancer and Capricorn. Discover myself in the words of the charts and understand why I am who I am, how I am. These levels of clarity bring healing.

Bobbi and Breezy, with matchin’ mid-length locs and knee-high socks and booty shorts revealin’ the curve of they flesh that read #FreeTheCheeks, slay in unison. Two sisters under twenty-five leading

³⁸⁸ Lorraine Avila, “#FREETHECHEEKS: How Two Sisters Are Helping Black Women Express Themselves Through Sensual Dance.” Blavity News. April 10, 2018. Available online at <https://blavity.com/freethecheeks-how-two-sisters-are-helping-black-women-express-themselves-through-sensual-dance?category1=community-submitted&category2=feminism>.

a movement of women gettin free free free from the cheeks to the bones to the spirit.
#WeHealDifferent. An affirmation that the healing modalities needed for round the way girls like us must be *different*. Different from mainstream movements for self-care and wellness that don't do justice to the divinity of femininity that we workin' to reclaim. Different from the #WeHealDifferent. That's the hashtag. That's the caption. And that's on period.

Womb work. My homegirl Lorraine called it womb work. Told me I can't not talk about #FreeTheCheeks if I'm writin' a dissertation 'bout Black women healin' in Oakland. She was the first one who told me to go. I had seen the emails about a TwerkShop with some Bay Area sisters from TheWell listerv on campus, the Black healing fund my homegirl Kiara had started to curate sites of wellness amidst the violence of the university. Had laughed to myself about how only at UC Berkeley would there be funding for Black folks to shake our ass for free, to pop pussy on the university dime as a form of liberatory reparations. I had looked them up and stalked they Instagram and read story after story of how they healing had set Black women free. But I was always too afraid to go. But one day, after that twelve-step meeting was not meeting my needs and I needed some homegirl energy, I mustered up the courage to enter to circle and claim my place within the sisterhood.

...

Bodies in motion move in all the ways they not pose to be movin. All the ways Mama and Aunties threaten' to pop you for. Pussies pop and lock and drop to the beat of some ratchet shit. A twerk party for all the girls with "pretty eyes thick thighs who cus too much." A church of praise for all that is feminine and divine. For the girl who ain't never ever twerked before in public. Only in her mirror. Only in private. For the skinny girl with no booty. For the shy girl with no curves. For the thick girl who ain't never knew what to do with all them hips. For the fat girl who was told her weight was in all the wrong places. For all of us to reclaim.

It's like being ten again, with them cousins who from up north, who know the new dances you ain't up on. Who show you how them and they homegirls get down at the YMCA teen club. Hands on the wall. Booties in the air. Practicin' in the mirror. In the basement when yo mama not around. Except now it's not shameful. Only now you are grown enough to embrace the body your little self was ashamed of.

It is just as safe as it was with yo cousins. Just as safe to say you don't know how to move all that ass God blessed you with. Safe to say you ain't got no rhythm. You gon get hyped up anyway. If you got one cheek movin,' both cheeks movin,' or no cheeks movin,' you gon get hyped up anyway. Cuz we curatin' joy regardless.

Our bodies become art choreographed in song. "Hype thy sister" becomes a sacred anthem, a form of recognition, an affirmation of seeing and being seen. This is an embodied round the way praxis of *I see you sis*. Whether the words are spoken in that order or camouflaged in "yaaaassss bitch fuck it up," we find ways to say each other's names back to each other, to call ourselves back to our bodies, to find our way back home.

And this is a self-proclaimed freedom and a pedagogy of liberation. The dance teacher is the freedom dreamer and the cartographer of emancipation, curating a geography of the body that bends and winds and dips and pops. And *praise pussy* means praise the womb and praise all that is

womanly, means all that is womanly is Godly, means we recall the inner power from the depths of us that so many of us had forgotten.

Twerk Church is a holy ceremony, one as holy as the Black Feminist Summer School of Bahia, Brazil, as sacred a spiritual gathering as the Church of Black Feminist Study.³⁸⁹ It is a gathering of homegirl haven, hood girl reckoning, ghetto girl sanctity. It is an aligning of signs, a speaking in liquid tongues of suns and moons and risings. A pedagogy of round the way libation that is cultivated within the skin. Felt somewhere deep beneath the flesh. Folded into the sense of the self. A healing secreted in the sweat. A sweet taste of Black ratchet freedom.

There is a theory of giving no fucks that the professor of (non)performance paints with the posture of her pussy. Placing hands between sites of pleasure, pulsating cheeks to and from. Her ass whispers between twerks, *get free, sis. Get free.* From the pulpit of the pussy power congregation, Pastor Breezy leads the chorus in worship. *Praise Pussy, Praise Pussy!*

What does it mean for Black women to find healing at the space between our own thighs³⁹⁰? In the collectivity of the Twerk? We be gettin' free in the round the way proverb of recognition, in a collective understanding of the expectation to see and be seen, to let a sis know she killin' it, the permission to be as ratchet as yo sister.

I healed from sexual trauma between the gyration of each twerk. Took his hands from up off of me. Released his grip on me. Got free. Reclaimed my sexuality. Learned to be in my body more fluidly. To take ownership of my waist and hold it close. To cradle my own womb and name it sacred. I released a need to know all things that are unseeable. I surrendered to inner wisdoms and grew more patient with their reveal. I learned to meet my flesh as text, my body as ontology, I learned to praise my own pussy.

...

sanctified children

i often stare
at how fire
dances, and
wonder if
ever i could
be that free

i often notice
what wind does
to tree, and
wonder if she's
fighting or

³⁸⁹ Imhotep and baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*.

³⁹⁰ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

dancing. i be

moving my body
like art in my mirror
making plaything
out my own skin
making graceful
out the clumsy
hips of me. i be

moving like a
shake
quake
stomp
clap
clamp
boom. i be
catching holy
ghosts when im
dancing. doing
the booty moves
i never got to do
in my mama's house

.

sanctified children
don't do no sin

sanctified children
don't drink no gin

.

and i be sippin on
sparklin cider till
the sun come up

and i be twerkin on
clouds till the crumbs
drunk up. i be

moon walking down
destiny lane when
womanhood runs up

and im just a kid
stuck in sin

searching for new
mothers to mother
me. to rebirth me into
freedom i never
knew.

.

when i be in my
room i become
all the women
i was afraid to be
when i was a child
when i was alone

in someone else's
sanctified house
where sin was just
dressed in different
skin

.

sanctified children
don't play with ghosts
sanctified children
don't do no toasts

.

and i be
channeling
every ancestral
alchemy that
come to me. and i
be crying the tears
god's children wasn't
pose to cry bc we was
pose to have died
and came back to life
happy. born again
believers gots to always
be happy. joy, joy deep
down in my soul?

why pain gots to be
a satan? why rain can't

be holy, too? i be
dancing and drinking
sparklin cider in my room
and i be making friends with
sadness, too. and i be

black womb magic in my
bedroom. i be redefining
god for myself. i be
meeting the gods i was
ashamed of. i be ancestral
astral planing into my own
discovery

.

what happens at night
when the fire fades?
when the clouds collide
and the nighttime sways?

i settle into a two step
with sorrow. release shame
about the weight of its
wounding me. i cuddle
up with discomfort. i
tuck myself in beside
lonely. i learn this is not
such a bad thing.

.

i am bursting outside
boxes of sanctified
like holy wine

i am a womxn now
a womxn who dances with fire
who does not do well with
that which is not real. i am a
healer now. of my self. of my
wounds. of my shadows. i am
discovering now, what sits
well with my spirit, and what
don't.

.

no one knows how to hold
the truths that rest
beneath my bones

so i dance my hips into them
i stretch my skin out to them
these truths that burst from
depths of me. these knowings
i been holding since girlhood

i candance them free, i can
dance them free. i can move
my waist and i can set me free

akili healing room

Girl, was that yo booty I saw on Twerk Church Snapchat?! I crack up laughin' as I enter Esha Dee's house. Her and Heaven and Neesh and me meet at her home to prepare hearts/ minds/ spirits for Akili, the community healing retreat that we have been invited to hold space for. We sit in a circle and plan the space. What stations for healing. What each corner will do. What senses will be stimulated. She grabbed an object here, an item there, to pull from what she had curated for her home, to give us a sense of what we could make possible in the space. Her home became a model for us. A pre-curated site of safety that made room for us to make room for the communities of Black people that we serve.

...

On the morning of the healing retreat, we packed up three cars full of self-care goodies and drove the long road down to Sonoma. We had drums and rugs and pillows and paintings and furs and masks and mud cloth, and everything was stacked up so high, couldn't nobody even see out they windows! We was just praying all the ride long that ain't nobody pop off, get pulled over, or swerve into an accident. But we had hella sacred objects from each of our home-based altars compiled in the backseat of the car, so we knew we was gon be safe, 'cuz sage and plants and flowers and feathers still cradled our grandmothers' photographs that we placed neatly beside the drums in the trunk. We carried our ancestors in us, on us, with us, and they rode alongside us in Neesh's sky blue Toyota. Neesh had said that the trees are our ancestors, too. That they protect us and ground us in a deep internal knowing that we are safe from harm, and held. I breathe into that knowing as I stare up at those branches that tap the tip of the car. We pull up to this distant land that felt so far away from home, and Neesh adds, *Sometimes, we gotta leave The Town to find our healing. Then we can bring back everything that them trees in nature taught us.*

As soon as we pulled up to Sonoma, we dumped all that stuff in the healing room and made it come to life. *It's all about the lights, sis,* Heaven said as she played with the lighting machine at the front of the black box. *Once we get these lights right, we gon be set.* I watched her transition the space from open to closed, from seeable and hyper-visible to secret, dimmed and intimate. She shifted the levels of opacity within the room's interior to make it safe for folks to convene with their own interior, to make room for self-space to flourish. With hints of blues and purples, she toned down the

fluorescent and shifted what we could see of ourselves and of each other. And in that space of darkness, what was left to be exposed was the inner depths of us. And when we got real close, close enough to touch something, we could make out the color and the pattern of the things we had organized in there. In the space. In the room. In ourselves.

She saged and prayed over the room. Dabbed my forehead with golden-colored holy oil and prayed over me like Auntie Linda used to. Welcomed us to walk in circles and bless each corner of the space. With our hands. With our dance. Her cousin helped me lay out each rug as we rubbed scented oils into the fabrics. Covered and uncovered mirrors. Placed tables beneath cloth to curate a multidimensional altar space so that alternate scapes of self-knowing could be accessed.

In the midst of this ritual, I felt something on the inside of me quiver. I felt my feet move to each corner of the black box without my consent, my lips speak in tongues to a God I stopped believing in without my consent. I felt my heart drop and ride at a pace that's unfamiliar, felt like I did at age six, when Auntie first laid hands on me. Heaven laid hands on me and suddenly I felt myself slip into a dream state as I stared at each corner of the room, seeing through it. I peered through the curtains and the comforters, the rugs and the rhinestones, and saw Spirit move between each object. I was overwhelmed by the energy of Gods and ancestors whose names I did not know. I was amazed by the ways that material items could make way for my soul to soothe.

This room was made holy with the hands of my homegirls who knew the power of shifting atmospheres. This room welcomed the warmth and weariness of the weight we each knew, the weight of the women who came before us. We invited the energies I was afraid of, to cleanse and clear and make room for the opening up of hearts here. With each word I felt flow from my lip, with each step and switch of hip, I felt myself melt into honey. Felt my homegirls drift into an elsewhere.

We made a space for the working women to come and retreat from the retreat that they helped to lead. We curate a site of respite, a locale for the community who serve the community to rest in communion, in solitude, in silence. And as we worked to make that space, we made space for ourselves in the process.

The scent of sage and sandalwood settled into your skin as soon as you entered. Tickled your arm hairs and held your hand as you stepped into this darkness. It was not scary, just calming. Just invited you to breathe. Deeper. I watch the women who worked all day come into the space for a break, a spa-like retreat from the transitions that go too quick to breathe. We make an oasis of sorts, a stillness and a calming, for the working women.

I am the host of the healing space, but I get my healing there too. I lay out on the fur, face down, and write and write and write. It is dark and I cannot see the words but my pen goes where my heart tells it to. I write about Jamie and the children who slipped into spaces that scared me. I write about how I motioned to myself from inside myself and felt a storm and a breeze. I write about how the space we curated held me.

Part Four: The Ancestors + The Astral Plane

interlude four: a methodology for the black feminist sacred

the ancestral and the sacred: a theoretical analysis

In *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics Memory, and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander explores the rich sacred tradition of Black women's spirituality in relation to natural elements like waves and wind. She argues:

Not only humans made the Crossing [of the Middle Passage] . . . Housed in the memory of those [who were] enslaved . . . sacred energies made the Crossing [as well] . . .

The Sacred energies that accompanied the millions who had been captured and sold for more than four centuries have indeed inhabited a vast geography . . . [They were] Guardians of the crossroad . . . [and they planted] themselves on the soil of the Americas.

Once they crossed, they graced all things with the wisdom of Ashè . . . They all conspired to rest their Truth everywhere. And in the simplest of things. Like a raindrop.

[and that] water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory . . . An expansive memory refusing to be housed in any single place.³⁹¹

Alexander's words help us to imagine how our ancestors brought their Gods and their healings with them during the middle passage, and infused these Spirits in everything, even in the oceans whose waters carried the ships that carried them into enslavement. Those Gods can still be felt and experienced today - in the rain, in the seas, and in the trees, if we so choose to believe. For the "Wind. Water. Fire. Thunder. Lightening. Volcano. The cosmic geography of Sky. Earth. Trees. Forest. Park. Mountain. River. Ocean. Rocks. Stones. They each have their own consciousness."³⁹² And we can tap into each in order to connect more deeply with our own consciousness, our own ancestors, and our own spirits.

Alexander helps us to situate ourselves, as Black women rooted in diasporic healing, within an ancestral lineage of care that can be tapped into through nature. Using her framework of the sacred, which centers the metaphysical alongside the physical to illuminate various sites of interactions between "the human and the divine,"³⁹³ I think about the ways in which spiritual energy is channeled through natural elements, ancestral presences can be felt on multiple planes at one time, and how Black women make sense of these simultaneous sites of healing. Additionally, I think about the secrets held beneath the visible.

Zora Neale Hurston also points to the spiritual and ancestral power prevalent within nature. In reflection on her relationship with New Orleans Hoodoo, Zora Neale Hurston states, "I was to . . . get my answers to life and things in storms."³⁹⁴ Hurston draws on a rich tradition of Black folk . . . spirituality that grounds itself in ways of knowing the self and the world through, what Alexander

³⁹¹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289–303.

³⁹² Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 303.

³⁹³ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 303.

³⁹⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 192.

calls, “the Sacred energy that claims one’s head.”³⁹⁵ This recognition of the ancestral presences that express themselves through storms and other natural elements allows for clarity and discernment when dealing with sacred lives and intimate stories.

I additionally rely on Boyce Davies’s theory of twilight zones here, which she defines as the space “between night and day, where spirits begin to roam and objects that seem perfectly normal in the daylight assume strange patterns and shapes, that gap between different realities.”³⁹⁶ She argues that “Moving out of the twilight can also mean moving into the dark, which sometimes is where the true light exists. The sun is always there, just obliterated under a cloud of dark grayness, ready to be revealed if one could only burst through and penetrate the surface obscurity.”³⁹⁷

I read both the ancestral plane and the interior space through a theory of palimpsest. In *Afro Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*, Christen Smith frames palimpsest as the geographic “interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain the depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.”³⁹⁸ In other words, palimpsest is the “etching over” of spatialized memory that exists on the Black body and simultaneously as “the ground we walk on.”³⁹⁹ It is the site at which the past is mapped onto the present, a site that can exist at any scale, as minute as the birthmark that resembles a mother’s, and as vast as an ocean that resembles an ocean that carries Black life beneath the Kalunga line.⁴⁰⁰ Palimpsest is the lingering of that which was said to have happened and ended, like childhood, like dead mothers, both of which haunt like phantom remnants of the elsewheres we were once afraid to know.

transparent opacity

There are things that only dirt and dust can tell you through the whispers of the wind. There are certain ways of communicating care that can only come through a wind storm. There is the stomping motion of memory, and then the gradual sensation of it. There is the forceful entry of facts, and then the reminiscence of recollection. There is the excavation of that which wishes to remain secret, and there is the willful leaning into the lullabied song that awaits the wandering and wounded soul. Some secrets we are meant to keep close as a way to ease our worrying. Other secrets are said to have healing powers only in their unspokeness. There are certain signs of deep knowing that no one is pose to have language for. There are fears and facts that were buried for a reason, where treason would be the very unrooting of them.

