Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother

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Abstract

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Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother is a critical study of addiction that uplifts and centers Black folk. This dissertation utilizes Black feminist and Afrocentric theory, queer of color theory, performance studies, critical ethnography, and critical addiction studies to advance performance studies and to address the relationship between 21st Century Black social life and addiction as it intersects with dominant notions of recovery. I approach my study through an analysis of historical narratives of the term *recovery* in 20th century U.S. society that produced normative meanings of *recovery*, deployed by the Recovery

Movement, Alcoholics Anonymous and Addiction Studies. I examine how these institutions frame the reduction of addiction to a problem of the individual, the continued pathologization of blackness as diseased, and the normalization of whiteness as the exemplar of a *recovered* person. These institutions ignore the impacts of state violence such as the continued hyper-criminalization of those with addictions and legacies of neglect by the Federal government in recovery projects such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina–which left thousands of Black and brown folk dead and millions of others draggled, dislocated, and in complete destitute to this day. While this research primarily deals with narratives of recovery from addiction, addiction cannot be separated from larger themes of social neglect and historic marginalization, thus I recontextualize recovery beyond its relationship to compulsive substance use to broader themes of colonization, land displacement, and systemic racism. My dissertation raises important questions of *what is meant by "recovery" when articulated from the margins and how does recovery get redressed from normative notions embedded in power and dominance? How does Black communities "recover" when tasked to reconcile with what may never be able to be regained? How does one return if one has been displaced and has no place to return to? How do we "recover" pleasure? What qualities of African-Diasporic culture are responsible for the retention of Black folk in Alcoholics Anonymous?* Chapters argue that "Recovery" is a process of reconciling with loss, which includes the loss of social and spatial connection, time, and pleasure. Additionally, I invoke a critical performance ethnography, which combines critical praxis around ethnography with the performance in order to understand the ways embodied performance illuminate the culture of Black AA. I utilize a social justice orientation toward ethnography and performance as a method of disseminating culturally relevant literature options for Black folk reconciling with addiction: theater and performance.

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Introduction: A Critical Addiction Intervention

Introduction

The urgency of Black feminism, queer of color critique, and Afrocentric thought continue to penetrate most major fields of study: gender and sexuality studies, history, social sciences, anthropology, literature, and geography to name a few. This is largely due to the work of Black scholars who recognize the interconnection between ongoing violence inflicted onto Black communities and the reverberations of colonization and anti-Black epistemologies grounding most fields of study. Addiction Studies, a discipline emerging in the 1930's by social workers becoming more involved in the diagnosis, treatment, research, and policymaking of addiction related matters, most notably Mary E. Richmond, has yet to adequately address the ways western European ways of seeing and theorizing around addiction and recovery methods continue to promote Black geno-epistemicide, both within the academy and beyond.[1]

[1] Donna Bliss, "Beyond the Disease Model: Reframing the Etiology of Alcoholism From a Spiritual Perspective." *Journal of Teaching in the Addictions* 8, no. 1–2 (2009): 11.

I use the term *geno-epistemicides* to think about the co-constitutive nature of genocide and epistemicide. In her essay, "The Future of Our Worlds: Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University Under Globalization", Grace Hong reminds us through examining the work of Barabara Christian, that the mechanisms that undergird universities extinguishment of black feminists--organized around white-supremacist epistemologies, are but a product of histories of the enslavement and genocide of African and indigenous people and colonial conquests of land. Further, Dian Million's "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History" allows us to trouble the idea that genocide, according to the western imagination, never existed prior to the Holocaust. The decimation of Indigenous people, the enslavement of African people, the imprisonment and murder of Black people, are all means of enacting genocide and thus reinscribing white supremacist epistemologies of the culturally inferior colonial subject.

Critical Addiction Studies (CAS), still in its infancy, has made attempts to address such ruptures. In the anthology *Critical Perspectives on Addiction*, scholars across multiple disciplines and geographic locations came together to address theoretical issues within Addiction Studies and raise the importance of a social justice lens.[2] One of the major contributors to the anthology is the editor Julie Netherland. As Director of Research and Academic Engagement for The Drug Policy Alliance, an organization in the United States invested in the eradication of the drug wars and repairing the harms it produces, medical sociologist Julie Netherland has brought extensive experience in health research to address the policies that impact Black life as it interfaces with drug policy.[3] In *Critical Perspectives on Addiction,* dimensions of concern the anthology took up was depiction of addiction as a matter of agency or free will, the hyper-criminalization and stigmatization of drug use as a form of social control, and debates around whether addiction was a biological, sociological, or cultural matter.[4] The *critical* element in Critical Addiction Studies and as depicted in this anthology, was the assertion that traditional studies of drugs and addiction tend to decontextualize "addict" or "addiction" without consideration of how economic, social, familial, political and historical factors shape these particular experiences.[5] But while these attempts may be earnest, authors in this anthology highlight the importance of a racial and social justice analysis yet overwhelmingly relegate the

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[2] Julie Netherland, "Introduction: Sociology and the Shifting Landscape of Addiction." *Critical Perspectives on Addiction*. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), xiii.

[3] "Julie "Jules" Netherland, Ph.D," Drug Policy Alliance, accessed June 1, 20124, https://drugpolicy.org/person/julie-jules-netherland-ph-d/.

[4] Netherland, "Introduction: Sociology and the Shifting Landscape of Addiction," xiii.

[5] Netherland, "Introduction: Sociology and the Shifting Landscape of Addiction," xiii.

knowledge of Black scholars to the chapter entitled, "Addiction Intervention- Race and the Shaping of Addicts"--a chapter examining the ways treatment responses to opioid addiction intensified stigmas for communities of color .[6] This is harmful as Black knowledges has been used for additive racial analysis, but never fully integral to the very fabric in which social occurrences are understood. Thus, with Critical Addiction Studies being in its infancy, my interventions are intended to help shape its future trajectories as my dissertation intervenes into the ways Critical Addiction Studies lack attention to Black Studies, intersectionality, and queer of color critique. My intervention into Critical Addiction Studies addresses the violence of the canon of Addiction Studies, notably literature of Twelve-Step Recovery and clinical studies on Black people navigating addiction, by asking critical questions around the etiology of addiction, the efficacy of proposed recovery tools, and the kinds of cultures that get produced and reproduced through the circulation of literature and other dominant recovery materials. Addiction Studies and the Recovery Movement continues to exclude the nuanced experience of Black folk navigating through compulsive substance use through universalizing the experience of those with addiction, normalizing whiteness as the exemplar patient, promoting colorblindness through erasing the culture-specific, and pathologizing the individual without acknowledging the impacts of systems of power. This is done through universalizing the experience of the "addict" as a white masculine being–evident in normalized treatment plans and the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous from the twentieth century.