There is a way we Black girl child learn to notice, when it is time, the tumultuous remembrance of the tales that become truths, of the distance between spaces and times of trials and defeat, where our own two feet have never passed, but where our souls have known once in a different lifetime. These are the sites that are meant to remain unspoken of, for our own protection. These are the sites we must keep secret, the ones we only share in the shelter of sisterly convenings, the one we write in forest green pen into a felt blue diary that don’t need no lock cuz we keep it somewhere so safe no

³⁹⁵ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 303.

³⁹⁶ Carole Boyce Davies, *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 19.

³⁹⁷ Davies, *Caribbean Spaces*, 23.

³⁹⁸ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 66.

³⁹⁹ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 9.

⁴⁰⁰ The kalunga line, within Kongoles cosmology, represents “the waters of parturition. Crossing these waters, one enters the realm of the dead.” (169) It has become a term taken up by Black folks who are the descendants of the middle passage to represent our ancestral links to spirits of another realm. Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

one would know to find us there. These are the stories that stay stuck to tethered page for a reason. We keep ourselves safe by saying these secrets only to the ones we trust. We know that the secrets will kill us if we hold them in shame, so we let the lies that live in our homes burst into becoming, if only to set ourselves a little more free. But we do this in private. We do this when the door is closed and locked. When no notes are being taken. We do this with the wandering souls who sit with us from the other side and remind us that we are “spiritual beings having a human experience.”⁴⁰¹

We convene in the company of the forgotten women with diaries they carried across Kalunga lines, through underworld rivers and Earthly returns. The women of our bloodline bare their secrets to help us see why we women of this century see remnants of ourselves in their sickness. These are the secrets whose source cannot never be stolen. These are the intricacies of internal worlds that expand beyond our beings. These are the processes through which a Black woman rediscovers her girlhood and learns to give herself more grace. This is the moment when she sees her mother and her mother’s mother in the mystery of her own eyes. These are the sites of healing that we can’t not handle with the utmost care.

...

What of Black women’s healing spaces is meant to be left unsaid beyond the closed doors of community? In grappling with this question, I turn to Zora Neale Hurston’s introduction of *Mules and Men*, where she quotes, “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.”⁴⁰² Hurston sarcastically calls out a tradition of anthropological scholarship that attempts to pry into that which is sacred in order to excavate knowledge of the exoticized other. Academia adopts the “white man’s” curiosity and fascination about that which it “know[s] so little about,”⁴⁰³ leading the researcher to desire novel answers over communal peace. The researcher is trained to rupture trust and bonds to get answers. My methodological approach rejects such training, resisting the gaze of the academy and the desire to know that which would be best left unsaid.

“Tarika don’t want me to find her,” Savannah Shange says of the Black girl at her research site who “refu[s]es to be seen through.”⁴⁰⁴ Even in her attempt to formulate a “liberatory ethnographic project,” Shange’s methodological training “demands access to Black girl interiority” in ways that require “performative transparency” from Black girls who wish to remain unknown.⁴⁰⁵ Tarika embodies a round the way ethic of refusal, remaining “opaque on purpose . . . [to] an external gaze,”⁴⁰⁶ forcing us to ask how we might view “opacity as a site of knowledge production.”⁴⁰⁷ In pointing to Tarika’s refusal to be archived, and her own refusal to “track [Tarika] down,” Shange models a resistance against disclosure and a denial of the academy’s desire for intimate access into Black life. As a Black feminist ethnographer, Shange leads me to ask difficult questions about my own methodological praxis.

⁴⁰¹ Esha Dee. Homegirl from around the way.

⁴⁰² Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 4.

⁴⁰³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 4.

⁴⁰⁴ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 16.

⁴⁰⁵ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 16.

⁴⁰⁶ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 16.

⁴⁰⁷ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 16.

If we imagine the external gaze as whiteness/ the academy and internal gaze as the seeing of oneself through one's own self gaze/ being seen by one's sister through a gaze of care, then questions of opacity differ based on whose gaze is being refuted and for what purpose. What does it mean to think about opacity at multiple scales, in multiple ways? How might we think about the refusal of an external gaze differently from the refusal of an internal gaze? How does one write about Black girl interiority and Black women's intimacy in ways that refute the external gaze of whiteness by protecting the sanctity of communal discourses? How does one make space for transparency that is not performative while simultaneously questioning the impossibilities and limitations of seeability and knowability? What does it mean to respect the unknowability of each other, of our ancestors, of ourselves?

The foundation of this project is a rejection of whiteness, in that I do not write for nor in conversation with whiteness, and therefore a rejection of the academy's gaze in its most traditional sense. While I write for an audience of Black folks, I recognize my inability to control who reads this text and how they choose to use it. Thus, I practice a refusal of disclosure in order to keep sacred certain aspects of Black communal life.⁴⁰⁸ Particularly when it comes to the intricacies of messiness that feel too intimate to share publicly, I make choices and decisions about which stories are better left untold, even when I have consent to share them. Additionally, I use coded language, hood terms that only my intended audience can comprehend, to block the gaze of institutional surveillance and to unravel linguistic harms that have traditionally blocked hood girls from gaining access to their own theoretical interventions. I write so that they might see themselves and simultaneously be hidden in plain sight. This praxis of opacity operates to insulate that which is, based on my own round the way metric of care, too raw for external reveal.

As I, like Tarika and Shange, practice a Black feminist refusal of the external gaze, I think about how a transparent opacity might allow me to refute and embrace multiple gazes simultaneously. How do I allow round the way Black girls to be seen and unseen simultaneously? How do I make space for a liberatory healing praxis which necessitates that we, as Black women, become transparent with ourselves and with each other? How might we curate a model of transparent opacity that "dare[s] to recognize [ourselves and] each other again and again in a context bent on making strangers of us all?"⁴⁰⁹ What keeps us from having real conversations about the ways we refuse each others' gaze as if our sisters' gaze were an external gaze?

When I lean into an everyday round the way method for living, I center a sense of collective witnessing that not only acknowledges the slay, but also the suffering, of a fellow Black woman healing. The witnessing of each other's wounds, the opening up of space for each other's non performative transparency, becomes central to our healing praxis. Yet, we have become conditioned to deny each other's gaze because we have learned to deny our own gaze - a fear of seeing the self. Out of fear that we might "see [each other] through the eye of [whiteness], that eye [we] know too well from [our] often distorted images of [ourselves]," we are conditioned to fail at recognizing each other. "We see in each other our own face,"⁴¹⁰ a face we have been taught to turn away from. In fact, Audre Lorde argues that because "we do not love ourselves . . . we cannot love each other."⁴¹¹ Thus, a rejection of ourselves is reflected in our rejection of each other.

⁴⁰⁸ In *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Kamala Visweswaran challenges our comprehension of ethnographic data collection by writing about her process of failing at ethnographic work. Her intent is to model the sort of surveillance blocking I name here, an attempt to refuse the academy access into the interior lives of the folks she engages in her project. Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁴⁰⁹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 279.

⁴¹⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 154.

⁴¹¹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 155.

Lorde and Alexander call for a turning into each other, a reclamation of the sacred gaze that can only be given to and from a sister, to and from a self. I take up their framing of an internal gaze to stretch a method of opacity to include intentional and interior transparency. I am not suggesting here that Black women be transparent with other Black women in ways that feel unsafe. Rather, I am asking what it might look like, beyond a research practice, to allow ourselves to see ourselves and each other in ways that help us heal.

A refusal to be seen by ourselves becomes deeply harmful and detrimental to our healing. What might it look like to employ a transparency of sacred intention that begins first with a deep desire to be seen by oneself in rigorous honesty? Healing begins with a radical love of oneself, a love so radical that it insists on truth and transparency for the sake of mending wounds. To see oneself requires the “shadow dive,”⁴¹² as it forces one to face that which feels unfaceable. To see oneself, then to allow oneself to be seen in sisterhood, is a sacred process that requires safety and communal care.

I also recognize that, even in our most concentrated efforts to be transparent, there are pieces of ourselves that we could never know, and pieces of ourselves we still subconsciously choose to not know out of fear that we cannot afford to embrace ourselves in all of our messy wholeness. When Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods assert that “no one knows the mysteries at the bottom of the ocean,”⁴¹³ they too recognize that even in the underworlds of unknowability and unseeability, there can never be a true uncovering of that which cannot be accessed or known.

I waver with my right to know myself daily. No signature or script can justify the mishaps of my rediscovery in my gaps. While we slip into the unknown, then, there will always be the realm of the forever unknown. The unknown as refusal, the unknown as sacred, and the unknown as impossibility merge to make up this method. It is a sitting with and making peace with that which is known but unspoken, that which is spoken in privacy and unshared, that which is shared in fragments on purpose, and that which cannot be known of interior and metaphysical worlds, even the ones that live in me. My homegirls who are centered in this work taught me how to see and be seen, and their capacity for transparency opened me up to new ways of writing their stories in my work.

To allow that seeing to be revealed beyond the enclosed space of healing is my process of curating this text. In this process, I practice a radical Black feminist refusal, in that I make decisions about the intimacy of details that may be best kept visible only at the level of trusted sisterhood. This opacity, a refusal to be seen by the world beyond the sacred space, is an opacity of protective care. It is a type of round the way ethic, in that it requires discernment and communal sense to delineate what words become too sacred to share, even when given consent. There are pieces of Black women that have been revealed to me that I choose to not share out of respect for the sacredness of exchange between sisters who heal. There are things of Black women’s healing that I refuse to write on the page, for the sake of radical refusal to disclose.

curating a space for metaphysical slippin’

⁴¹² Joycie. Round the way homegirl.

⁴¹³ McKittrick, *Commentary: Worn out*.

*The energy in this space is like contagious
like I nearly fainted, like I bella felt it
like I bella felt everything.*

-Galilah⁴¹⁴

As an extension of Creative Space Making as Method⁴¹⁵, Curating Space for Metaphysical Slippin' is a practice of Black feminist interior design that shapes spaces of care with the intention of spiritual connectivity. Altar work and inner child healing are my primary sites of spiritual curation and communal sacred exchange. I am welcomed into sites of metaphysical transcendence by Black women healers who guide me and others through travels of divine connection. I invite Black women to travel into alternate elsewheres to collect missing pieces of themselves through memory and recollection. These journeys through multiple pasts become palimpsestic sites of healing that transform our way of navigating the material realities we exist within.

During the art exhibition I hosted (*This Sh*t is For Us: An Exhibition of Black Girl Healing*) I invited my homegirl Lynesha, a Black feminist art therapist, to curate a community altar. Lynesha invited Black women to bring precious objects into a little corner of the room which she designated as sacred. Over the course of four months, the altar grew and expanded from her hand crafted memory of her deceased father to yellow sunflowers, portraits of grandmothers, obituaries of poetry mentors, and a frame with three images of three Black women side by side - June Jordan, Barbara Christian, Vèvè Clark - radical Black feminist scholars who died at the hands of the academy, who taught in the very department from which I write this project, who continue to be the most poignant reminders of why I do this work. While standing over the altar space with my homegirl Joycie, I traveled to these ancestors' realm and invited her to come. We went into a trance of knowing that exceeded the bounds of the corner where the altar was placed. We were no longer in front of the altar as a material object, but within the altar and moving through it, all while standing still. Lynesha's vision for this co-curated sanctuary of remembrance made my encounter with Joycie and our ancestors possible, as the curated objects in space served as a portal of transcendence for each of us. This encounter represents the heart of this chapter - an attempt to make sense of these moments of metaphysical slippin'.

I theorize metaphysical slippin' in conversation with Carole Boyce Davies' "twilight zone," which she defined as "that space of unreality . . . that zone of instability between darkness and light, that time when transformation happens."⁴¹⁶ I place twilight zones in conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander's exploration of sacred crossing to meditate on moments when Black women lead others into transformative slippages, and when Black women themselves experience these slips. What do we see/ feel/ think/ dream when we slip? How do we make sense of ourselves in these moments, and how do we reimagine the power / necessity of reclamation and restoration⁴¹⁷?

I read both the ancestral plane and the interior space through a theory of palimpsest. In *Afro Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*, Christen Smith frames palimpsest as the geographic "interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain the depths of other presents,

⁴¹⁴ Gahlilah. Homegirl from round the way in reflection of the healing spaces I host.

⁴¹⁵ Creative space making as method is the methodological framework engaged in Chapter Two of this text.

⁴¹⁶ Davies, *Caribbean Spaces*, 19.

⁴¹⁷ Alexander frames spiritual scapes as sites of transcendence that allow for restoration. In a letter to the spirits she states, "you have restored their wings," suggesting that travel to metaphysical spirit scapes allows for renewed fugitive strength for escape routes to otherworlds. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289.

pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.”⁴¹⁸ In other words, palimpsest is the “etching over”⁴¹⁹ of spatialized memory that exists on the Black body and simultaneously as “the ground we walk on.”⁴²⁰ It is the site at which the past is mapped onto the present, a site that can exist at any scale, as minute as the birthmark that resembles a mother’s, and as vast as an ocean that resembles an ocean that carries Black life beneath the Kalunga line. Palimpsest is the lingering of that which was said to have happened and ended, like childhood, like dead mothers, both of which haunt like phantom remnants of the elsewheres we were once afraid to know.

In conversation with Katherine McKittrick, who explores “how black femininity carries with it, on the body, traces of the past,”⁴²¹ I think about “bodymemory”⁴²² as a framework for the embodied “historical present.”⁴²³ I am particularly interested in how the Black female body itself becomes a palimpsest. I view “palimpsestic embodiment” as “that which ‘makes visible . . . what is already there: the ghosts, the images’ . . . [that which] conjure[s] up past situations [that have become] internalized . . .”⁴²⁴ Black women’s relationship to our bodies, I argue, is dictated by the haunting of past trauma which we carry from past lives (the many lives we have lived as Black girls and the many lives of other Black girl lives that preceded our own). This layering of pasts bares weight on the body, leans itself into the flesh of Black skin, etches itself into our bones.

Even as the Black feminine body exists as a site of matrilineal weight, holding loss, grief, and the ever present mourning of ongoing terror, so too does it exist as a site for reclamation, since the space of most harm is in fact the most fruitful site for healing. While earlier chapters focus on the reclamation of the exterior body through an aesthetics of refusal, I turn here to reclamations of the interior body, the self space which travels inward and outward simultaneously, from an individual I to a collective we, both which operate within spheres unseen to the naked eye. In conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander, I ask, “how is a Sacred interior cultivated?”⁴²⁵ I wonder what it means specifically for Black women to curate an interior self within the context of creative space making. “The Sacred becomes a way of embodying the remembering of self,”⁴²⁶ a way of witnessing oneself, refusing self opacity, refusing self forgetting. “To know the body is to know it as a medium for the Divine . . . [therefore] it is to understand spiritual work as a type of body praxis, as a form of embodiment.”⁴²⁷ Hence, I view the body as a “repository of a consciousness that derives from a source residing elsewhere” in relation to “spiritual work [that] produce[s] the conditions that bring about the realignment of self with self, which is simultaneously a realignment of oneself with the Divine through a collectivity.”⁴²⁸

Alongside ancestral sites of transcendence, I theorize the inner Black girlchild as an interior and metaphysical healing scape. Centering a method of inner child healing,⁴²⁹ I frame the inner Black

⁴¹⁸ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 66.