In 2022, Black women's studies scholar Stephanie Y. Evans and historian LaShawn Harris put out a call for papers for an anthology entitled, *Licka Stow: Alcohol in Black Life,*

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[6] Julie Netherland, "Addiction Intervention: Race and the Shaping of Addicts." *Critical Perspectives on Addiction*. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), 79.

History, and Culture, in which they argued a need to center Black knowledge and experiences in unpacking the history of race, class, and gender in the production and consumption of alcohol. In this call for papers, Evans and Harris called attention to the vast relationship between Black folk and alcohol, from the ways African palm and wine bolstered the slave trade and the labor of enslaved Africans on plantation vinyards, to celebrity alcohol brands and the deliberate placement of liquor stores in predominantly Black neighborhoods instead of affordable grocery stores.[7] By Evans and Harris centering Black narratives and experiences at the center of the alcohol discourses, Black diasporic knowledges were considered integral to the ways social norms, systems, and identity are shaped. Though the anthology did not come into fruition, the attempt is but one example of the kinds of Black feminist scholarship needed within Addiction Studies and Critical Addiction Studies.

Underpinning my lines of inquiry is the legacy of the Combahee River Collective, a radical Black feminist lesbian organization active in the 1970's and '80s, and their assertions made that continue to resonate today, when the status of Black women are examined.[8] When highlighting the psychological toll of Black womanhood, The Combahee River Collective states, "There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women."[9] In order for liberation to

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[7] Stephanie Y. Evans and LaShawn Harris. "*Licka Stow: Alcohol in Black Life, History, and Culture.*", accessed June 1, 2024. https://lickastow.net.

[8] BlackPast, "(1977) the Combahee River Collective Statement." (August 29, 2019) https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

[9] BlackPast, "(1977) the Combahee River Collective Statement."

be possible, the lived experiences of Black women must be moved from the periphery, and the holistic wellness of Black women must be a rallying point for collective transformation.

Addiction as an experience or "addict" as an identity category, are positionalities subject to additional vulnerability, as the status quo stigmatizes those possessing such vulnerability as it pathologizes and criminalizes. In the United States, there is a fraught history with drugs and the criminal legal system, particularly noticeable in the wake of Richard Nixon's declaration of the War on Drugs in the 1970's, at a time in which drug related crimes were on the decline. In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* writer and lawyer Michelle Alexander argues that the new racial caste system, like slavery and Jim Crow, has resulted in mass incarceration, catalyzed by the War on Drugs. It subjects Black people not only to imprisonment but additional discrimination in the realm of housing, voting, education, employment, and public benefits.[10] Although studies reveal that folks of all racial and ethnic backgrounds use and sell drugs at similar rates, due to the racial biases in the criminal legal system, including policing practices, sentencing, and arrests rates, Black folk have been disproportionately targeted.[11] In a study conducted in 2011 in New Haven, Connecticut, by sociologist and addiction studies scholars Alana Rosenberg, Allison Groves, and Kim Blankenship, for example, Black people were revealed to be incarcerated at a rate five to seven times higher than white people; of those folks, nearly half were drug-related offenses resulting in

[10] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (New York: New Press, 2010), 2.

[11] Kim Blankenship, Alana Groves, and Alana Rosenberg, "Comparing Black and White Drug Offenders: Implications for Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice and Reentry Policy and Programming," *Journal of Drug Issues*, no. 1 (2017): 132–42, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5614457/.

more than a year of incarceration.[12] This study revealed the economic disparities that factored into Black folk participating in the selling of "illegal drugs", and though the rates of distribution were consistent across racial lines, the over-policing of inner-city and Black dominated neighborhoods led to increased visibility and criminalization of such groups.[13] This underscores the ways the subject of drugs carry racialized and classed dynamics, evidenced by the hyper-policing and criminalizing of possession, without taking into account how unequal distributions of wealth and resources at the expense of Black communities, produces a need for generating income by any means necessary for survival. My study argues that these contextualizations are an absolute necessity in critical studies of addiction.

When it comes to drug use, as it stands, poor Black women are disproportionately punished and subjected to incarceration for addiction and ingesting illicit drugs, at a rate seven times higher than white women.[14] This underscores the reality that Black women are differentially and systematically disadvantaged as a result of drug related charges, and that the negative sanctions are greater than those imposed on white people. Because Black women are most impacted, my study urges the importance of centering Black women in critical addiction studies. Embedded in this particular reality are controlling images of Black women, constituted during chattel enslavement that continue to shape dominant perceptions of Black women, such as being *welfare* queens and *matriarchs,* utilizing government resources, and raising animalistic

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[12] Blankenship, Groves, and Rosenberg, "Comparing Black and White Drug Offenders," 132–42.

[13] Blankenship, Groves, and Rosenberg, "Comparing Black and White Drug Offenders," 132–42.

[14] Iris Carlton-LaNey, Mary Jackson, and Amelia Roberts, "Revisiting the Need for Feminism and Afrocentric Theory When Treating African-American Female Substance Abusers." In *Journal of Drug Issues*, 30,no. 4, (2000): 903

children.[15] Black women have been at the brunt of the War on Drugs as largely the narrative of the *welfare queen* was always entrenched with the criminalization of drug-using women as a way for the government to cut funding for welfare. Through depicting Black women as "irresponsible" and unfit mothers, the government through shaping public perception, were able to further their goals of reallocating that funding to bolster mass incarceration through the criminalization of the women addicted to drugs, specifically, crack cocaine.[16]

With substance use being bound to such histories the efforts of recovery become as entangled as well. The agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), was established by Congress in 1992 in order to make services and information about substance use and "mental disorders" more readily accessible.[17] SAMHSA describes recovery as "a process of change through which people improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential."[18] They also identify the dimensions that support recovery which include the following: managing the disease or the symptoms, having stable housing, finding purpose in the everyday which includes resources and income to fully participate in society, and having a support network and access to community.[19] In thinking about the context of Black people in an anti-Black world, Blackness does not afford *recovery* in the ways SAMHSA suggests: disease is a term filled with histories of pathologizing blackness in service of medical

[15] Carlton-LaNey, Mary Jackson, Roberts, "Revisiting the Need for Feminism," 904.