⁴¹⁹ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 66.

⁴²⁰ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 9.

⁴²¹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 47.

⁴²² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 46.

⁴²³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 46.

⁴²⁴ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 165.

⁴²⁵ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 298.

⁴²⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 298.

⁴²⁷ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 298.

⁴²⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 298.

⁴²⁹ Inner child healing is a form of healing that centers childhood wounds as sites of original pain. This framework of healing has mostly been written about in ways that do not interrogate racialized and gendered childhoods. My work aims to expand the framework and extend its tools to think about what inner child healing looks like for Black women working to heal their inner Black girlchild.

girlchild as a spiritual life force within each Black woman who was once a Black girl herself. I argue that reconnecting with this site of interiority opens up possibilities for an excavation of originary trauma, and a reclamation of that which was lost/ never had in our childhoods. I think critically about Black women's processes of travel into our Black girl interior as a journey of space making. Rerouting ourselves back into ourselves becomes a praxis of visibility, revealing the roots of our trauma, the moments of the past that are continually triggered in the present.

Being triggered is, I argue, a palimpsestic encounter that forces one to be spiritually and emotionally within multiple moments at once. The root of our triggers is the earliest memories of how it felt to be hurt, and that hurt, when unprocessed, is remembered each time a similar hurt occurs. Pain is mapped onto itself over and over again. This pain, Black girl pain, becomes the familiar bed we lay in. We know it well. We dwell in it. We know it does not go away. But do we know what to do with it? Do we know it is not ours to hold onto?

In *Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography*, Savannah Shange names herself as a "Black womanchild," positioning her identity in direct relation to Black girls'. Her linguistic compilation of terms signal disjointed fragments of the racialized, gendered, and aged identity of the "Black womanchild." She suggests that "those of us who are Black girls [or] who have been Black girls" might imagine ourselves through the lens of the "Black womanchild" to point to the impossibility of Black girlhood and Black womanhood.⁴³⁰ Audre Lorde argues that the "societal deathwish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America" informs the way we see and unsee ourselves in the world. Drawing on her theory of Black feminist social death, I think about the effects of the ways we "have been [and continue to be] steeped in hatred - for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live. As children, we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions."⁴³¹ Thus, "to begin reconstructing [our]selves, [we'd have] to reach all the way back into the murk and mire of [our] childhood[s],"⁴³² the earliest memories of when we learned to hate ourselves.

As Akasha T. Hull articulates in *Soul Talk: the New Spirituality of African American Women*, the particularities of abuse within the Black girl experience "directly interfere[s] with the child's developing spirituality."⁴³³ Hull views "abuse of spirit that take form as sexual exploitation, emotional abandonment, miseducation, systematic poverty, racial oppression . . ." as sites of harm that erode Black girl selfhood in ways that have lingering effects into Black womanhood. "Reparenting, building, or rebuilding the self pushes forward the motion of spiritual redemption."⁴³⁴ I view reparenting as a process of becoming to ourselves the mothers we needed as children, the mothers our mothers could not afford to be to us because of their own Black girlhoods, their own palimpsestic weight. Thus, "what we are fighting to remember, to put back together, is our true and powerful spiritual identity." The power of Black feminist inner child healing is that it cultivates space to mourn the inner Black girlchild while also bringing her presence, energy, and self determination into the adult woman's everyday life.

clairaudience and deep listening

⁴³⁰ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 6.

⁴³¹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 146.

⁴³² Hull, *Soul Talk*, 150.

⁴³³ Hull, *Soul Talk*, 172.

⁴³⁴ Hull, *Soul Talk*, 174.

*I'm allowing my ancestors and my higher self
to just say what they have to say.*

-Lorie ⁴³⁵

While standing over the altar, translating from spirit to tongue, I was told by Joycie that I am clairaudient⁴³⁶, that the voices I been hearing in my head since I was seven were from former lives seeking to give me love in this one. I had always wondered if the voices were real, if anyone else heard them, if I had been going crazy since girlhood. Her witnessing of me in my most intimate transcended space opened up new possibilities for sacred healing methodologies. I translated from another realm words I had heard from the spirits of the altar.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “Black women are the ones who really listen to one another.” She states that “only Black women know what it means to be Black women.”⁴³⁷ Hill’s assertion lays the groundwork for my framing of deep listening, as it centers the need and the necessity for deeply listening to Black women homegirls and Black women ancestors. What I learned from Joycie was the power of deep listening, in this realm and the next. As I witnessed her witness me in all of my transparency, I understood more deeply what a radical healing practice it is to listen and be listened to intently. As I leaned into the words I received from elsewhere, I shared those words with Joycie, and she reflected them back to me. She showed me why the words came and what they meant to my life simply by hearing what I had to say about my ancestors and myself, and allowing me to explore that more deeply. To allow oneself to unfold in front of another, and to know that sonic space is held for you to go with your tongue to all the sites that harmed you, and through the therapeutic exchange of hearing and being heard, you shift your seeing of yourself in the world.

My methodological praxis of clairaudience and deep listening requires a spiritual attention to voices of multiple realms. “The dead do not like to be forgotten,”⁴³⁸ and the living do not like to go unheard. Thus, I listen deeply to what Black women have to say about the spirits with whom they are deeply connected. I listen deeply to the ancestors who communicate with me and take seriously what they say within the spaces I curate. I do not take this process lightly. I do not overstep boundaries, and I do not seek connection for the sole purposes of this project. Rather, I write about the intimate moments I share with spirits who have made a point to reach me in order to help me say something more accurately in this work.

⁴³⁵ Lorraine. Homegirl from round the way.

⁴³⁶ Clairaudience is a term that refers to people who can hear voices of another realm speaking to them within their own minds.

⁴³⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

⁴³⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289.

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.

-Toni Morrison⁴³⁹

In order to speak with Black women about the spaces they slip into, I must know how it feels to have slipped into alternate planes myself. In order to listen to ancestors on journeys across realms, I must first listen to the inner worlds of myself.

Like Davies and Alexander, who openly recount their navigations through twilight zones and spirit scapes, I write about my own sites of divine encounters, where the mysterious of the unseeable become a part of my movement through the city. I frame this process as an opening up of travel to planes beyond our planetary conceptions of world and wind. It is a deep desire to lean into the Earth as a portal into other worlds- the tree stump as a stomping ground of an ancestor, the wind as an old woman's gathering call. I have to nurture my own process as spiritual being if I desire to understand Black women's sites of transcendence more deeply. I write openly about the sites I travel to- my inner Black girlhood, my altar, the holiness of my own interiority.

⁴³⁹ Morrison, "The Site of Memory."



Figure 15. her grandmothers, like mines, map themselves onto our lives, mixed media by nettynoon (Vivien Jenette Lee, My Grandmother's Garden, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

chapter four: metaphysical slippin'

homegirl who do yo' hair

Yo homegirl who do yo hair? You can't not be vulnerable with her. She don't seen you bal' headed and ugly. So when she be in yo dandruff infested scalp, you be more open to lettin' her see yo dandruff infested soul, yo holes, yo hang ups. You be more willing to unravel before her as she unravel the two strand of yo twists, as yo body twist and turn from the pain of her heavy handedness. She give you a break, she let you take a moment. She stop mid braid and just hold you, pray for you as yo body feel all the things it never could. And she hold yo body like she be holdin' yo hair in her hands, and she hold yo head in her lap and just rock you, and she let you just come apart . . . come apart. Horse hair half installed, other half of yo head still bald, and you be lookin hit and hurt, but still she praise you, still she tell you there's a God who can save you. You, the broken and undeserving. You who in the midst of hurting hurt others. You who handle no one and nothing with care. You who would not dare get to yo knees and pray. You who swear you know more than yo hairdresser 'cause you gettin' a PhD. You who yo hairdresser humbles in love.

Somethin bout gettin yo hair braided by a Black woman. I don got cuts and colors, sew ins and weaves, but somethin bout the process of braids and twists, locs and dreads. They require an attentiveness to each strand as the hands hold and mold the texture of each twisted kink. It is somethin' about the twelve hours you spend seated on somebody's auntie's kitchen chair with Moonlight playin' in the background, with Janelle Monae's voice yellin for Chyrone and you questioning yo own queerness. It's somethin' about the melody of the ever so gentle thumping of thumbs and forefingers into each other in rhythmic motion, one strand over the other, as you share epiphanies you have about yo lover, about yo God, about healin'.

She see you come in with mascara in tact, naps camouflaged beneath baby hairs and a ball cap, or a bun wrapped up in cotton two toned tie dye fabric, or a head scarf tied real cute with a floppy lop sided bow, or a bandana and a bantu knot. She see you come in camouflaged and she watch you come apart before you leave out as a new somebody, changed in ways the eyes can't see. She watch you unmask yo'self, remove the layer of luggage you carried with you, remove the layer of old grease on yo scalp, remove the edge control and the Bobby pins you had tuckin' in yo kinks, remove the mask. She watch you remove yo facade from yo self, watch you disrobe before her. She watch you rinse the water over yo eyes when the jam gel start burnin'. She hold you over her sink and soak yo wounds there. She rub yo scalp clean. She dip yo braids in boiling water while she speak to you in tongues, praying over the pilgrimage of this journey you have known.

When it's so late that you let her see through yo soul because you are too tired to cover it up. It is three thirteen in the morning and this woman with weave platted in her hands is demanding that you see yo'self, that you see God in you, and you are too tired to pretend. You are too tired to wear the face of no feeling.

Together, in the tethering of the thin tooth comb and the rattail, the readjusting of diamond parts and stringing of wooden bead, between the one strand over the other and the snatching of the last little bit of the kitchen to fit the final braid, you and her co-curate an ensemble of wearable art- each braid its own branch of a tree she built for you. Together you co-author a living breathing

dissertation of Black girlhood. Together you map a new way of being yo'self, a mode of cartography that cares for you in the wake of yo undoing.

...

Hadah was the first to plat cornrows into my hair since age seven. Her sharply curved nails scraping against my scalp to remove the dead skin, dancing strands of kinky coils into and out of each other. Hadah made me feel young and beautiful. I was seven again, seated between the brown of Triana's inner thigh, "this hurts!" - "hold still!" I was seven again, swinging on the sea saw at elementary, letting my long locs love on the wind beneath each braid. I was seven again, pinky swearin' not to let my mama find out Triana was the one who braided up my perm, pretending her auntie made me do it. And then it was April, who had Proud Family on, who sang the theme song like we was in sixth grade again, who let herself become undone in my presence. And then it was Peaches, who spoke of the intergenerational curse and breakin free. And then it was Sakina.

She and I map a theory of healing journeys with the pointer tip of our fingers. *From that place, the person you were and the world you knew then, to isolation, deep intense isolation for yo growth, to the return to that place, looking the same as you did when you left, but feeling inside so much different.* We looped our fingers together, tracing a circle from a point of no return, only to return to that exact same spot, but different, different in the sense that your soul glows, different in the sense that you found something for yo'self that someone else could never give you.

//

I slip into the holding of her. With no warning. With no signs. I do not realize I am seeable until she sees me. How alone I still feel. How alone I always been. She sees it in the dangling of my eyelash. She plucks me apart at once. I wonder how visible these wounds have been to the whole world this whole time. My hand unclenches the braid I helped her tie to a close. My feet float from the ground. I slip into a twilight zone, "a sense of (un)reality."⁴⁴⁰ I am stretched out flat on the ground with no grounding. I swim like fish for answers. Who sent her? Why is the room shaking? Why am I breaking? Unfolding/ unmolding. I did not ask to be seen today. I cannot hide from her eye's embrace. I couldn't not remember everything all at once.

The grey couch. The forced fingers. The silent assault. The voiceless nonconsent. The motionless fight I refused to put up. My favorite uncle. My grandmother. Who she was to my mother. My mother. Who she was to me. Silence. So much movement in silence. The crochet hook. The corner of the room where she lay. All day. Depression. Disdain. Door unlocked. Everyone cuming in. Remembering all that was buried all at once.

She made a space for me to slip. She watched me transition from the physical place we shared - the wood, the walls, the grounding - to the inner world of remnants I hadn't buried deep enough. She made a space for me to slip and she caught me there. She showed me the interior of myself that needed redesigning.

⁴⁴⁰ Davies, *Caribbean Spaces*, 21.

slippin'

Girl, she don slipped again.⁴⁴¹

It was one thing
to think the pain
theorize the pain
speak the pain.
It was a whole nother thing to
/ *feel* it.

To slip is to transition from one space to the next with your body having moved none⁴⁴², having only experienced a quake like shiver or a falling into ground, yet having never transported itself out of a room, a home, a non/shelter. It is an overcoming of spirit, like a catching of the Holy Ghost, only the ghost you catch is your own self, or remnants of yourself, or pieces of a past, or a portrait of a God you so deeply believed in. It is “the past that is not the past [that] reappears . . . to rupture the present.”⁴⁴³ It is flight and burial simultaneously. It is cocooning and shattering enmeshed. It is wings and waves and oceans, water and rush and loss of breath. It is a losing of control, an existing in the unconscious, a sliding into an alternate elsewhere, a site at which old versions of yourself are revealed to you, pieces of yourself you had forgotten, or perhaps never had the chance to know. It is dropping into heartscape, an inner world where being a being is all that matters and there is no room for to do’s. It is a slipping into shamelessness, a speaking of self in fully fragmented statements with an utmost clarity. It is a clearing of throats by the altar. It is a holding close of clairaudience, a listening deeply, a depth of knowing oneself and one’s surroundings beyond the concrete.

It is a surrendering that you did not plan for, prepare for, and maybe did not even consent to, but because all knowing or more knowing spirits had other plans for you, you go to that place because you don’t have a choice and your voice chokes up too much to resist it. At times, it is accompanied by an uncontrollable flow of salt flavored water riding in droplets from your pupils to the curve of your cheek, the heaviness of heaving resembling an asthmatic attack, an inability to breathe. At times, it sends the body in a shock wave and paralyzes the feet. At times, it comes as a trance, like a dream. At times, it silences you, stills you, startles you into a frozened forgetfulness.

It is a forgetting of the unimportant stuff- like what time it is, what day it is, what year it is, where you are and how you got there- and a deep remembering of that which is most essential to your survival- who you are, what stuff you are made of, what color your womb is, what woman your inner child needs you to be, what wound will continue to hold you back until you tell it your name. Suddenly you see yourself outside yourself and inside yourself simultaneously. Suddenly you no longer can grasp hold of a grounding object. Suddenly you cannot name the objects in the room - a wooden chair, a platinum blonde pack of braiding hair, blue black beads, a pot of boiling hot water to dip your ends. Suddenly the room is spinning and you cannot catch yourself and you know that you are not supposed to, you know that in letting yourself crumble into the concrete wood you will become more full, you know that letting the weight rush over you will somehow let you feel lighter, eventually.

To one who has never experienced a

⁴⁴¹ Hull, *Soul Talk*, 159.

⁴⁴² Davies, *Caribbean Spaces*, 21.

⁴⁴³ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 9.

// slip
it may appear too dangerous
but I promise
it is the most liberating
form of letting go

I hold my breath when I slip. I am never ever prepared. I never sign up for it. Never light the candle and sit and wait for them to come. The ancestors. The inner child. They bombard me with words when I am too afraid to seek. They speak in twisted tongue and tricky language. Yet, they speak with an utmost clarity. “And you will know that I am God. / Trust us, it is yours. / This is what your spirit has chosen.” There are those things that get repeated. And then there are those things I must sink deep into dirt to know. Like how it feels to not have a mother. Or how it feels to mourn the stillbirth of a daughter. There are things that I cannot know that I am forced to know when I slip. Things I forgot I never felt. Like loss. Like abandonment. Like how we Black girls get used to not feeling shit.

To slip is to feel everything, deeply. The dirty shit. The weight of it. To slip is to go there, to be forced to go there, to break, to bend, to be swimming and unable to find shallow when you cling for it. This is the depths of healing we have been conditioned to be afraid of. This is the site at which transformation occurs. This is the interior design of the home within, the space that no house or no healing circle could make. It is the space inside you that you make, with your own bare hands, prying at the parts of you that you wish most to unravel, to discover that which lies beneath you. *What are the secrets you have hid from you, the ones you have refused to bear? Whose grandmother got you to slip and how did that shit feel?* I find I am not the first in my family to slip. We just never had words to speak of it.

...

The metaphysical palimpsests⁴⁴⁴ we Black women slip into - the interior self space and the ancestral astral plane - call us in through song, through sisters, through silence. Pain seeps into geography, producing a palimpsest of the body, of the Bible, of the graveyard, of the home. The Yellow House.⁴⁴⁵ The Body of Christ Christian Church. The site of burial. The body is a palimpsest that calls forth layered pasts. “The body . . . hold[s] . . . our memory.”⁴⁴⁶ The body carries on it the hauntings and lingerings of another time, another space, another place. Suddenly California becomes Philadelphia and Georgia all at once. Suddenly Oakland is Atlanta and my feet can’t find no solid grounding. In one moment I stand in three places, three different homes of non-protection. The spaces this body carries around in it’s cracks crumble into each other in disjointed remembrance, in girlhood abode, in ancestral cleavage.

A house . . .
is only as safe as flesh⁴⁴⁷

When nothing or no one else can hold me, they tell me my body can. Just for today, just in the floating between here and there. There are not enough houses in the world to heal me from myself.

⁴⁴⁴ Smith, *Afro-Paradise*.

⁴⁴⁵ Like Sarah Broom, a New Orleans native who writes beautifully about her childhood home in *The Yellow House*, I too came of age in a yellow house. Her text brought me back to that house and opened up space for me to sit with difficult emotions about what it felt like to live there.

⁴⁴⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 279)

⁴⁴⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, ix.

If my body cannot be made home in this world then no place ever will be. This is what they tell me. Grandma Mamie and Ethel Mae and Britt Britt and Toni Brown. They bare witness to my suffering and shutter themselves to sleep in the soil of my sickness, planting hope in my weeds of impossibility. They remind me of wake work, of life in mourning, of soaring. I feel them fluttering on the tip of my toes beneath my feet. Feel them weep for me. Feel them want more for me. Want wholeness, want warmth amidst winter coldness, want me to be my shelter.

The interior space of Black womanhood is the space where the womb is felt, where the offspring of the soul to be rebirthed can be felt kicking and screaming, demanding release, demanding the woman step into her darkness, to be seen by herself and transformed. The interior space of Black womanhood is the site of the shadow dive, the unrestricted swimming into one's own intangibles, the site where worries are housed, wounds are slit open, where residue of the wayward inches into the skin. The interior space of Black womanhood is where the healing takes place. It is the slip, the gap, the hold. It is the product of the wake and the where of wake work.⁴⁴⁸ It is where our inner Black girl lives, where from which she demands an answer from us, where she attempts to mold new meanings into our flesh as we let the lingering of her death drench us deeper in agony. It is where she welcomes us, where she demands her ultimatum- acknowledge me or you will suffer. So we suffer. Chronic stress/ fibroids/ somatization. *If you will not heal me I will harm your body.* She lives beneath the bones, beneath the flesh. She becomes the body that is home, the flesh that is only as safe as a house built with Black brick that never had none of our name on it.⁴⁴⁹

The interior site of Black womanhood is the site of affect, the location at which hurt haunts the everyday, where the palimpsestic patching on of *girl im okay* cuts deep into the pores of the preacher's wife, the pastor's daughter, the deputy's side piece, the healer, the mother, the wake worker who mourns twenty generations of loss.⁴⁵⁰ No love. No life. No living in the wake.⁴⁵¹ The interior space is where we feel this, where racism written on skin sinks into flesh and forces Black womenfolk to face it. It is where the sound *fuck my pain away* is screeched from, where formations of false hope are strung together too deep through cracks to combine and dwell.

It is the soul space where our selfhood dwells. The you you were before this world stripped you of you. The childhood dream. The imaginings. Before you knew you were Black and ugly and bound for death. Before you broke bread with the devil because pain was your only option. When pigtailed and pansies and parted braids and beaded bangs made life okay. *Was there ever a moment when she was snatched from you? Or were you born into never knowing her? How did you come into your self, you as a Black womanchild, who choked up resistance and raw emotion, who chalkboard scratched her way out of Heaven?*

Self space and astral plane exist at the same frequency. Friction between Britt Britt the Black girlchild and Grandmother Mamie never seem to show. She knows what she knows, one because of the other. Together they take me back home to me. Together they return me to a place of safety within my own bones.

...

"The past and the future merge to meet us here.

⁴⁴⁸ Sharp, *In the Wake*.

⁴⁴⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

⁴⁵⁰ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*.

⁴⁵¹ Sharp, *In the Wake*, 7.

*What luck. What a fuckin curse.*⁴⁵²

We Black girls be goin back in time to heal, because we understand palimpsest in our bodies. The physicality of our being is forced to know trauma of times we never lived in. Our bones and blood hold the particled stench of unhealed ancestors, and the scientific passing down of trauma sticks to us in our skin. The shrinking of telomeres is passed down in a tone of feelingless love from a mother, in the hyper responsibility to provide for the distant father.

We Black women be goin back into our girlhood to heal. Listenin' to Anita Baker and slippin into car rides with a Mama too depressed to notice that you are too. Slip into a memory of yellow stained walls and abandoned house you call home, and the haunting of unhealed spirits you felt at ten years old.

We Black girls be listenin' to Lemonade and know what Bey mean when she say what she say bout the past and the future merging. She know her mama trauma and her mama mama trauma meet at the edge of her skin and sink in to the eggs that birthed Blue. *With every girl child that is born, there is two generations she carries, the eggs of her daughters and the eggs of her daughters' daughters.* Precious say trauma be carried through them eggs, through them birthings. Beyoncé know it too. That's why she sing to Blue and sing to her mother and sing to her grandmother. Cause she understand the weight each generation carry for the other. "You look just like your mother. You look nothing like your mother."⁴⁵³ We wanna be everything and nothing like our mothers. We want her glow but not her weight. We want her light but not her pain. "I'm untangling these thoughts. [My mother] didn't get the opportunity to untangle hers. She was still too busy struggling for survival."⁴⁵⁴

We time traveling Black girls go back to a time when our grandmothers' grandmothers were raped to feel the pain they never could, because we know that trauma runs through bloodlines, because we refuse to pass down what we were given to our grandchildren. We be slippin back to Maafa⁴⁵⁵ for our healing. We be channelin' the ancestor of the crossing, whose name we won't never know and the ones who we were taught to not remember. We circle up at community time and play a track of jimbe tunes to channel they energy. We reenact to retrigger to retraumatize to remember with our bones what we been through. *Our ancestors make space for those who listen. For those who are ready. For those who think that life has more to give on another plane.*

esha dee + a healing hand

...

*[ancestral healing is]
knowing self through Spirit,
to become open to the movement of Spirit
in order to wrestle with the movement of history*

-M. Jacqui Alexander⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵² Beyoncé, "An everyday round the way imaginary homegirl," *Lemonade*.

⁴⁵³ Beyoncé, *Lemonade Visual Album* (Parkwood Entertainment & Columbia Records, 2016).

⁴⁵⁴ Hull, *Soul Talk*, 150.

⁴⁵⁵ Maafa is a term used to refer to the Trans Atlantic Middle Passage. Within my Bay Area based healing community, I participated in a Maafa ceremony, designed to guide descendants of enslavement through an experience that depicts various aspects of our ancestors' experience.

⁴⁵⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 294.

Esha Dee and me, and our fellow homegirl healing team, arrive at Akili, the community healing retreat that we were each invited into to hold space for intergenerational recovery. It is late, and there is a child who is suffering.

Esha Dee and me grope the palm of a precious fifteen-year-old brown child with deep sad eyelids that are centuries old. Whose pain is centuries old. Who goes back centuries just to see it, to heal it, to feel it. Jamie's fly ass mama makes sweet potioned love for her firstborn baby to sip through the ice that slides from Esha Dee's hand into thick, crusted lips. She say, *ice help calm the spasmed soul*. Jamie knows with a wounded body what bondage means. Jamie is crippled by that reality.

Jamie taught me to hold space by slippin' into a space I could not enter and trusting me to catch the frail and fragmented body I found slumped in the folding church chair. Esha Dee taught me to hold space for a young human who is hurting by doing what she does with her healing hands. By moving them up and down the back, by placing them at the base of the feet, by grounding a growing child into some soil to hold on to. No book coulda taught me. No text could ever lead what Spirit naturally reveals. This I learn at the first healing I ever seen, the first healing I ever had my hands in.

Esha Dee say, in a room full of crying teens, *this is healing. This is healthy. Let yourself come and cry, cry, cry*. We could not control the tears that came, one after the other, water spilled on the crecented curve of each cheek like a chilled cool rain upon concrete. *Do not wash it away with warm water from faucet sink. Let it flow, let it flow, let it flow*. We sit in it. Bathe in it. That flood of tears. We wash our wounds with them, tearing apart the parts of our pieces that are missin', the puzzle missin' pieces, the blurred vision, the vulneragouesness⁴⁵⁷ of admitting jealousy, guilt, shame, of being vulnerable to the world. We, with our brown-skinned pains, place palmed layings on of hands at the bare flesh of the feet, at the root of the chakra, we who know what never alone feels like, we who say "I am because we are" and mean it. We whose moment for transcendence is never a finite place. We place a palmed healing on the heart of the chakra of the girl who lost her mother. The girl who was just five years old, just five years old. The child whose mother was not there, was not there. We who know the stories of their lives in our own bodies. We grown-ups who cry with kids and call it healing. They teach me what it means to hold space, to be held in space, to be raw and unrestricted, to struggle in public, unjudged.

...

Jamie. Traced with fingers on the black of the lap of the Nike sweats when Esha Dee asked - *What is your name?* We smiled. The dark brown child with the heavy hard eyes with a twinkle of pain that was centuries old, that child was coming back to us. Sista Lynne saw Jamie first, fallin' forward, finna faint. The child grabbed her hand and she got the child a chair to sit. The child tried with the mind to trace the pain away, to race the chains away, the slave away, the stain away, the whip, the slit, the knife away. But the child bled and bled and bled. Black blood drippin' down the sag of the chin. Bare feet folded onto each other in the wind. Climbed out tint of window. Caught. Bought. Sold. Bought. Sold. Sanity never granted to the slave. The child trembles and shakes just to feel somethin'. Just to heal somethin. And then the child is still. Stands at the porch of a master. Stabs wrist. Walks away. Wakes up. Just another day. Plantation. Pain. Pain is Jamie's first, last, and middle name.

⁴⁵⁷ Mx T. Homegirl from round the way/

Nevermind that the child's heart and mind been on freedom since before a time that the birth of great great ancestor was sexed into being.

Esha Dee say Jamie is a *divine spirit having a human experience*. This, the child knows with body and with breath. The child remembers a time of the trade. The child's spirit recalls what the body never knew but always knew. The child who heals remembers.

Jamie jolts jittering body back and forth in that church chair placed at the corner of the place around the space that is held on behalf of the child who remembers, and all the other children who bleed. The child has left the body. This we know. We Black women who hold Black space for the Black child to recall, we witness the child return with spirit to an elsewhere steadily longed for. The spirit of the child is with mother, and her mother and her mother and her mother and her mother and her mother's mother and her mother's mother and all the mothers' mothers who rejoice at the rejoining. The child is unfree to move small feet stuffed in too tight air force ones. The child cannot force a smile. The child is not with us. We lost the child. For hours. Spirit roaming about the tombstone of the child's own ashes. Ashes. The child falls down. All falls down. Mother on top of mother. Life on top of life. Past on past on past. Sista Lynne and Sista B do not take turns holding the child, they hold the child together. Hold the child still. Pour rose water and rosemary and lavender sage into the ashes of that child. Selah asé the child. Hold the child. Cry cry cry till they can't no more.

Fifty moments later I see them. Set my hand on the shoulder of Sista Lynne, to support her as she supports the child. I breathe and pray and breathe and pray. She slips. Held on long as she could, but slipped. Somewhere else. Someplace like where the child went, but different. Her own mothers and mother's mothers and mother's mothers. I catch the hand of the child in the moment she releases to ensure the child never knew the air of an unheld hand in the moment of the slip. As Sista B caught Sista Lynne, I secretly judged her for not being strong enough to hold the child. For letting all of herself fall down. She did not save the child. Could I?

I caught the hand Sista Lynne had held for hours, the hand of brown skin and heavy-hearted eyes. The hand of centuries-old pain and centuries-old wisdom. The child, wading in the waters of embodied secrets, clenches my fingers like feeling a mother for the first time, like deep dark need need need to be held held held and never let go. I squeezed all the love my fingertips could muster into the life of that little hand. I held held held that child and did not let go.

Esha Dee held the left hand as I held the right. I watched what she did with the body of that child. Opened up palm. Pressed into each finger gently. Brushed hand with hers. *Keep the hands open as much as possible. Help the child remember how the body works*. What words the spirit knows, we could never. But we sit. Still. Lean into the child. Gently. Each time I try to open the hand to mimic Esha Dee the child clenches harder. I say I will not let go. The child leans deeper. Grasps me firmer. We have yet to hear the voice of the child. We watch the child return, to the self, to the space, to the room. Esha Dee guides with questions. *Can you feel your throat? Can you move your tongue?* The child responds and then doesn't. Returns and then doesn't. No words. Just eyes that come and go.

Finally, after fifty moments of this, after the sturdiness of a hand held, after a refusal of mint and welcoming of ice, Jamie speaks.

I lost my mother when I was seven years old. I have felt alone every day of my life since then. Until now. I never felt so safe as now. Because I know y'all really love me. We smile and smile and smile. The child has returned. The child has learned something of mothers.

Can you move your leg Esha Dee needs to know. The child says it hurts, hurts, hurts. That pain from that injury all those years ago, the one in the calf of the left leg, it's that pain all over again, and it hurts hurts hurts. Won't move. The leg won't move. Somatization. Esha Dee says it is somatization. The body remembering where it stores pain when the brain can't not protect the heart from feeling. When the choking of the throat can't hold the tears. Jamie sobbed and sobbed and choked up tears. Then stopped. Then was tellin' jokes. Then was back, for good. *No, no, don't take my shoes off, my feet stank! No, no, not my socks! My toes ugly!* We laughed and laughed and loved on that silly little self. Esha Dee said she needed the flesh of the feet to hold to the ground, to ground the child in a somewhere, in a plane that was located where we all were. *I ain't cried, I ain't cried, I ain't cried since the day my mama died.* That child's heart needed to remember.

I could not save Jamie, and neither could Esha Dee, and neither could Sista Lynne. I forgave her and I forgave myself for judging her, because the next day, holding the hand of a Black girlchild, I too / slipped. Triggered. By all the girls like Jamie. By all the tears of all the crying girlchilds inside me. Wondering why all the girls like me be suffering. Knowing the answer. Social death and the wake and all that shit. But to sit with its manifestations, that's heavy.