[16] Adrianna Finamore. "Geeking and Freaking: Black Women and the 1980s Crack Epidemic." *California History (San Francisco)* 99, no. 2 (2022): 61.

[17] "Recovery and Recovery Support," SAMHSA, https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/recovery.

[18] SAMHSA, "Recovery and Recovery Support."

[19] SAMHSA, "Recovery and Recovery Support."

racism. Stable living for Black people continues to be a source of hardship due to carceral geographies, gentrification, racial capitalism, and workplace discrimination impeding on economic independence for many. Still, Black folk still sustain long term sobriety, or abstinence from drug and alcohol use, and would suggest they have *recovered* or are in process of *recovering*. *Recovery*, then, reveals a series of complex relationships, from histories of policing and pathologization, to public health concerns within systems that produce public health crises, that require disentangling in order to effectively redress histories of neglect while inspiring opportunities for wellness.

This chapter addresses the key ideas underlying my interventions into Addiction Studies, such as understanding addiction as a norm rather than a problem "out-there", the importance of culturally relevant methods of interventions, and critiques of carcerality. This chapter also includes theories from other disciplines that contribute to my interventions, such as the work of scholars of Black geographies, including Angela Davis, Rinaldo Walcott, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. This chapter is primarily concerned with mapping the interventions Black feminism, Afrocentric, and Indigenous thought make to Addiction Studies in order to adequately assess the potentiality in understanding *addiction* and *recovery* from communities relegated to the margins. This dissertation cannot entirely answer the question of what addiction is exactly, as the term continues to be in flux. It does argue however, that the way it is understood in dominant discourse does not account for how anti-black violence within cultures of addictions produce compulsive substance use, and further, how *recovery* as dominantly understood, fails Black and brown communities. Thus, my intervention into Critical Addiction Studies seeks to dismantle the webs of power and dominance that exacerbate addiction and compulsive drug use, while

highlighting the ways communities on the margins have articulated other ways to be and heal, outside of these dominant paradigms.

Situating Critical Addiction Studies

Addiction Studies emerged in the 1930's, post WW1.[20] As an alternative to Christianity's association of inebriation to immorality and sinfulness, Addiction Studies sought to provide a model of understanding addiction that moved beyond poor moral character, to an "amoral" approach, suggesting psychological and physiological factors were responsible for addiction.[21] Bolstering the assertions made in Addiction Studies was the success of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which proclaimed alcoholism to be a "disease". Social workers and psychologists, notably Mary. E. Richmond promoted the concept of addiction as a disease as well.[22] By describing alcoholism as a disease rather than a problem of immorality, researchers in medicine and physiology, religious leaders, and those recovering from addiction sought to destigmatize addiction conceptualizing it as a biological phenomenon beyond human control; something that no amount of self-will could remedy.[23] During this time, social work as a profession became

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[20] Bliss, "Beyond the Disease Model," 11.

[21] Bliss, "Beyond the Disease Model," 11.

[22] Bliss, "Beyond the Disease Model," 11.

Jolene Sanders, "Seeking Acceptance: LGBTQ and Membership in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)," In Alcoholism *Treatment Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2020): 433.

Bill Wilson. *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*. New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2002.

[23] Sanders, "Seeking Acceptance," 433.

increasingly involved in alcohol treatment, and through the work of Richmond inebriation became classified as a disease requiring a treatment approach.[24]

The disease model, though believed to have the intent of destigmatizing alcoholism, posed a problem in that it has relied on genetics and pathologization of the individual without context of the social world and factors that may shape a person's compulsion to drink addictively. This is particularly alarming for Black communities and the histories of pathologizing Blackness as a rationale for subjugation. This is most poignantly seen in the plight espoused by E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel P. Moynihan in the mid-twentieth century who utilized the idea that Black families were pathologically dysfunctional and fundamentally unable to conform fully into American societies, thus were deeply inadequate.[25] It was this discourse that made possible the maintenance of Black subordination and continued incarceration of Black families. Incarcerating Black families was justifiable by their inability to assimilate, yet there was no regard for how a lack of access to class-related privileges and how Black family values differed from white American values contributed to this "failure" of assimilation. Like the disease model was said to be created to understand those with addiction, The Moynihan report deployed a method of understanding and supporting the need of Black communities, and yet, both projects through pathologization, furthered the harms enacted into Black communities.

Addiction Studies and the Alcoholics Anonymous's Twelve-Step Program, which both took root in the early twentieth century, emerged during the height of the eugenics movement (1907-1939), and in the wake of Women's Suffrage (1920) and three decades before Jim Crow

[24] Bliss, "Beyond the Disease Model," 11.

[25] Carlton-LaNey, Mary Jackson, Roberts, "Revisiting the Need for Feminism," 904.

was “dismantled” (1965), which means of the ideologies around addiction and recovery would reproduce the heterosexist, racist, and eugenic language plaguing the times.[26]

Influences

My interventions into Critical Addiction Studies (CAS) and Addiction Studies utilizes the traditional addiction and recovery canon in order to understand the problematic nature of Addiction Studies, and to highlight the stakes of Black feminist, Afrocrocentic, and Indigenous interventions into the field. Because I recognize the danger of a singular story, I utilize the methodology of *shoaling,* as described by Tiffany Lethabo-King, bringing into productive friction the fields of Black Studies, Native Studies, and Addiction Studies.[27] When describing shoaling, Lethabo-King states, “By assembling, shoaling, and rubbing disparate texts against one another, unexpected openings emerge where different voices are brought into relationship. As new relationships among texts and voices are made, new and “transgressive ground[s] of understanding” emerge where one can begin to notice where rupture and “momentary dislodgings” reveal that the archive is not a closed system that contains only one story.”[28] Taken together, the knowledge from these disciplines help build a more well-rounded perspective of the needs of Black folk interfacing with addiction, and the multiple vantage points allow us to understand the histories that inform approaches to treatment and the necessary directions to move toward to best serve Black diasporic communities. By placing Addiction Studies alongside

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[26] Ingrid Grenon and Joav Merrick. "Eugenics Movement." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intellectual and Developmental Disorders*, edited by Merrick, Joav, and Ingrid Grenon, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 597-98

[27] Tiffany Lethabo King . *The Black Shoals : Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. (Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2019).

[28] Tiffany Lethabo King “Introduction: The Black Shoals”. *The Black Shoals : Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*.(Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2019), 30.