I see myself in my own eyes and I cry cry cry. I run to the grass with no socks and no shoes and I ball myself up in a fetal position and I cry, and I cry, and I cry. My body needed to remember where it stores the pain and how it knows to release.

malcriada

I am seventeen on this trip,
but I feel like a trillion.
Mostly because I don't die.
I keep coming back up for more life.
In grandmothers, and daughters,
and daughter's daughters.⁴⁵⁸

How do we center mourning and childhood in our healing? In our self care? In our self love? It is Lorraine Avila's very first stop on her Bay Area book tour and she asks the hard questions. She wrote a book about them bad Black Dominican girls learning to love they skin and the soul that simmers beneath. She birthed a book and named her *Malcriada*.

Malcriada - raised bad. Raised wrong. She explains the title of her text. The motherlessness of it. The inherent abandonment in it. The girls they ask *who raised you?* The girls with no home training. Them wayward lived⁴⁵⁹ round the way ghetto girls who do what they want and don't be caring who got what to say bout it. Them girls kinda like me.

⁴⁵⁸ Avila, *Malcriada and Other Stories*, 132.

⁴⁵⁹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

The first words on the first page of her first book - “Seventh grade . . . kicked out . . . middle school . . . for fighting.”⁴⁶⁰ I write in the margins with my lavender tip pen, *Same sis. Same.* She says she writes to “all the Malcriadas in [her],” all the bad Black girls who still live inside, dwelling audaciously at her interior. She says she writes for all the girls in her and all the girls in me and all the girls in all the women who just tryna get free. She writes “for us to mitigate the heavy.”⁴⁶¹

. . .

I tell her I have been sitting with her words. That she has held me without even knowing. That her centering of stories helped me clarify my centering of stories. That I, too, am a storyteller, and in her storytelling she helps me proclaim this. Helps me see how our stories are but spells, and how a spell is but a conjured up affirmation of desire. How the journal itself becomes a portal into an alternate universe, a site itself/ a space that holds multiple scapes and transports the writer to multiple spaces simultaneously. How the pen to the page takes us to all the pasts we once feared, how writing lets us be brave enough to make the trip. To childhood. To the childhoods of all the mothers who suffered. How adorning the page as one adorns the body as one adorns the home as one adorns the soul and all the spaces that the soul must know to be whole, how this process is in itself *healing*.

Her words help me see how the space on the page like the space on the skin like the space of interior intimacy becomes a site of aesthetic and linguistic refusal in its rawest form. To say and be that which is shameful and to feel unashamed. The site at which ball point pen meets line and a life is written without margins. Somethin like the site of the body marked up like a subway round MacArthur. Like the space between yo chest a blank canvas to trace some shit that's true to you. Like you could make a map back to you if you let them stories lead you. I tell her how her words make me write more, write the honesties I kept hidden beneath my breasts, covered in the sag of a nipple, too much sorrow to enter the heart. How I kept pain at an intimate distance. How I been working to bring it close. How her stories helped me do that.

I bathe myself in her words. The words she has written on the page. The stories of Malcriada. Her words make sensory things occur in me. Parts of my body that know trauma, know pain, know uncertainty, feel clarity in the way her words speak about curves and freedom. How her pen folds into the page in rhythmic motion, her terms and the tone of them, flipping themselves inside out. I am enamored by the way her words dance off of the page. I place her story into mine and see myself outside myself inside myself. I hear her healing in the tones of the tales she admits are rooted in truth. *Writers are the truthtellers of the family*, she says. I realize I am too.

She says,

A lot of our stories are like mercy and gritty and kinda like shameful, filled with shame in a way that, like, I don't feel like I've seen it be written, without it being like, written with grace, you know? Like, I think I have read stories about shit that has happened in the hood but it's like, the lens that people look at these stories through is like, um, this is urban lit . . . Yea, like, I wanted to write somethin' that was like urban lit and like grace to put together . . . Yes, grit and grace, like, let's examine our internal worlds.

⁴⁶⁰ Avila, *Malcriada and Other Stories*, 8.

⁴⁶¹ Avila, *Malcriada and Other Stories*, 8.

We speak of interior worlds. Of the entire world that wades in wombed waters that bends and breaks off key. In the meeting of our thighs there is a wisdom, a holding of eggs that only wombed women might know, a meeting of generations in the water that wades within the darkest, deepest parts of us. I see something familiar in her knowing. I see a Black girlchild who knows more than she can hold. I too felt like that once. I too still feel like that once in a while. Like my little fragile body may not be able to hold this. All this that spills from my lips. All this that overflows from my tongue. The top of my taste buds wonder if it would be sweeter to experience the grit of my truth, or to know how to pretend to be healed.

We both agree there is no healed, only healing, only healing, only hurting and then healing. Forever. We both have some sense of pain and it's inability to ever be erased. We both let the weight of wellness pull us in. Drag us into the depths of darkness. I do not disclose that I am still wading between the white tinted turquoise. She speaks of deep blues. Of dark purples. Some days magenta. But most days not. She say she did not choose this. I wonder when I will be as brave as her. She does not see her traveling to dark places as bravery, but as no other choice, as no other way. Lorraine desires life, even though all other forces fought to take her out. In her desire for life, I clarify my own. What woman might I hope to become?

We agree that there is no life fulfilled without the wandering into one's own soul. She believes in the wisdom and the curse. The passed down and the haunted. She believes in this, not metaphysically, but scientifically, intuition tells her, the little witch, *pequita bruja*, tells her. She cannot pretend to not know what she knows most intimately. I am reminded of Precious, who tells me we are healing for our mothers, that the bloodline is healed through us. Lorraine speaks of eggs and grandmothers, of birthing baby girlchild whose womb carries two generations of life. Speaks of the science of this. The facts of this. This real visceral thing we know in our souls. Somehow I am sensitive to this. Somehow I know this too. Something in my vagina moves, as if to demonstrate for me where and when and how this thing happens.

Where exactly is my womb? My body points to this space. The space on the page could not cure it. The therapy and sisterhood could not cure it. Only me. Only me. Only what I etch into my flesh. I could not find no other life but this. They sent for me here. *I am seventeen but really I am a trillion.* Same, sis. Same.

She say she was created without care. Egg and sperm forced together through the treacherous reality of survival. Shame carried her in the womb. Shame coated the cervix of her mother. Her father dispersed as wide as seas and trees in her homeland. The lady with the eight month wide belly begs death for a chance. Traffic does not take her. She lives. Her baby is born. They name her Malcriada.

Care was never given. The womb would not carry nothing but a birthright. Her birthright is being born into darkness. Her body has known since embryo that she would not be protected here. Her mother, a woman with a weight that may never be cured from wellness, would rather not say what is true. She, a truth teller of that which is centuries old, decides to do things differently. She says she did not choose. I tell her she did. She did not let death win. She and her mother both tried to let life take them out. She and her mother made meaning of life through the curse of death upon them. Malcriada, the Black girlchild of the man whose memory was lost. Lorraine lets herself heal with each word she speaks to me. There is healing in the truth of the trauma. Healing in saying what it is.

in the night

When it's late you grow closest to kindred spirits, those housed in bodies and those housed in the thickness of air. When it's dark outside the ancestors are waiting for you in the corners of the moon, motioning you forward with a flicker of fire dance and the summoning of shadow dive. Altar work happens late at night, when we can't be cool enough to pretend that we don't feel this. The darkness of the night makes you heal the wound you could not see in the light. Like glow in the dark spaceships at the meeting of yo soul, the subtlety of yo disdain becomes pain pain pain. Time slips into you, serving as a barrier to your facade. You reach for the mask you love to wear in the day, but you cannot hide in the darkness as you hide in the day. The light lets you pretend but the darkness will expose you. The light lets you blend in but the dark refuses your wish for opacity. The dark will snatch the soul from you just to mirror it back to you just to make sure you know who you are. The body might hide yo insides in the light, but in the dark yo flesh is see through.

We could hide in the daytime, in broad daylight before the street lights come on. We could hide behind the sun and pretend to be healing in her rays. We could hide within the vastness of an open road with only one way to go. But there is no way to hide from the hauntings in the night. No way to not be seen by yo deceased selves. By the many women who roam within you/ beneath you/ between you and yo'self.

In the night you see you most clearly. In the night yo people see you most clearly. In the night yo ancestors see you most clearly. In the night yo inner girl child screams for you to let her help you heal. The night is where you slip. The night is when time and space collide and you transcend to some elsewhere. In the night Mamie LaViolette places herself into the diaphragm of your eye and forces you to see yourself through her lens in your mirror. You cannot hide from the night. You cannot hide from yoself in the darkness, can't pretend to not see yoself musing out of ever green eyed precarity.

There is no way to be with a woman past midnight and not catch a glimpse of her soul. To sense the subtlety of her sorrow covered smile. I become that woman, and the many women in me whose wombs birth death in order for me to breathe, they each become that woman round midnight. Where we slip. How we slip. Who we slip into. It matters and then it doesn't. A motion towards something is only measured in its merging beyond infinity. We who cannot comprehend the churning of insides that take us to some place that is no longer here, we dare to dismiss ourselves as damsels. Crazy. Until we see a sister who slips too. Till we know the gut wrenching pain is our first step to healing.

the ocean know my name

During my healing journey in Oakland, I worked closely with an organization who hosts healing retreats for Black women. I served as a healing retreat facilitator and led various groups of women in nature based activities designed to help us connect more deeply with ourselves. This story is about the women I encountered during these retreats, including the women within myself.

...

Bobbie been nine women all at once since her baby died. *Gemini*, she say. So many sides she can't keep up. Can't know who gon come out at what time. Bobbie be a good time no matter which layer of gemini come out. She write a love letter to each self. About strength. About faith. About courage. You can't unsee Bobbie. Her big glowin' eyes, banged black wig, rich brown skin, smile so wide it extends her jaws, revealin' half her missin' teeth. *Hol' up, hol' up. Before we snap this photo lemme grab my teeth.* Reaches into breasts and snaps 'em in and smiles her wide great smile. You can't unhear Bobbie. *Homeless two years. I was homeless two years.* Rings like palimpsest of loss and longing. *I had a baby. My baby was fifteen years old at death. I did not work for five years.* In mourning. She was deep in morning. *First time I let my baby go to a party. Fight broke out. Shot and killed my baby. My only child. My baby.* Tears choke at the throat of all nine women inside her, and all nine women in our circle. We cannot unfeel Bobbie. We cannot unfeel her heartache. *This pinecone represents my baby.* Can't not see a pinecone and think of all nine sides of Bobbie collectively mourning the life they birthed. *A pine cone open up after it been closed. I left work five years but my baby opened me back up. Angry with God. I was angry with God. He make no mistakes but why he have to take my baby?*

Bobbie walk rollin hills with a stick. Say some woman told her that with every pound to the ground she channel her ancestors. And they guide her. Bobbie be wadin' in the waters of life and worshipping a God she can't see and mourning a child who can't breathe. I wonder if that thick long stick connect her with her child. If she ever seen her baby as an ancestor. Bobbie bring back a stick and a pine cone to the circle. The stick, she say, is strength. *Don carried my fat butt up and down these mountains last mornin', this mornin', and the next. I can't not be a survivor.*

Every mornin' I wake up and feel this thing in my gut. It ain't no physical pain. I can't quite explain it. But it's heart break, maybe, thats what my therapist say. A broken heart I been havin for sixteen years, ever since the day I lost my baby. That feeling in my gut, it still ain't never went away. Bobbie and her stick and her strength choose 7am for a hike up a hill with me and Tyesha, whose gold rimmed necklace of her dead baby shimmers in the sun rise.

She turns to her sister, places her hands in her hands, *I'm nine women at once and ion even know who comin out when. Don't pay me no mind. I love you. And this is Bobbie speaking most sincerely from my heart to yours. I appreciate you for being who you are.* They hug and we cry and feel the warmth of Bobbie that extends far beyond her own flesh. She calls me into the circle, place my hands in her hands, *I been through a lot. I been through a whole lot. But you let me cry on yo shoulder, And that mean a whole lot.* She hug me tight and I tell her of the love I feel in my gut.

She tells me Ima be her daughter. Say we gon go on hikes and talk about how she live in *Emeryville, Oakland, and Berkeley. Depending on which way you turn I'm in all three at once.* Palimpsest. Her body and her home and her life is palimpsest. Is the haunting of that which once was and is no longer. Yet still lingers. Still drifts in and out of consciousness. Bobbie live three places at once. Bobbie got nine faces at once. I am blessed to meet each side of her, each side of her that's healing.

...

All of the women say unprotected. Say branch off a leaf. Say no shelter. No sense of self or home. Say loose ends and no friends. Say unraveled, untangled, unbelonged. Mama made me stay when she would leave. Mama made me leave when she would stay. We Black girls who Mama made grow up too soon, 'cause she knew who Black girls had to be in the world - Black women too soon, Black women too soon. We lean into the memory of murky muddy childhood waters that ain't never make sense. The little girl still tryna grow in me resonates with every recounting of misfit, misread, misunderstood. This is the original pain.

Trees and leaves were her mother. Succulent her sister. Sage her most sincere friend. She grew in any condition but something inside her died each time she turned her head into the tumultuous home of her youth. Left her yearning for a tree to grow from, one that was more real than a dangling branch left bare, herself, floating with the wind. She knew how bare her heart, how raw her hurt, like loving oneself at the edge of the ocean. Like, what is that potion for acceptance? Learned to hold herself together while she falls apart. Learned to tape her own bandages on top of every scar.

Each woman, in her realness, becomes a metaphor. Each woman walks through woods and wanders into her past and does not pretend to be an adult. Each woman becomes a child again. Nature brings her home to herself. Each woman in her realness lets nature become a metaphor. The chain at the edge of the staircase. The closing up. The impossibility. Nature, in its realness, becomes a metaphor for sunflowered growth, for growing up too fast, for adolescent blues, lavenders, for being unprotected. Each woman becomes the woman to hold her, remembering herself in the waters. Each woman ends with the ocean. The window of what water made possible. The wave. The opening up of something. The somewhere else she might go. The loving oneself to the edge of the sea. The expansion. Nature, in its realness, becomes a remedy.

Nature nurtured us back to ourselves. Brought us into the stories we had forgotten and the stories we had never known, like grandmothers and “daughter’s daughters.”⁴⁶² We search for our mothers’ gardens. In the petal of a pansy we find our self. Remember grandmother healer, lavender and fish oil, aloe vera root. We open up our soul to the softness of salt-watered tide and mourn the loss of a love we never got to know. We find solace in that which Spirit makes possible. How we each can breathe and be, by the beach, by the tree, by the water. There is a balm here for us to hold on to, if we’d just reach out for it.

Somewhere by an oak tree, we transition back into ourselves. There is a message for us Black women here in these trees. She knows it. She touches the roots of it. Prays there. Levels herself in the dirt and plucks grass from the ground as she gages the space between this world and the next. She feels her God in the ground and she stays seated there. Something deep inside her says don’t move. Says stay still, right here, with hands in soiled rock. Remember of yourself what you have lost. This is the only way she know to breathe. In the sun. By the Bay. Present in this world and the next, the most human she ever felt. She hear wind move water. She feel at home in the world. We end by writing a love letter to self. She make origami folds out bright green construction paper. Each of her favorite numbers on each of the flaps. Open each flap to find a deeper interrogation of herself. Open again to find a deeper interrogation of herself. Layers. She say her healing is layers. Multifaceted. Many things at once. She understands interiority and multiplicity, deeply.

black (w)holes

me
a Black woman
who is a Black hole
holds everything close
that is sacred

⁴⁶² Avila, *Malcriada and Other Stories*.

me
a Black hole
who is a mother
to myself
holds close
everything that is
chaotic. floating.
like far off galaxies
that escape my
slit of wrist

me
a Black girl
gone wrong
holds close
the Black hole
of a womb
that ruptures
each time
i take me home

me
whose unhealed holes
made her not know
her
self
me
with each Black hole
in my heart
with each Black
scar that scrapes my throat

me
a Black girl
who is also
a Black hole
who be stuck
in the hold
of the wake⁴⁶³

me
who have no map
to make sense of

me
a whole ass

⁴⁶³ This poem was first published in botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*; Sharp, *In the Wake*.