Black and Native Studies, I argue that underlying the phenomenon of addiction in the United States, is always chattel slavery and settler colonialism. Thus, we cannot strategize around addiction without those most impacted by these historical ruptures at the center of discourse.

My interventions in Critical Addiction Studies builds from the work of the following scholars who have critiqued Addiction Studies' approach to race, gender and sexuality in narratives and practices. Jolene Sanders, bell hooks, and Mary S. Jackson, are a few of whom have clearly articulated the possibilities of *recovery* grounded in feminist praxis. Sanders has conducted extensive research on women and substance use, and as co-editor of *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, is one of the leading voices in applying a critical feminist analysis to alcohol treatment.[29] hooks' *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* highlights the ways sexism and racism impacts the emotional health of Black women and offers strategies for Black women to self-actualize and heal from the inside, despite the context of their existence.[30] Sociologist Mary S. Jackson, whose work largely centers on Black women in recovery treatment centers, proposes the necessity of situating Black folks' recovery within an Afrocentric Paradigm. Afrocentricity, afro/center, is a liberating ideology and praxis, rooted in the cultural image and interests of people of the African diaspora.[31] From this perspective, the culture and beauty of Black folk and their attributes are celebrated, perpetuated myths of inferiority are

[29] Jolene Sanders. "Biography." *Hood College*, www.hood.edu/academics/faculty/jolene-sanders. Accessed 2 June 2021.

[30] bell hooks. *Sisters Of the Yam : Black Women and Self-Recovery.* (Boston, MA :South End Press, 1993).

[31] Mary Jackson, Richard Stephens, and Robert Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment in Residential Substance Abuse Care: The Iwo San." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1997, pp. 88.

dispelled, and our strengths are the center focus rather than deficits.[32] Like Afrocentric thought, Critical Addiction Studies urges the necessity of Black self-definition through a culturally relevant knowing of oneself.

Scholars of Black Geography inform the field of Critical Addiction Studies. They offer a way to understand the dimensions of spatial matters that impact Black life and exacerbates addiction, namely, the deliberate production of prisons as a spatial solution to political, social, and economic problems and carceral geographies that make for the continued premature death of Black people.[33] Black Geography scholar Rinaldo Walcott reminds us that "crimes" cannot be divorced from the life chances of black lives that took root during slavery and thereafter, and that the carceral state (encompassing lawyers, social workers, prisons, police, teachers, correctional offers etc.) have a vested interested in the economic profitability of containing Black life, rather than offering rehabilitation and wholistic healing.[34] This unreconciled history and punitive measures do not account for how these legacies produce drug crimes and other survival crimes.[35] Scholars in Critical Addiction Studies account for these ongoing violences and urges

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[32] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 88.

[33] Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (American Crossroads. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[34] Rinaldo Walcott, . *On Property : Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition*. First ed. Field Notes (Biblioasis) ; #2. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2021.

Angela Yvonne Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

[35] Rinaldo Walcott. *On Property : Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition*. First ed. Field Notes (Biblioasis) ; #2. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2021.

Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Transformative Justice and prison abolition; that in fact, Recovery on a global scale cannot fully happen without abolition. Additionally, scholars of Critical argue for black-space making practices allow for Black rootedness.[36] Recovery methods proposed in Critical Addiction Studies encourages the cultivation of *otherwise*[37] spaces, or spaces exclusively for Black people as a practice of combating loss of space.

Key Themes

Addiction as Normality not a Disease or Natural Immorality

Scholars of Critical Addiction Studies reject any notion of addiction that renders communities of color as pathological and perpetually inferior and/or relegates Black and Native epistemologies to the periphery. Thus, a definition of addiction that does not rely on reproducing the aforementioned attributes is needed in order to adequately understand the intersection of race and substance dependency. Turning towards Black Feminism, Critical Addiction Studies aligns with an operational understanding of addiction promoted by Black feminist writer, bell hooks. In the seminal text, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery,* Black feminist writer bell hooks outlines the ways in which Black folk, specifically Black women's historical subjugation, created a people whose sense of wholeness, self, pleasure, and healing was vehemently discouraged:

> A culture of domination undermines individuals' capacity to assert meaningful agency in their lives. It is necessarily a culture of addiction, since it socializes as many people as it can to believe that they cannot rely on themselves to meet even their basic human needs. Considering the way black people have been socialized, from slavery to present day, to

[36] Camilla Hawthorne. "Black Matters Are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the Twenty‐first Century." *Geography Compass* 13, no. 11 (2019): N/a.

[37] Spaces free of quotidian violences (Crawley 2020).

> believe that we can survive only with the paternalistic support of white power structures, is it supprising that addiction have become so all-pervasive in our communities?[38]

hooks is in conversation with writer Stanton Peele who is often cited for studies of addiction. In his book, *Love and Addiction,* published in 1975, Peele argued for a more progressive understanding of addiction. Through revisiting studies on how morphine and heroin did not in every case create the physical symptoms associated with "addiction," how it was contingent on a consumer's mental state, cultural background, and environment. Peele argued that drugs themselves did not produce addiction, it was people's *experience* that produced addiction–to drugs, love, sex, food, gambling, etc. Peele stated,

> Addiction is not a chemical reaction. Addiction is an *experience*—one which grows out of an individual's routineized subjective response to something that has special meaning for him—something, anything, that he finds so safe and reassuring that he cannot be without it. If we want to come to terms with addiction, we have to stop blaming drugs and start looking at people, at ourselves, and at what makes us dependent. We will find that we learn habits of dependence by growing up in a culture which teaches a sense of personal inadequacy, a reliance on external bulwarks, and a preoccupation with the negative or painful rather than the positive or joyous. Addiction is not an abnormality in our society.[39]

Peele then proposes, "One of the best things we can do to safeguard ourselves against addiction, therefore, is to understand how our social environment affects us and to develop the internal strength to become something more than creatures of society."[40] Peele is drawing a direct correlation between addiction and the importance of understanding the social contexts of addiction. This supports my research efforts of detaching addiction from a problem of the

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[38] bell hooks. "Growing Away from Addiction" In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2014): 49.