Black girl womanchild⁴⁶⁴
womb of the wake
wanderin soul
me
who sense somethin
greater than flesh
in spirit

me
a collection
of Black holes
a curation
of the unclothed
a citation
of bare boned
naked
nude
unnurtured
holes
in every single
Black girl womanchild
i know

me
a mosaic of all the
unwhole folks
who claim Black and womb
by they surname
me
a compilation
of the catastrophe
an exhibition
of the catastrophic
Eurosphere
that forced me into
Black holes

me
who is hurtin
from all those holes

me
a skin cell
me
an inkwell⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary."

⁴⁶⁵ The Inkwell is a term that refers to the only portion of Martha's Vineyard where Black folks were allowed to be when the vacation spot was legally segregated. What was initially a derogatory term became a stomping grounds for Black creatives to convene and exchange their art. Donna-Marie

me
unwatered
me
a plucking
out a root
me
a floating
with no shoes
a feather
with no grounding

me
a moment of
collapse
in space/ time
a sinking
into my own
Black hole
with hopes
of comin back
whole

me
a hand full
of honey
a hair strand
of kink
a cloth patterned
with memory
a gourd
made for drinkin
a psalm and a jazz
made for thinkin

me
and all the things
i never knew
to love
float into the abyss of
me

me
and the combination
of every Black hole
i own

Peters, "Inked: Historic African-American Beach Site as Collective Memory and Group 'Third Place' Sociability on Martha's Vineyard," *Leisure Studies* 35 (2014): 187–199.

rupture
a myth of bliss
we become
unknown to ourselves
a satan waitin' to bloom

//

soon,
Black hole
you will learn
how you survived
how you climbed
yourself
outside yourself
right before your moon

soon,
Black girl,
you will learn
the love
of mystic darkness⁴⁶⁶
is what saved you
the sacred
of her covering
the care
of her hold
on you
how she suck
you in
make you stuck
with sin
just so you
could return
to you

soon,
you yearning
mourning
breathing
Black hole
you
Black womanchild
will thank
your womb

⁴⁶⁶ Imhotep and baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*, 17.

for rebirthing you⁴⁶⁷
for renaming
your Black hole
whole
holder
of all that is sacred
releaser
of all that has wings
that which can afford
to fly from you
and find home
in someone else's

soon,
my child,
you will see
that there could be
no growth
beyond Black holes
that journeying deeper
into some soil
is the only way
to work
with yo hands
to heal the holes
who summon you

soon,
someone will say
something about a hatred
for darkness
and you will understand it
as an anti-God
a hatred for holes
a refusing of whole⁴⁶⁸

soon,
you will realize
that Black girls
with holes
all learned
to disguise themselves
as you

soon,

⁴⁶⁷ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 270.

⁴⁶⁸ Imhotep and baker, *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas*.

you will see
in the learning
of your womb
that darkness
always brings truth

Part Five: The Departure



Figure 16. disjointed in 'The City, created by Ang(ela) Bey. (Angela Bey, Self-Portrait, May 2, 2019, www.blackwomxnhealing.com/blackgirlquarantine).

epilogue: crossin' the bridge

transitions at the corner

At the start of 2020, after one year of living in the back unit of the fourplex on the corner of MLK and MacArthur, we moved to the front unit of the fourplex. Moving from the back to the front felt like we was movin' on up, even if just a little bit. A little more space. A little more room. A little more lighting.

"Till the contractors came. Building up this big imposing structure that they claimed was for "low income renters," but we all knew the game. All of a sudden, that vacant lot to the right of the fourplex was becoming another gentrification venture. Another tall tower of apartments for tech folks to find rent cheaper than in the city and a smoother BART commute. They was taking up all the space, all the room, all the sun. Every single day, wake up to the noise. The sounds of drills and drones. Black men working for white man's vision of the city. And taking up all the space.

All of a sudden, we were no longer the house on the corner. You used to could turn the corner and our teal blue fourplex was the main thing you see. Now, here come these construction plans, piling

up concrete on top of dusted sand, making my homespace shrink. As the building grew taller, the sunlight grew dimmer, until all we could see out our living room window was the concrete walls of gentrification.

Just one month after the move, and our movin' on up to the front unit of the house didn't feel so exciting no more. We came for the views and the space and the sun but the new structure suffocated our home. It happened so abruptly, like one minute we could see all of MacArthur out our window and the next there was no sun.

Everyone had they own hopes for that corner. To my left, there was the 37MLK encampment, and to my right there was this structure. I make a sound map of the juxtaposition - the pounding, resounding noise of a constant humming, thudding, clanking, screeching that occurred daily on rotation from the heavy machinery responsible for the towering new apartments; and from the encampment, I hear the laughter, the deal-making, the shit-talking, and the dap-ups between Black folks struggling on the corner; and inside my home, I began to hear the deep longing for the silence and stillness that I wanted to make possible in my home, now that there was so much noise, all the time, and as times got harder, the sounds got louder and louder and louder.

I have always loved how Blackness sounds, especially outside Oakland windows. The Mary J and Alicia Keys blasting out parked car windows. The love. The warmth. The feeling. The I See You, Sis and Excuse Me, Miss with the stride and sway of Blackgirl slay. The Cadillacs and lowriders with engines vroom-vrooming down MLK. I loved hearing Slim and Rosa's voice out my window, asking me questions bout crochet yarn and leftover cans I ain't using to collect for the next pick-up round. I loved hearing the neighbor with the bonnet and the neighbor with the braids take turns sayin *hey baby* to everyman that walk by, just to make 'em uncomfortable. I loved laughing along from the corner of my couch, occasionally pokin' my head out with a wave. I loved the moments of lightheartedness, even in the midst of the pain. But I always hated that sound of struggle, as I assume all of us do, 'cuz don't we all just want to live well?

While 37MLK worked hard to remain a haven for Black women in need of home, times got hard and the heaviness of economic despair hit the corner even harder. Where it was once love and uplift in the sonic scape, it became harsh, heavy, unfriendly, even more im/possible than it was before.

The pandemic introduced new levels of desperation that made shit escalate quickly. It was always hard on the corner, always heavy in its own kind of way. But the pandemic took that struggle and amped it up at such a notch that the suffering seeped into deadly terrain at a pace that was exponential. There was death at the corner. And altars and prayers. Pregnant mother of three with nowhere to go. Elder, with her dog and her health complication, with shortness of breath and nowhere to go. Struggles with addiction. Disdain. Despair. Still hope, but just so much hardship. 'Cuz how you gone shelter in place when you ain't got no shelter? And how you gone mask up when you ain't got access to one? And how you gone survive when times was already so hard before this? And when the world get hit, the hood get hit harder, and the downturn of the economy made the corner more cautious and distrusting than I had ever seen it before. Folks start transitioning. Sounds of loving warmth transitioned into sounds of deprivation. The transaction. The exchange. The change. The strung out. The struggling. The hardship.

I'm moving to Antioch! No more living in my addiction! My neighbor shouted into the chaos. She was an unhoused neighbor who always exchanged compliments about braids and hair, nails and slays. I

would miss her around, but was glad for her to transition into an elsewhere that might give her more life than this. In that proclamation, she had mapped the geographic location of her addiction, grounded and rooted it in Oakland, and particularly at the corner. Antioch, a far-out suburb where Black folks had migrated in mass after being pushed out of the Town, represented, for her, a fresh start, a clean slate, and new possibilities. The corner had become a site of complex trauma, a locale of unsafety that she could no longer survive.

In mapping the soundscape of my doorstep, and the contrasts of my left and right, I come to understand MLK and MacArthur as a disheartening case study of gentrified Oakland in 2020. This corner, at this moment and time, was, in such a real sense, the epitome of the afterlife of slavery⁴⁶⁹, the outcome of displacement and disenfranchisement, the epilogue of urban renewal. The old-school bay-windowed Oakland house that had been chopped into four, where teachers and students lived in each unit. The encampment, where Black folks who used to live inside these houses are now living unhoused. And the high-rise apartments, with the stale stone-faced aesthetics, marketing to the techies as the most convenient way to get into The City from The Town. Each direction pointing to insecurity, instability, inability to be well.

the back stairs of the fourplex

As much as I loved the space and the room in the new apartment, I missed the backstairs of the back unit so much. Back there, I could be outside in hiding. I could catch my sun in peace. In the front unit, I felt so exposed, so known, so unable to hideaway.

The back stayed vacant for a while, so I'd sneak back over to my sacred steps and do my mourning rituals in private. Until, one day, to my surprise, two Black women, round my age, moved into our old home. It was our very first time having neighbors that were Black and not unhoused. However, it became clear that they, too, were housing insecure, just one check away from uncertainty.

Since the inside of the new home had start feeling dark and dim, and I no longer had access to those back stairs, I'd started sittin' on the front stoop in the mornings. I had to curate a new ritual with my inner[blackgirl]child,⁴⁷⁰ but we grew to love it. We would color and draw and paint and play and soak up the rays of the sun. Robe on. Shoes off. Free as we wanna be. Playing in rocks with no shoes, no socks. And the whole entire stoop would be our playground. We would pick up shimmery stones from the gravel of the driveway and place them in cross-shape formations, welcoming our gods into our homes. We would sing songs and play Cleo Sol from the speaker and channel ancestral energies from the ether. And even with all that noise, the noise from the left and the noise to the right, we made that stoop stretch, we made space.

But as time went by, it became more and more clear by the day just how unsafe it was to be outside, so exposed right across from that corner. It was not safe to do the things we used to do on the back steps. We were in the front unit now, and that stoop was hypervisible to the corner, and the corner was more intense than it had been before, so we lost that access to sun and bliss and carefree mornings because of the conditions that produced the corner.

⁴⁶⁹ Hartman, *Lose your mother*.

⁴⁷⁰ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

I became jealous of the women with keys to my old home. I wanted those steps again. I wanted that secret, that privacy. A space where I could be free in the sun but hidden still, where the men on the corner could not see me. I longed for that seclusion. I wondered if those women would use them steps, or just run down 'em in a rush, with no reverence. I wondered if they'd enter them stairs like a portal, how I did, if they'd let ancestors come and meet them there, between the wood and paint, between the pages of their diaries, I wondered if they'd conjure up art and life, if they'd use the stairs to gain access to the whispers and the wisdoms of the sun.

And I wondered if my house was still as sacred a space as it had been to me, even though I no longer lived there. Did the walls still hold the energy of my grandmother, who visited me at the altar I had curated in her name? Did the tub still stain with holy oil I poured for my spiritual cleanse? Did the roof still smell of lavender and sage, did the floors still speak like they used to? I wondered what would the home mean to the girls who moved in after me, and I desired to still know that space, in some way, because it had once meant so much to me. It wasn't much, and much smaller than the front, but I had made it something special, I made a space that meant something sacred, and I missed it so so much.

In the days before it got so unsafe that I released my morning ritual on the stoop, I would greet the new neighbors as they'd walk by, between rock formations and color pencil scratchings, with a wave and a chat and "I See You, Sis, I'm so glad y'all are here."

A few months after their move, Juliette came out in some fresh new braids. "Girrrrl, who did your 'do?" She told me she was a stylist, strugglin, tryna make some extra cash to cover rent. I say, "hook me up, sis, please!" We schedule an appointment for the back stairs, *because, COVID*.

What she does not know is that them stairs was my sanctuary for three hundred and sixty-five whole days. To return to them steps for one last time, and to have my hair braided in that sacred spot, was a reclamation of sorts for me. It was a return to my ancestral portal, a reconnecting with the energies that met me there, in the wear and tear of that landing. It was a chance to make art again, in the place that birthed my art journaling praxis, only this time, instead of making art on the page, I was gettin' to make art on top of my head, with a homegirl that became a sister.

It was the power of them steps, and the ethic of The Town, that allowed our souls to open up. And as with every hair appointment I ever had in Oakland, it was a moment of interior encounter, an affirmation of hair growth, soul growth, whole growth, even in the midst of uncertainty. *Girl, when we first moved in, I seen you out on that stoop, shoes off and making shapes outta rocks, and I was like, yea, she on her Oakland girl shit, forreal.* We laughed about the sight of a small Black woman doing childish things in the sun. "Yea girl, that's me. That's just how I be gettin' free. Oakland really did teach me." We talked about migrations, about movement from here to there, about Oakland and the shifts, how quickly shit went left. We talked about the crown, the relationship between root and seed. She taught me how to care for my hair/ my braids/ my scalp, and in turn, how to care for my soul/ my spirit/ my self. She taught me to braid it myself, how to part and plat and weave. She told me my hair was beautiful - my kinks, naps, curls and shrinkage, sacred in all of it's glory. And her hands were soft and her dreams were big and I felt so safe, so home.

I tell her lately my home ain't been feeling so safe. I tell her Oakland been making me sad and blue as she braids blue weave into my scalp. I tell her how the colors I choose to place in my hair always

be tied to my mood, and lately I been feeling *real blue, real blue* like a Blackgirl with a Bluesoul⁴⁷¹, ‘cuz 2020 got us hurtin’. I tell her all the ways I am hurting, being here, being scared, seeing my people hurtin’ so deep.

on safety

i loved
living in
oakland

so much

but it got
dangerous
after covid

more
dangerous
than it
had ever
been
since
moving
on my
block

.

we all
deserve
safe
housing
my
neighbors
ain’t got
access
to safe
housing

the conditions
that force
the men
into danger
are my enemy

my neighbors

⁴⁷¹ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

who are men
who cause harm
they
are not
my enemy

we all
deserve
these
streets
to be
more
clean
more
sane
more
safe

.

my inner
child ain't
safe here
no more

i draw
and color
and paint
on the
stoop
and the
man
put his
hand
on the
gate
by my
stoop
he say
hey
you
know
i know
where
you
live
as if
204

he plans
to come
harm me

he grab
the lady
who live
at the
halfway
house
round
the corner

he say
bitch
you
lucky
all these
people
around

the white
people
with clip
boards
and
pen pads
take notes
about
the worth
of the
property
that i
live on

take note
of the
worth
of his
grandmother's
home, that
capitalism
stole. and

i sit
on the
stoop
with

the girl
inside
of me
drawing
painting
coloring
blue
making
our own
entire
elsewhere

sprawled
out
'cross this
whole
entire
stoop

until the
clink
clink
clank
of brick
and mortar
become
too loud
to breathe

and the
scratch
scratch
scratch
of the pen
on the pad
become too
too erie to
breathe

as the
shriek
shriek
scream
of the
woman
with the
bonnet
whose

hands
cling to
grocery
bags of
molded
bread
and
rotten
fruit

her
shoes
got two
holes in
the corner
and her shirt
got two
holes on the
side. and
the man
with his
hand
on my
gate
comes
toward
this way

BITCH
YOU LUCKY
ALL THESE
FUCKING
PEOPLE IS
AROUND

and she
shriek
shriek
scream

HELP!
SOMEBODY

HELP ME

PLEASE

and the
five white
people
who own
this home
who are
the truest
criminals
whose
capitalism
made this
scene
whose
callous
heartless
refusal
to witness
Black life
led this
woman
and this man
to Black
social death⁴⁷²
at the
base
of my
doorstep

the five
white people
with they
pens and
they pads
pretend
that this
woman
is not
screaming

i tuck my
innerchild

⁴⁷² Sexton, "Time, Temporality and Violence in the International."

inside my
heart. like
a locket
with a
safety
and a
key

we just
want
to live
where
it is
safe
to sit
outside
my home

i go
to the
woman
and the
man
walks
away

she say
please
please
can you
help me
please
but i
feel
powerless,
too

i open
my gate
and let
her in

he watches
me watch
him leave
looking
back with
familiar

eyes, like
i will be
watched
now, too

he is the
man who
stands
on the
corner
he is
the man
who knows
where i
live

it is on
this day
that i
agree
to the
move

i hide
inside
my
home
for
seventeen
days
straight

i never
ride the
bus
again

i become
so scared
of men
who harm
women
who are
vulnerable
i become
so scared
when i
put myself

in danger
for helping
a woman
in need
when
the
white people
act like she's
invisible

/

to be
Black and
woman
and living
in this
rupture
is to
be in
perpetual
fear
all the
time

/

my partner
got a new
gig, cross
the bridge

it is time
to move,
for his
commute

it has been
three hundred
and sixty-five
days of seeing
the corner
at my stoop
it is time
for us
to move

...