[39] Stanton Peele, "Love and Addiction", The Stanton Peele Addiction Website, https://peele.net/bookstore/love.html

[40] Stanton Peele, "Love and Addiction."

individual to a systemic context. I am building on Stanton Peele and bell hooks' argument by highlighting the ways environments and cultures produce addictionI argue that addiction is a product of being entrenched in a society ridden with anti-Black violence. Specializing in the effects racial trauma renders on the body, psychotherapist Resma Menakem describes how ongoing violence inflicted onto the Black body results in trauma that transmutes into adaptive behaviors–behaviors that support individuals in coping with life circumstances. Anxiety, hypervigilance, ADD/ADHD, and addiction are a few in which Menakemz puts forth.[41] Non-adaptive behaviors, which are behaviors that impede on an individual's ability to survive and cope with life, are also a result of the ongoing violence, which can look like panic attacks, self-hatred, learned helplessness, hopelessness and depression.[42] Menakem and other Black psychologists such as Joy DeGruy understand that the aforementioned are pervasive stress induced responses born from enduring ongoing violence.[43] Addictions then, do not preclude social contexts, but are products of them. Thus, addiction is not merely about an individual addressing a biological tragedy but is a matter of dismantling the multitude of injustices that impact Black life.

Cultural Relevance

My interventions in Critical Addiction Studies urge cultural relevant tools of assessing addiction and prescribing treatment. Here, I look to Afrocentricity and Black Feminism when addressing Black folk and addiction in order to center the strengths of Black epistemologies and

[41] Resmaa Menakem, "Changing the World Begins with Your Body" In *My Grandmother's Hands : Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 129.

[42] Menakem, "Changing the World Begins with Your Body", 130.

[43] Menakem, "Changing the World Begins with Your Body", 130.

upliftment. Afrocentricity, first articulated in the 1970's and 1980's, referred to the remnants of Africa in African American culture.[44] Afrocentricity, afro/center, was a term that described an ideology of praxis, rooted in the cultural image and interests of people of the African diaspora.[45] From this perspective, the culture and beauty of Black folk and their attributes are celebrated, perpetuated myths of inferiority are dispelled, and our strengths are the center focus rather than deficits.[46] However, in 1990's, Afrocentricity began to gain scrutiny for the ways it excluded gender and sexuality as an additional vector of analysis, thus, the need for Black feminism has been tantamount. While I have my own critiques of Afrocentricity in the ways I have seen it deployed, such as they way it has flattened the idea of of "Africa" as a uniworld, I use it here to honor the work Afrocentric scholars, particularly Afrocentric Feminist scholars such as Mary S. Jackson., whose laid the groundwork for understanding the needs of Black women healing from addiction through Afrocentric methods of emphasizing the importance of elders, communing with nature, and opening capaciousness for queer and women-centered experience. While some of the most abundant tools utilized by Twelve-Step recovery to mobilize sobriety is storytelling, forging community, knowing oneself, and connecting with spirit/God/ancestry, the literature and materials do not encourage this to be done by incorporating cultural values. Thus, my interventions into Critical Addiction Studies urge recovery to be interconnected with recovering the Black Past, or recovering one's history and cultural contributions in order to know the self in context of community. Reliance on spirit, ancestors, and orishas, as well as knowing oneself, being of service, and healing with

[44] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* (Place of publication not identified: Taylor & Francis, 2021): xxi.

[45] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* xxi.

[46] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 87.

community are practices that have *always* lived in the bodies of Black folk and existed in Black cultural traditions, regardless of recovery affiliation and are reflections of principles of Afrocentricity that has been called forth as a theoretical backing to understanding the needs of Black people navigating addiction.

Further, the production and circulation of culturally relevant literature that centers the narratives of Black folk is another concern. In their writing, "Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali", author D.T. Niane adequately describes the expansiveness of literature to spoken word forms of narrative telling, through the exposition of the role of the griot in Mali, and how narrative telling destabilizes the Africana person as the objective study rather than agentic beings.[47] I urge mobilizers of Critical Addiction Studies to promote literature created by Black folk as a tool of recovery, rather than literature that relegates these lived experiences to the invisible.

Transformative Justice and Critique of Carcerality

In critically studying addiction, not only am I interested in the efficacy of communal healing through shared identity and cultural values, but I am also concerned with Transformative Justice as a praxis, and actively resisting state carceral punishment through encouraging collective care-taking and community accountability. Transformative Justice is an approach to addressing intra communal discord, which includes addiction and gender-based violence, and positions itself against the criminal legal systems and its punitive ways of addressing such matters.[48] It also considers the needs of and interests of the community, and relies on the

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[47] Djibril Tamsir Niane, David W., Chappell , and Jim Jones. *Sundiata : An Epic of Old Mali*. Revised ed. (Longman African Writers. Harlow, England: Pearson, 2006).

[48] Mimi E. Kim. "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice: Women of Color Feminism and Alternatives to Incarceration." In *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 27, no 3. (2018): 219 – 233.

community for resolutions.[49] Social work scholar Mimi Kim reminds us, "Communities are sites for prevention, intervention, and transformation, spaces where interventions can be imagined, initiated, and implemented."[50] This is not to romanticize community, for we know that communities can maintain violence against Black women queer and transfolk, however, community cam also be generative sites of resistance. In thinking about methods of ensuring sustained recovery through accessible communal circuits, those navigating addiction become obliged to individual members within the community, and the act of taking on such responsibility is an active resistance of calling forth racist neoliberal institutions to do such work.

Further, Kim states, "the notions of healing, reintegration, and repair hold particular promise to communities destroyed by the intersection of intimate, community, and structural forms of violence and, most recently, the impact of four decades of policies of mass incarceration. Support for collective, community responsibility can foster notions of community self-determination, culturally meaningful practices, and the building or rebuilding of community health."[51] This point so poignantly made, highlights that the community has the power to protect itself, which a culture of domination, as hooks already pointed us, would have us believe that the community in fact is not self-sustaining. Further, as outlined throughout the chapter, self-determination and culturally meaningful practices are the crux of self-definition and in it of itself, undermines the plight of the carceral state.

Futures

[49] Mimi E. Kim, "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice," 225.

[50] Mimi E. Kim, "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice," 227.

[51] Mimi E. Kim, "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice," 230.

The future direction of Critical Addiction Studies relies on the continuous process of collective knowledge production and harkening back to what Indigenous scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls, "As we have always done." Black queer scholar and artist Ashon Crawley summarizes this as, "To do as we always have done is to mark the fact that otherwise possibility is not tending toward a future that is to come but is the marking of the practices that we have and do and carry with care and love for one another against the imposition of settler colonial violence, the violence that is coarticulated with anti-Blackness to produce the modern crisis of racialization, the theft of ground and air, and the strangulation of life possibilities."[52] As we have always done is our creative practice and our communion with each other, spirit, and nature, to come up with collective strategies for survival. Critical Addiction Studies calls upon collaboration with historians, public health scholars, sociologists, anthropologist, black geographers, abolitionist, and beyond to address the unreconciled and punitive histories of law, the incarceration of addiction, the impacts of sexism and racism on emotional health, and tangible possibilities of collective care work–rooted in the roadmaps left behind my our ancestors. This collaborative research brings forth ongoing interdisciplinary interventions on cultures that produce addictions.

Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother: Chapter Overview and Methods

Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother is a critical study of addiction that uplifts and centers Black folk. This dissertation utilizes Black Feminist and Afrocentric Theory, queer of color theory, performance studies, critical ethnography, and critical addiction studies to advance what esteemed performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison

[52] Ashon Crawley, "Stayed / Freedom / Hallelujah." In *Otherwise Worlds*, (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2021), 28.

defines as critical performance ethnography. My addresses the relationship between 21st Century Black social life and addiction as it intersects with dominant notions of *recovery.* I approach my study through an analysis of historical narratives of "recovery" in twentieth century U.S. society that produced normative meanings of "recovery", deployed by the Recovery Movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, then later, Addiction Studies. I examine how these institutions frame the reduction of addiction to a problem of the individual, the continued pathologization of blackness as diseased, and the normalization of whiteness as the exemplar of "recovered." Such frames ignore the impacts of state violence such as the continued hyper-criminalization of those with addictions and legacies of neglect by the Federal government in "recovery projects" such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina–which left thousands of Black and brown folk dead and millions of others draggled, dislocated, and in complete destitute to this day. While this research primarily deals with narratives of "recovery" from addiction, addiction cannot be separated from larger themes of social neglect and historic marginalization, thus I recontextualize recovery beyond its relationship to compulsive substance use to broader themes of colonization, land displacement, and systemic racism. My dissertation raises important questions of *what is meant by "recovery" when articulated from the margins and how does recovery get redressed from normative notions embedded in power and dominance?*

Chapters argue that "Recovery" is a process of reconciling with loss, which includes the loss of social and spatial connection, time, and pleasure. For example, through my examination of poetic text such as "Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict" by Sonia Sanchez and "We Made It" by Sunni Patterson, existing testimonies from Black folk in AA pamphlets, and oral narratives I gathered during my ethnographic research, the first part of my study argues that addiction is understood as symptomatic of dealing with trauma.

As my research demonstrates, recovery requires reconciling with the loss of social connections such as being severed from one's Mother in the case of chattel enslavement, loss of land due to gentrification, loss of time through disjointed relationships to spirit and ancestry across dimensions, and historical denial of pleasure that impedes the "recovering" or "retrieving" pleasure and desire. At the same time, my analysis suggests that reconciliation allows something else to emerge from the rupture, a byproduct that highlights one's capacity to discover joy, healing, and relationality–the story does not end at loss.

While the first part of my study provides the social and historical context for my study, the second part of my research launches a performance ethnography that documents stories of those recovering from addiction. My performance ethnographic method is informed by my analysis of Black feminist thinkers, writers, and artists, such as D. Soyini Madison, Joni L. Jones, and Ntzokake Shange. Such ethics require me to co-create a collective theater performance as a new form of addiction literature.

My research archive includes the theoretical and creative work of Afrocentric, Black feminist, and queer thinkers, writers, and artists, including Marimba Ani, Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Sunni Patterson to name a few, arguing that the theoretical and creative writings and performances by such people, better serve as a foundation to reconceptualize recovery in a way that adequately addresses the experiences of Black folk. Such writing and art offer a capaciousness to account for ongoing systems of violence and its production of cultures of addiction, while utilizing Black art, performance and African-derived spirituality and religions to encourage opportunities for agency, self-definition, joy, communion, honest testimony, and reverence for Black culture.

Aggressive Counter-Reading of the Archive

My research method does what Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash calls "an aggressive counter-reading of the archive." In her book, *The Black Body In Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, Nash notes the tendency of Black Feminist theory to structure the visual and cultural representation of the black female body as a site of injury. Utilizing the term "grammar of woundedness", she describes the rhetorical ways that the archive of black female pleasure becomes always relegated to impossibility. Thus, her work calls for an "aggressive counter-reading" of the archive of black female pleasure. My research seeks to co-creating a new archive, one which highlights the experiences of those recovering from addiction–through a lens of empowerment, alongside the impulse to relegate us to be perpetually wounded–often suggested by feminist and afrocentric scholars who have critiqued the white-masculininist origins of Alcoholics Anonymous and Addiction Studies.

The following are ways I implement this intention:

(1) I attend Sobriety meetings within the institution of Alcoholics Anonymous, an institution that I have deemed deeply problematic, yet still argue that wherever Black people reside, they are sites generative of Black feminist theory.

(2) I document through mental notes the elements of these meetings that are rooted in Black cultural contexts.

(3) I analyze my interlocutors from a place of agency and self-definition, I do not elaborate on their "oppressed status."

(4) Through my analysis I provide a lens to which attendees of such meetings or visitors of such meetings can also analyze the space in similar ways. These examples are found in Chapter 5. This is important because though members may attribute the success of the program to Twelve-Step, and may even practice individualizing their experience as AA

encourages, taking a more holistic approach to understanding their stories highlight allows the African-Diasporic elements of the program to be foregrounded.

Embodied Knowledge & the Spoken Word

My lineage of Black and Indigenous Feminist thought articulates the importance of knowledge born from the embodied experience. In "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History" Dian Million discusses the ways emotional knowledge–knowledges that are embodied but do not necessary translate into political terminology as commonly understood– have been used as alternative truths, or "truths that challenged Canadian settler truths" in residential schools.[53] In "Sapphire as Praxis: Toward a Methodology of Anger", Bettina Judd examines Black women's creative works, specifically where rage is expressed, in order to interrogate what can be learned about the conditions that produce Black women's anger. Judd describes "Sapphire" or the angry Black woman, as something Black women are inherently rendered as, even before they speak. When outlining her methodology, Judd states, "Tracing Black women's anger troubles this concept of the human and invokes rites that Black women engage by *being* anyhow…These rites constitute the rituals of anger that manifest in what I call texts of rage—texts made to obliterate knowledge as we know it"[54]. The scholarship of both Million and Judd are a part of lineages of feminisms that challenge dominant notions of "knowing" and illuminate the felt and suppressed knowledge of folks of color. These affective realities and felt knowledges inform where I begin in choosing critical and performance ethnography as a research methods. It is not enough that my theoretical work is

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[53] Dian Million. "Unmaking the Biopolitical Citizen" In *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 154.