What does safety mean to the Blackgirl who is suffering? What does safety mean in the midst of precarity? Can a soul be safe amidst material harm? Can a spirit be safe in precarity?

And why we always tell each other “Be careful,” even more frequently than we used to, like we could control what some man choose to desire with his semen, with his cum, with his penis, like we could control what do or don’t come to our bodies, like we could control how care full or care less some man choose to be with his hands. How come we tell each other to be care full when we facing this care less world, as though we would stop it from harming us?

...

At the front unit’s final slumber party, me and my homegirls make a sister-circle in my living room and sigh a sigh of relief to feel some glimpse of some safety in each other. We were safe that night, in some ways, in many ways, even with the corner gettin lit like it do, even with the whispered sounds of the trade out the window. Even with the men who hopped the fence to hotbox the brand new apartments that hadn’t opened up for rent yet. Even with the sirens and the uncertainty of whether or not it was gunshots or fireworks. We say, we are safe, because we are with each other. But are we, are we *really*?

My homegirl who live some BART stops away say when her and her boo walk round her way, the men say shit like, “I could take yo girl away,” like queer Black woman can’t have her boo for herself, like some man always come and try her. We talk about how heartbreaking it is that we can’t even take walks for morning ritual. That gym be way too crowded and unsafe and outside on the street even the concrete knows that the men approach in low dark tones and make women who love women feel like love don’t exist between them, like some strange man is more deserving of knowing that body than she.

We each take turns talkin bout how hard it be, to love our people and love our healing and hate how hard it be to live with our people when our people be struggling how we do. With patriarchy. Dispossession. Precarity. With addiction. With the manifestations of the dispossessions we been suffering from for four hundred plus years. And how sometimes we just wanna know bliss, and could we ever get that chance, that choice, that freedom?

My homegirl say she can’t take the weight of Oakland no more. Say sometimes she gotta cross the bridge just to feel like sunshine. Say since the pandemic it just got so heavy, say it don’t even feel like pandemic in San Francisco. *It’s like, over there, they still get to know bliss.* But Oakland got hit, got hit real hard, and it ain’t no real way to even hide it or deny it, because it lingers, ongoing, at yo doorstep.

And the San Francisco we speak of is not Sunnydale’s San Francisco. Is not the side of the city that ain’t so sunny⁴⁷³, where the majority of the three percent of Black folks who still left in the city are cramped up in crowded projects and homes.⁴⁷⁴ Potrero Hill. Oakdale. Bay View. Hunters Point. Concentrated in projects, reppin’ towers that ain’t standing⁴⁷⁵. Geneva Towers, the towers Lady V helped tear down on her first construction job in ‘98. This San Francisco, the city under the city, is

⁴⁷³ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*; Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

⁴⁷⁴ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*; Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

⁴⁷⁵ Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*; Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary.”

not the city we refer to when we say that the other side of The Bay ain't heavy. 'Cuz this side of San Francisco be just as heavy as the corner I am moving from, just as heavy as East Oakland. The San Francisco we exit and enter for leisure, for pleasure, for play, in our privilege as homegirls transitioning to the other side of housing insecurity's spectrum, is not the San Francisco my husband's students know - a San Francisco of enclosure⁴⁷⁶, a cartography of im/possibility, a suffocating of scenic routes, an 8 bus away from tragedy.⁴⁷⁷ Me and my homegirls struggle to make peace with the lack of Blackness in the places that bring us peace - the pier, the beach, the ocean - where the white folks look at you like you ain't pose to be here, like you ain't worthy of knowing this peace in the first place, 'cuz the only place they relegate Blackness is the projects that's out of view. The unsafety of Black San Francisco, in opposition to the bliss of the San Francisco my homegirls and me attempt to escape to, illustrate the divide of the bridge, the space crossing between the crossing, and the precarity the lingers on both sides.

I guess I believed that the healing we make might make us a little more safe. But maybe I was wrong all along. Maybe the wake is just too grave. But those moments of intimacy mean something, don't they? Maybe they gave us some glimpse of how it might feel if we ever had the luxury of *safe*?

Maybe the truth is that it was never safe. It was never really *actually* safe. To be Black and woman in Oakland, living where we lived and how we lived in 2020. Black women made it feel so safe in subtle moments of affirmation and encounter. But the heavy heartbreaking unshakable truth is that it was never really safe. From men who say they know where you live, who remind you of their power to harm you. Who come to the front of your door when you are foolish enough to unlock it just for a moment. Who follow you home from a run. Who tell you to watch where you sleep.

The truth is that maybe all the safety I imagined was an illusion of childish daydreams. A bubble of translucent naivety filtered through my fairytale of survival. But maybe that was never safety at all, maybe it was more so that the site of sisterhood made that other world of safety more possible. But maybe the truth is that I never even lived in it to begin with, that none of us ever really had that.

And we, the three of us at this slumber party finale, we were the ones with degrees of choice, with the chance to maybe leave if we want to. We are the ones with roofs overhead, who could never know unsafety like Slim. But it *still* was not safe, not for us, not for Rosa, not for Slim. And the degrees of safety vary gravely, the levels of harm that could come, and the capacity to receive support, vary greatly. If safety exists on a spectrum, then I am much more safe than the woman who had no gate to duck off into. I am much more safe than the women who have no roof and no room. Who struggle daily to locate food and shoes, who got stuff they love that they have no place for. Their unsafety, their precarity, heightened intensely by layered precarity.

transitions 'cross the bridge

When I drive to my new home for the first time, I drive through Sunnydale and feel like I went back in space and time. All of a sudden, I was in the deep dark South, in the Georgia apartments my cousins grew up in, at my Auntie's projects at the corner of College Park, at my mother's grandmother's home. How did San Francisco become Georgia so quickly, so sprawled and forgotten? In just three minutes the scenery shifted from city towers to the reppin' and the haunting

⁴⁷⁶ Woods, *Development Arrested*.

⁴⁷⁷ ward, "Classroom as Quilombo."

of Geneva towers to the peace and calm of McLaren Park. And that is where I arrive at my doorstep. At that part of Geneva's intersection that gets quiet and calm and still.

Oakland, and the corner of MLK and MacArthur, could never be that gift for me. It is unsafe because the state curates death scapes onto concrete marked urban and Black and disposable. Scapes of social death and im/possibility. It is unsafe because cycles of drugs and addiction rooted in the need for survival. It is unsafe because pimpin' gave men some way to feel like Gods. It is unsafe because COVID expanded the need for stability. Because the economy crashed and the street corners got active. And I felt trapped inside with no room to breathe.

My precious inner[blackgirl]child⁴⁷⁸ had looked to me to mother her now, to keep her safe in all the ways I never knew how, in all the ways this world never could. This, too, was part of my healing.

In Oakland, she'd sit on the stoop and doodle in daisy dukes and not even noticin' the corner. A woman is selling sex without consent at the corner of our street and she does not even notice. She is still connected to the blissful ignorance of youth. She is the age I was before I knew to sense danger. The age of the pureness of my youth. We, Black women, be grown too soon, but before we got grown, there was youth.⁴⁷⁹ That age of growing up too soon, it varies for each of us. Most of us can't even recall that age, most of us was born vigilant, came out the womb distrusting. I was a sheltered girl gullible enough to believe that I was safe even when I wasn't. That little girl, age six or seven, she wants to dance in the street. Play hopscotch and double dutch, even if just in her imaginary. I tell her it ain't safe and she gets so so afraid. She cheers at the news of the move, she knows it will be safer at our new home in San Francisco.

Does innocence only have to be synonymous with ignorance? Can't we be wise and aware and still worthy of the feeling that we deserve this bliss even if we ain't got access to it?

...

It was not until I moved across the bridge that I understood what I had been missing. Not until my privilege and position allowed me to shift my life towards San Francisco, to a quiet part of the city, a place to lay my head and read books about the place I left behind.

And all the people and all the places I left behind still haunt me in my peace and haunt me in my sleep. *How dare you walk away from the only city that taught you how to love you, for a damn near no Black wack ass city that's way too crowded to think.* When I said San Francisco, it cut deep into my tongue. Tasted like the cuss word you wasn't never pose to say around yo Mama. And I know, I know that it means different things to different people. That Black folks be reppin' Frisco in they own way. That them projects down the hill from my home marked Sunnysdale but it don't be too sunny. That it be hella Black folks out there, too.

But to me, the Black women healing who Oakland birthed and adopted, saying San Francisco felt like blasphemy. Like I sold out, traded, faked, fumbled. Like I left because I could and ain't give a fuck 'bout those who couldn't.

⁴⁷⁸ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child.*

⁴⁷⁹ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child.*

Even though I know that is not true.

I hated to admit it, but my inner[blackgirl]child⁴⁸⁰ loves her new home in San Francisco, because she feels so so safe to play here. There is no man saying threats to her in passing. There is no harm at the stoop. We can color and paint and draw and think and not worry about who will harm us. And don't every Black woman's inner[blackgirl]child want to live somewhere safe and free? Don't we all deserve that peace?

This is how it feels to be in privilege, to have options. To be financially stable enough to take a chance on The City when COVID caused them prices to drop, when San Francisco rents went low like Oakland, and I got a second job, and suddenly the money ain't looking as funny as it used to. I feel that survivors guilt, about being the one who got to leave the neighborhood I grew to call home. Because my boo got a gig out South Bay. Because we made just barely enough to scrape together to afford some SF rent. Because COVID made that move a possibility - before that ain't no way we woulda been able to even dream of living somewhere safe in San Francisco. But all of a sudden The City was feasible, and all of a sudden it made sense to make that the shift. Right in time. Right as the pandemic exacerbated the danger and the trauma of The Town. Right as it got so bad that I couldn't even sit on my front porch no more. Right as The City became somewhat semi-affordable for me.

And part of me feel like fuck my privileged problems. But part of me feel like these problems tell me something. About my project. About my healing. About myself.

Don't none of us really wanna be there, in that, in the harm that the trauma leave behind. We would love to be in Oakland, Black and free and safe. This is just not always an option, especially at the corner of the house I once called home.

And because I got a man I got options. And because I got a plan to get this PhD, I got options. And my heart hurt deep for my folks who ain't got options. For all those who made this research possible, whose stories make it possible for me to get this degree, but who still be stuck with no options. And here I am, leaving them behind. To leave behind is a harsh thing to say, but that is how it feels. I am still in deep community. But I no longer *live* in the community I am deeply a part of and that fracture hurts more than I realize, more than I am willing to reckon with, because both things are true at once.

I miss Oakland. I miss Black people. I miss my people. My community. I do not miss unsafety. I do not miss never having the freedom to walk alone. I do not miss that feeling of needing my man each time I leave my home.

...

In San Francisco, on the corner where we live, right at the edge of Daly City, it feels safe to stay and play and run, it feels safe to do my healing. Each morning we wake up and go walking across the street, it is an affirmation of safety. Never in my life have I had access to this sort of safety. And the truth is I am never truly safe here either and that is a truth I know. And yet, to walk through the park alone. To move after dark alone. And to know that it is so much safer than it's even been, that right there is a gift, a wish, a privilege.

⁴⁸⁰ botts-ward, *mourning my inner[blackgirl]child*.

In my corner of The City, I feel safe yet invisible. There is no *I See You, Sis*, yet there is also no heightened feelings of danger. Here, I feel far more safe from physical harm than I ever did in Oakland. However, the danger of disbelonging is also lingering. I do not give myself the space to feel that too. I feel more assured that no physical harm will come to me. But that racism, the look and the star and the eyes that say you do not belong here, that is a type of violence too. That is a sort of spiritual unsafety I do not validate for myself as harm.

I wonder why I enter twenty-nine feeling so damn insecure. I realize how much it's impacted me, that I have no Black women to see and be seen by, that there is no reflection of myself here. My culture. My hair. My heritage. I am not reminded here of the things that I learned to love about me. And that is impacting my ability to feel beautiful and confident and sure of myself.

There was one day when I was sittin' on my porch feelin' all uncertain about my 'fro, and four Black women rolled down car doors at once screaming, "Yaaaasssss haaairrrrrr! We see you froooo!" I shed a lil thug tear, remembering how normal of an encounter that would have been in Oakland, how foreign a feeling it was out here, and how healing it was to receive even just a glimpse of what my spirit had been craving. It happened once, and never again, and it is the round the way encounter I still cling to. It is the one moment, other than the head nod at Popeyes, that I recall feeling seen in this city.

I only ever meet Black folks at Popeyes. It is the one place I am guaranteed to see at least one other Black person, hear the sound of soul food jazz, and smell the crispy chicken of my childhood. And in my first few months of settling in, there was one sis in front of me with some hella fly kicks and I complimented her and we got to talkin'. I was all lit up inside just to have the exchange, and then suddenly I found myself judging myself for how pathetic I felt, that this Popeyes encounter meant way too much to me. But I knew this was my one dose of Blackgirl realness that I would get for a while, so I had to soak it all up.

She tell me that we used to be here. That it used to be 25% of us but now it's down to 3. Harlem of the West⁴⁸¹ bulldozed by techies and gentrification. Eminent domain.⁴⁸² The destruction of Blackness and property. The uprooting of an entire community. The death of an era of freedom.

I have come to the realization that I am closer to the trees than I am to the people in my neighborhood. The trees are my neighbors and my friends. The people remain strange and distant and far away. The trees tell me things that only God and ancestors know. They see me. Love me. Affirm me. I am grateful for my tree friends. How my ancestors whisper messages to me through them. How they are, as Neesh say, ancestors themselves, who protect me and hold me close even in the midst of my discomfort. I am grateful for the lullaby of lavender. For the pinks and purples of the sunset. For the rolling hills and rolling planes. For the person I meet in the morning, a me that I feel proud of, a girl grounded in her womanhood. I am grateful that all the girls in me feel safe here, and that they make friends and family of nature and wind. The rocks help me to remember. My self. My life. My past. The parts of me that get mapped onto this lifetime. The nature becomes the new healing community that I long for. And yet, I wish there were humans to reflect me here, too.

⁴⁸¹ Elizabeth Epin and Lewis Watts, *Harlem of the West - The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era* (Chronicle Books, 2005).

⁴⁸² Epin and Watts, *Harlem of the West*.

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After months of not having my hair did, because all my braiders are too far away and I still ain't located a beauty supply, I finally muster up the strength to travel two miles to get to the store I think might meet my needs. On the whole entire walk over, I am skeptical. First of all, I am irritated that the beauty supply is a whole hour long walk away. Like, why it ain't nowhere else to get some horse hair round this way? Why it ain't no closer beauty supplies? These are the moments when I get to missin' Oakland the most. Also, what they even gon have there? Ain't no way to really know from a Google search how good a hood beauty supply gon be. What if I walk all this way and they don't even have the colored hair that I came for?