[54] Bettina Judd. "Toward a Methodology of Anger." In *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*, 155–76. Northwestern University Press, 2023.

rooted in centering the voices of Black women, queer, and trans folks, but my methodological approach to research must also do that same work and build new worlds that become therapeutic landscapes for Black folk across the diaspora to thrive. These landscapes must foreground the lived and embodied experience of folks of color which performance lends to and performance ethnography critically supports.

Historically, subjectivity has been violently policed, surveilled, regulated, and punished, when asserted by folk of the African diaspora; specifically, Black folk rendering themselves as beings, with spirit, agency, and autonomy, continues to be considered a problem to the anti-black structures of power that aim to reduce folk of the African diaspora to merely objects. This is precisely the importance of "oral" and spoken word forms of narrative telling. Narrative-telling in oral form, within the African diasporic literary tradition, requires the destabilization of the Black folk as "object." Oral tales then become the living truths that white supremacy attempts to obliterate; they are the remnants of the histories we have not been gifted access to in the western education system. In their writing, "Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali", author D.T. Niane notes, "Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human.[55]" I depart from Niane's argument for text lacking warmth, as Black women have left behind journals, autobiographies, handwritten letters, and poetry that still evoke the soul and warmth of the writer, but there is something to be revered about the catharsis of sharing or listening to spoken word in the voice, tone, and feelings coming from the flesh. Further, voice and sound are not physically tangible, yet written words are both observable and can be physically

[55] Djibril Tamsir Niane, David W., Chappell , and Jim Jones. *Sundiata : An Epic of Old Mali*. Revised ed. Longman African Writers. (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2006), 41.

touched--which is considered most advantageous in non-Indigenous forms of communication. Oral tradition then becomes of vital use to the African Literary tradition because it honors not only Black folk as the subject, but also honors the nommo, the spirit life behind the spoken word itself. Both spoken word and performance for these reasons are crucial to my ethnographic practice and the lineages of the ethnographers who influence my approaches.

My method of utilizing the spoken word beyond its textual form is through performance ethnography.

Performance Ethnography

Below, I conduct a literature review exploring critical and performance ethnography in order to situate myself in conversation with ethnographers who influence my own work. I will be unpacking their methods of approaching performance ethnography in order to express the ways my work builds on these lineages. For this reason, I will be reviewing the work of D. Soyini Madison, Dwight Conquergood, Joni L. Jones, Rodessa Jones, Nikki Yeboah, and Ntozake Shange. I then explain the ways I use performance ethnography and the methods of my research. Lastly, I state my relationship with the communities I research.

Literature Review

D. Soyini Madison & Relationality

In, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, Black feminist and critical ethnographer D. Soyini Madison offers an entry to Critical Ethnography through unpacking the relationship between theory, method, and practice, while overall engaging questions around ethics and responsibilities to the communities, or *the Other*, that the ethnographer will be engaging. Crucial to "critical" ethnography, as Madison explains, is a commitment to human

freedom and well-being.[56] Critical ethnography is unlike the sorts of ethnographic practices invested in learning "the other" for the purposes of control and domination of "the other", much like the work preceding 15th century colonialism, but rather, Madison is suggesting ethnography for the purpose of making a contribution towards changing the existing conditions of those on the margins of society as an ethical obligation.[57] In reading through Madison's work, I was stuck by the concept of relationality and dialogical performance. Critical ethnographic work, according to Madison, requires the examination of the connection between self, community, theory, justice, and practice, and that the ethnographer is in deep relation to the other, "we are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with the other."[58] Her proposition here is deeply reflective of Black world-making expressed by Kevin Quashie: "In a black world, one can be of relational oneness, relation as a world of one's becoming that includes being more than one"[59]; this he asserts is counter to the western imaginary's understanding of being, which often emphasizes individuality. Madison and Quashie emphasize how beyond critical ethnography, the project of world building is one of relationality, which must take place in every sphere, including our ethnographic practices.

These many different understandings of relationality are central to the methodologies undergirding my work. As this dissertation argues, *recovery,* for Black folk, is the process of reconciling the loss of geographic and social connection, pleasure, and time. Laden in these

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[56] D. Soyini Madison, "Intoduction Critical Ethnography: Theory and Method". In *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. (SAGE Publications. 2005): 4.

[57] Madison, "Intoduction Critical Ethnography," 4.

[58] Madison, "Intoduction Critical Ethnography," 9.

[59] Kevin Quashie, "Aliveness and Oneness" In *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 32.

different forms of reconciliation is relationality or "I am because we are," largely due to recovery being about the collective and how these relationships build new worlds and foster therapeutic landscapes, despite efforts to displace Black folk from land. In thinking about performance ethnography as a method to bolster my research on articulating recovery as reconciliation, dialogical performance as a methodology seamlessly fits into this world of relationality as it hinges on the self and the other being in dialogue– a "performance" that "emphasize the living communion of a felt-sensing, embodied interplay and engagement between human beings.[60] Prominent Performance Studies scholar and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood also invokes Dialogical Performance as method, stating "Recognition of the ethnographic encounter as unavoidably entrenched in the politics of representation; both researcher and researchers are implicated in the meaning making process."[61]

Dwight Conquergood

In "Performance Studies: Intervention and Radical Research, Dwight Conquergood critiques what he describes as the "hallmark of western imperialism," *scriptocentricism* or the privileging of the written word.[62] What this means for subaltern people, is that texts themselves (green cards, arrest warrants, etc) become intimidating thus, performance studies projects offer much subversive potential.[63] Conquergood writes,

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[60] Madison, "Intoduction Critical Ethnography," 9.

[61] Dwight Conquergood and E. Pattrick Johnson, "Introduction: Opening and Interpreting Lives" I*n Cultural Struggles :Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (E. P. Johnson, Ed.). (University of Michigan Press. 2013): 8.

[62] Dwight Conquergood, D. 'Performing as a moral act: ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance'. *Literature in Performance*, 5(2) 1985.: 1–13.

[63] Dwight Conquergood, D. 'Performing as a moral act: ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance'. *Literature in Performance*, 5(2) 1985.: 1–13.