On my way, I pass June Jordan highschool. I smile. I been saying I wanted to go by there. As I look up at the mural of the melanated faces, I am reminded that there is still culture and community and care in The City, I jus ain't made space and time to find it. I'm still new here. I'm still finding my way around this way. I hear myself tell myself outloud, *Black folks don't come to yo doorstep like they did in The Town, but they here. You just gotta leave yo doorstep to find 'em.* I feel hopeful for the ancestral reminders that reflections of me are out here too. June. A professor of Black Feminism and Poetry in the department where I'm earning this PhD. Transitioned in 2002. Too young. Too Black. Too woman. My reminder to keep on healing. June, the whole entire department doing lectures in your name all year and when I sat beneath the moon I was reminded of the poet that you helped me bring me back to. June. They got a whole entire school named after you right around my way. I should go. I should see. I should dream with them students who paintin' pretty murals in yo name.

As I turn from the corner of the campus and head further down McLaren Park towards Bacon, I feel a new sense of pride and connection to The City. I feel some sense of hope that maybe, just maybe, I can find me some folks here after all.

And as soon as I stepped foot into the beauty supply, I feel like all the round the way Blackgirl goddesses summoned me forth into hood girl ritual and welcomed me back home. They had all the shit that I like. Lashes. Nails. Glitter for the eyes. Lip gloss that get you extra shiny. Shimmer for yo toes. Nose rings. Ballies. Beads. Bracelets. Scrunchies. The works! As I wandered through the earring isle, I wondered if God answered ghetto prayers of round the way girls in beauty supplies. I was praying most of all that they had clip on earrings, the big bold gold ones with extra shine, since my ear hole split in '09. And soon as I asked the question, God answered my prayers with a whole entire row of gold clip ons. I confirmed that between June Jordan High and them earrings I loved, God was doing Her thing for me this makeshift Sunday mornin'!

There was a Blackgirl with a bold smile and a shiny puff coat jacket that looked just like the one I had in fifth grade. She was so excited to tell me that she got it for her birthday. With her warm and eager smile, she followed me around the store, pockin' her head out of each aisle as though we were playing a game of hide and seek that I was not made aware of. To her left was an older woman with two of her grandkids, one of whom was a teenage Blackgirl with a big beautiful 'fro and an all blue jumpsuit and some slide on slippers to match. They smiled and head-nodded as we brushed past each other on the way to head scarves and durags. There was a woman with a cheetah-print bonnet covering some lemonade cornrow braids, a set of sisters shopping for studded fake diamonds and lash glue, a group of homegirls searching for wig caps and edge control, and a family of five with a mama asking her daughter, *what kinda beads I'm bout to put on yo braids?* And there was quite the assortment to choose from. I heart Jesus beads. Smiley face beads. Flower shaped beads. Pink beads.

Purple beads. Brown beads. Gold beads. This beauty supply had it all! It was small and cramped and hot and tight, yet tender and soothing and warming. I had never seen so many Blackgirls in one place in The City. And even though every other step was a scuse me, my bad, I'm sorry, 'cuz them isles was so narrow that we couldn't move from ballies to beads without bumpin' into somebody, it was such a beautiful experience.

My inner teen was shook by the fact that all her favorite songs from seventh grade was playin' on the SF oldies station that the store owner had blasting through the speakers of a tiny CD player placed on the top of the earrings display. *Dang, we really that old?* Boys to Men. B2K. Brandy. Maya. Monica. Keisha. Alicia. Ashanti. Ameri. These was the songs we'd hear at the beauty supply round bestie Jita's old way, where we'd meet up after class and cop matching extra large silver shined hoops with aquarius written in the middle. Where we'd get that Pro Style and Jam Gel, (before they started makin' Eco Style and Edge control) with the extra hard wooden brush, and a pair of Chinese slippers, then go back to her place bumpin' them same tunes, swirling swoops and squiggles on top of each other's foreheads. Steppin' into that beauty supply, I was transported back to 2005, to Philadelphia, to the beauty supplies of my youth. It was the first time I felt at home in San Francisco since the last time I made a trip to Popeyes.

Y'all got the extra big ballies? I asked as I was winding down my shopping spree with a cart overflowing with goodies. The man behind the counter looked confused. I forgot that quick that I wasn't in Philly, and quickly found my way back to San Francisco. *My bad, the knockers.* He smiled, nodded and pointed up. Above my head was hella different shades of pink and my inner teen giggled and geeked. This was exactly what we needed to set the look off just right. I had just got the glitter gold extra long gaudy hot pink nails and I needed the hair to match. And this beauty supply was like a candy store to all the Blackgirls in me, it was like being in Michaels' crochet aisle and finding all my favorite colors, it was like I finally got a glimpse of what I been missing all this time.

As I waited in the extra long line to get rung up, I asked homegirl in front of me, "Is this like the only beauty supply in The City? Like, is there others with more shoes and bags and shit? I just moved up around here and still tryna find my way." *Well, you got the one on third street, and then the one on Fillmo', and yea, they proli do got a lil bit more, but I jus be comin here cuz it be more calm. Like, them other ones, it be real active outside. You know, niggas hangin' out front and shit.* I nodded. It was clear that, although this beauty supply ain't have the bags and shoes, it was clearly the safest place in The City to get some weave. She turns her head to greet the folks who just entered. *Hey girl, how y'all been doing? How is so and so, and her Mama?* It was clear that this beauty supply was a site of round the way convening for the Black folks still left in The City. Soon after this exchange, a man walks in with mini locs and golden grills. *Where you been? Dang! Ain't nobody seen you in a minute.* She says as she reaches over to hug him. *I just got out.* He nods when she says, *Makes sense. Well, did you know that so and so sister just died? And they just had the funeral the other day.* It was clear that he had not known. He had known that the sister of the sister had died, but not that the other sister had died, not that two sisters in the same family had died around the same time. And there was a heaviness that mapped itself onto the beauty supply. Suddenly the beads and ballies held weight. Had stakes. Suddenly San Francisco felt as heavy as Oakland had been, and I knew that death and Blackness lingered here too.

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The drive across the bridge be heavy. Arriving to The Town from The City be heavy. There is a looming weight in the air here, of despair and desperation. The folks in The Town gone let you

know how they struggle - through mural, through dance, through song. Sometimes that struggle is glorious but most times it really just hurts. We celebrate, we dance, we find joy. And yet, that burden persists. That foot don't lift up off yo neck. And we be feeling so weighed down coming round here now. I never even noticed how heavy it was here until I left. And I love it so much but I left. I lost and I gained in that transition.

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for slim

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In the final days of dissertation writing, I learned that Slim had died. I threw my phone across the room and said, no no no. I wanted to be in denial about the facts. I wanted to pretend it was not true.

Slim had died a month after I moved and I didn't find out until months later. Had I been there, at my Oakland home, as her neighbor, I could have at least been notified of her passing. By an in passing encounter with other residents, or an altar at the corner. I could have attended the community service, the collective mourning of her. But I had left and got busy and lost touch, and she had passed and I never got to say thank you, in the ways I would have wanted.

She would introduce me to folks at the Bible study like, "She gone be a professor!" She believed in me. She encouraged me. She loved on me like a mother.

How do you process that a research participant has passed before the closing of the project? How do you process that a favorite neighbor, a dearest friend, has transitioned to the other realm? I do not know what to do with these feelings. I do not know how to heal. I am hurting, because the words on this page could not save her, could not change her condition, could not keep her alive, and the time I spent theorizing her life was the time she spent surviving it. The shame comes up, that I ain't do enough, but I am no one's God. I guess I just wish there was more I could do for the woman who changed my life. More I could say to convey to her how much she meant to me.

Slim told me not to question God, but God I got questions. Why she had to go out like that? Neglected and disrespected and uncared for like that? Wasn't her life worth more than that? More than being treated throw away people like that?

On the last Christmas, I gave her a note and a crocheted warmer for her ears.

Dear Slim,

Happy holidays to you! I hope that this season brings you lots of love, joy and peace. As I reflect on all that I am grateful for this year, I am so grateful to God for putting you in my life. Thank you for always showing me lots of love and care, and for believing in my dreams. Thank you for inviting me to Bible Study and for opening up your home to me. I feel so honored to know you and to call you my friend. You are the best neighbor I ever had.

I never got to give her the final version of the manuscript. I never got to get her eyes on the final words I wrote for her, to her, about her.

When I learned of her passing, she felt my yearning from the other side. And I leaned into that clairaudience, and she spoke.

Write about me at the Bible study. Write about how I lit up when I spoke about God. Change that otha shit! Humanize me. Write about me nice and kind. Don't write about me low. Write about me in the ways I want to be remembered. Write about who I really am, not just about your vision of me.

I go back through my dissertation. Make it stretch and expand. Make edits. Make space, make room. Add new narratives about her that I had not included before, because she requested that I do. *Tell those stories, too she says. Tell the stories of my smile.*

...

Slim's death changed things for me. Made me reconsider everything. The heightened need for a carefulness with words. The stakes of my writing.

If I could love someone, deeply, and allow them to love me, deeply, and lose them to the very thing I'm writing on . . . If I could share the stories that brought me healing and lose the woman who made what I write possible, then what is it all really for? What is safety and intimacy and a small false sense of security when life don't love us Blackgirls? When life don't love our mothers?

I am in my phases of grief. I know my grief is clouding things. That is okay. That is the place from which I write today.

Slim's death is the im/possibility. Even in all that possibility she made, her life was still made im/possible. Im/plausible. Slim's death gave the life of this work new meaning. Slim's death makes wake work mean something more grim.

What good is the grounding of a healing space when the wake knock you off yo feet? What good is the creations and citations and innovations when you dead and gone next week? I am wondering, because this warrior of a prayer, this activist of a woman, is no longer here and she should be right here and I am hurting.

I guess it is the truth, that the joy of the light that she gave to herself as a gift in the midst of displacement kept her alive a little longer. That having a space that was a little less unsafe gave her rest and ease. She should be here. Here in this body. Here in this life. I should be able to hug her again.

Slim saw me, and let me see her. She let me in on glimpses of her light, and her life, and for that I am eternally grateful.

on blackgirl spirit sense

I am discovering what we round the way Blackgirls hold onto when we feel we have nothing left to love. I am discovering what Blackgirl spirit sense looks and feels like in the wake of displacement, disrupture, disturbance and despair. I am discovering our diasporic recollection of ancestral conjure art⁴⁸³, how we learn to keep Slim alive after she has crossed over the Kalunga line. I am watching us cling to of Gods and Goddesses of our own understanding to ground us in our healing arts.

This is the power of the Blackgirl spirit sense. The something out of nothing. The hope, the possible, the but still. We find something to hold on to. We find something to stay alive for, and when we die our loved ones find something to keep us alive for. In saying her name, we collectively keep Slim alive.

Oakland introduced me to the Blackgirl spirit sense. The conjuring of curatorial genius, the affirmation in uncertainty. There are always many truths in one, and the truth is, we find a way, we make a way, we found reasons to smile in 2020. Even in the loss, even in the pain, we still made our way through 2020. We opened ourselves up to the possibilities of spiritual knowing, and the universe held us close. We, sixty-five Black women healing in Oakland, lived and loved and laughed through 2020. We had babies. We made music. We made art. We had heavy ass days and sleepless nights, and yet still we survived. And although Slim did not make it out alive, her legacy could never ever die. In learning and leaning into this Blackgirl spirit sense, I grow closer to her now than ever before. I mourn her, I grieve her, and I celebrate her. I let her live, in a multitude of ways, through the art that I make in her honor.

for oakland

the woman
oakland
made me

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a mother
to myself

a homegirl
a friend
a sister
to all my
fictive kin
a rock
collector
a sin. a

⁴⁸³ Amara Tabor-Smith.

scholar
a poet. a
writer. a
storyteller
chasin' wind

a warrior
goddess
wordsmith
healer, of
all the
blackgirlchilds
livin' in me

a woman
with a right
to this life

a lover
of the
moon

a momentary
madness. a
still cold
girl in
midnight
blue. a
softness
sitting
with
shame.

a note
a quote
a remedy
a daughter
a garden. a
sea

a home
inside
my skin

a heavy
hearted
heathen. a
singer of

golden
tunes

a dancer
in my
room. an
undamseled
distress. a
muthafuckin
mess. a girl
who knows
me best

a silence
a hiding
a citing
of scene
a stillness
a realness
a suffering
a wife
a wound
a woman
with gloom
a grown girl
in a cold world
stumblin' through

a sinking
into truth
a soaking
up of sun
a honey
birthed
hue

a colored girl
who walks on
rainbows⁴⁸⁴

an educator
who lectures
in blues. a
birthing of
a self
yet to be

⁴⁸⁴ Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*.

discovered

and a
laugh
and a
love
and a
hymn

a bead
at the
end
of a
home
made
braid
a curly
bang
swooped
to the
side. and
a ride
and
a right
and
a riot

a settling
into voice
an affirmation
of choice

a witnessing
a wandering
a knowing
woman. a

healing
a feeling
a peace

IV.

/ dear oakland,

I wrote this dissertation to honor you, to honor my time with you. I wanted to pay homage to how you changed me, how you introduced me to myself for the first time.

I love who Black women made you, how the Black women I know and love made room for me in you, gifted me with a sense of belonging in the bosom of your womb. You became the Black mother who held us close through the storm. You were the Black mother who gave us grounding.

Thank you for adopting me. As a Chocolate City child, you became my mother from another. You made me sit with me. You introduced me to the pleasantries of my senses. In your sun, a breeze is still warm and you help my soul not be so cold. I love the affirmations you give to me, in a bee, in a tree, on a swing. I love your energy, your vibration, your pace, your peace. I love my feet in your soil. I love your holy oils. I love your crystal and lavender and sage and scents. I love how you play with the moon. I love how all the Chocolate City babies from all over the nation gravitate towards you, and each other, out here. How it still be feeling like a Black ass place, even in the wake of displacement.

I been discovering myself in the flowers of yo garden since before I turned twenty-five. I been findin pieces of my fragmented self in you since twenty-three. I am now twenty-nine. You been the soundtrack of an era. You have “[brought me] out to know [myself]”⁴⁸⁵ intimately, for the better half of my twenties. I have celebrated seven birthdays cradled in your arms, like a babe, still stumbling through her reckoning. You rebirthed me and brought me back to myself. Gave me milk from which to drink. You rooted me in my own understanding of God, of love, of wind. You made a woman out of me. A woman I could be proud of. A woman who grew comfortable with blues. A woman who learned to love, to read, to think, to be.

You birthed in me an ability to see myself frail and fragile and broken. Wounded and fractured and warrior. Black and bold and gifted. Grown and woman and well. Unwell and unhealed and trying. You birthed in me an artist. A filmmaker. A dancer. A drummer. A storyteller. A truth seeker. A believer in myself and all things good. You birthed in me a creator. A spiritual being who believes in her capacity to create beautiful things. You have birthed in me a friend. A sister who knows how to listen and be heard, how to see and be seen, who hosts Slumber Party Sisters in studio apartments and tight cramped fourplex rooms. You stretched me with every single move. You revealed me to the moon and left me unafraid to find the details of all that she has for me to know. You birthed in me a writer. A poet. An author. You returned me to rocks and sand and stillness.

You have mothered me, soft and sweet, when my mother was far away. You have taught me how to honor me, and how to honor my pace. Thank you, Oakland, for mothering me, and for teaching me to mother myself.

I love you for First Fridays. For 37MLK and Lemonade braids. I love you for Black women uber drivers and the 57 bus. I love you for Lake Merritt, for Jack London and for Twerk Church. I love you for loving me, for loving us, even when they tried to make you forget us. I love you for the headwrapped afro sheen queens and the bamboo hoops with high heel shoes. I love you for your summers, for cookouts and festivals and BBQing While Black. I love you for all you made me.

⁴⁸⁵ Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*.

Thank you for birthing this project, and for birthing me in the process.

With deepest love and deepest gratitude,

xoxo,

ree

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