> A number of performance studies–allied scholars create performances as supplement to, not substitute for their written research. These performance pieces stand alongside and in metonymic tension with published research. The creative works are developed for multiple professional reasons: they deepen experiential and participatory engagement with materials both for the researcher and her audience; they provide dynamic and rhetorically compelling alternative to conference papers; they offer a more accessible and engaging format for sharing research and researching communities outside of academia; they are a strategy for staging interventions.[64]

Performance offers another method of inquiry that suggests alternative ways of knowing through embodiment. Conquergood calls this, "Knowledge that comes with doing."[65] Here, I am interested not only in ways of knowing that come from what an interviewer shares through word of mouth, but observations of what I can know through their body *language*.

Searching for Oshun

Joni L. Jones' "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity", offered an example of what ethnographic work in process looks like. Jones' begins with translating their research on the Yoruba deity Oshun into an installation entitled "Searching for Oshun."[66] A part of their interest in curating this work was reconciling their relationship to Nigeria, as an African-American, and the dialectal realities of feeling both foreign to, and kin to Nigerian culture and Yoruba Tradition. Undergirding this work is a question that was made visible to the participants, "What happens when images of Nigeria are brought to

[64] Dwight Conquergood, D. 'Performing as a moral act: ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance'. *Literature in Performance*, 5(2) 1985.: 1–13.

[65] Dwight Conquergood, D. 'Performing as a moral act: ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance'. *Literature in Performance*, 5(2) 1985.: 1–13.

[66] Joni L. Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity" In *Theatre Topics*, *12*(1), (2002), 1–15.

Austin, Texas for a performance installation: cross-cultural understanding or reinforcement of stereotypes?"[67] Jones' methods of ethnographic research is rooted in her understanding of performance ethnography, or "how culture is done in the body." Specifically, Jones utilizes installation and performance as setting to conducting field notes and observations and document the behaviors of the participants, while improvising conflict with actors/performance in order to generate moments in which audiences might have to engage the truth or the false of these encounters. They describe the primary ideas rooted in performance ethnography :"that identity and daily interactions are a series of conscious and unconscious choices improvised within culturally and socially specific guidelines, and (2) that people learn through participation."[68]

My dissertation argues that for Black folk in the United States whose ancestors endured the slave trade, addiction is symptomatic of having *lost our Mother*. Jones' ethnographic question, method and methodology offers an example of how to explore authenticity based on embodied knowledge in light of recovering from the loss of social and geographic connection. Jones suggests, "performance itself creates a particular authenticity that is rooted in the present, in the experiences here and now that are collaboratively and improvisationally generated… As a form of cultural exchange, performance ethnography encourages everyone present to feel themselves as both familiar and strange, to see the truths and the gaps in their cross-cultural embodiments. In this exchange, we find an authenticity that is intuitive, body-centered, and richly ambivalent."[69] Utilizing performance in this way can be argued as a tool of recovery;

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[67] Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," 14.

[68] Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," 7.

[69] Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," 14.

reconciling what has been lost, as featured in the performance ethnography I conduct at the end of this dissertation.

The Medea Project

"All art is social work. And I think that social work is an art"- Rhodessa Jones

Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women, details Rena Fraden's observations and critical analysis of the methods and methodologies underlying Rhodessas Jones' play, *Slouching Towards Armageddon.* Central to Jones' work is showcasing the subjective experiences of incarcerated women, whose voices otherwise, largely go unheard. Jones' began her ethnographic work in jails and prisons when invited to teach the arts with incarcerated women and recounts methods such as listening to incarcerated women and jotting down random things Jones would hear them say, and create language and movement through observing how they moved through space and engaged in everyday activities.[70] Before creating the Medea Project, Jones' would perform by taking on the persona of incarcerated women until she began to encourage them to write their own stories and perform their own work–eventually staging the works and putting the women's stories in relationship with each other and histories of state-violence.[71] This methodology of documenting these women's stories then situating them historically is part of the lineage of making the connection between the personal and the politics and the mutually informing relationship between micro-level experience and macro/global. Situating the individual lives of incarcerated women in context of each other and broader systems/ folklore/ and religion, moves beyond understanding the production of criminality being

[70] Rena Fraden. "*Imagining Medea Rhodessa Jones & theater for incarcerated women*. University of North Carolina Press. 2001.

[71] Rena Fraden . "Forward" In *Imagining Medea Rhodessa Jones & theater for incarcerated women*. (University of North Carolina Press. 2001): 9.

contingent on individual behaviors, but rather, an interconnection between the kinds of bodies and experiences we associate with criminality, and the ways social neglect–normative–produces group vulnerability for those racialized as non-white. As a decarceration project, The Medea Project investigates the conditions that produce imprisonment in order to envision a way to chart a new path that resists these systems and traps. One of the methods that Jones' uses in creating *Slouching Towards Armageddon,* is having the performances move into the areas designated as "audience " space.[72] This disrupts the audience/performer relationship through forcing the audience to reconcile the impulse to separate "us" versus "them" and to instead wrestle with the reality that incarcerated women's stories are the audiences' obligation to tend to them as well.

Rodessa Jones and D. Soyini Madison both regard the activist obligation of performance ethnographic work. While in my project I intend to highlight the gender, raced, and classed dimensions of recovering from addiction in the Central District, I ultimately want to reassert the normality of behaviors associated with addiction order to promote stigmatization as well as the end of the mass incarceration of those who engage in illicit drug use.

Further, Jones' work raises questions around who gets to be embodied in these sorts of performances. Part of the work I hope to do is not only share stories of those who have maintained sobriety, but also feature an entire cast of those recovering from substance addiction. In doing so, I hope to disrupt the audience from the ability to separate themselves from the cast, as the common experience of addiction will be honestly framed that no person can deny their close proximity to "the addiction problem."

The M(others)

[72] Fraden, "Forward," 10.

In the play*, M(others)*, performance ethnographer and playwright Nikki Yeboah highlights the voices of four mothers whose sons had been killed by police in San Jose, California. Through utilizing the methods of interviewing and constructing a play that featured direct quotes from the mothers, we were able to hear the stories of those who are left to grieve the losses of victims of police brutality. "You took a life but you destroyed a whole family."[73] We hear in black and feminist circles that the ones closest to the ground are the ones most qualified to tell the honest story. Hearing these mothers recounting the moments leading up to the death of their loved ones (starting from infancy), turns the narrative from what could be captured in a body cam, to a more complete picture of the complex life of a person, who was loved, who experienced joy, who was sad, who sensed impending death, who was committed to family, who rode bikes and grocery shopped and ate McDonalds, who wanted a birthday cake like any child would. These complex beings get wrapped into prison logs, annual statistics, conquistadors' notebooks, ship logs, and enslaver's journals. I use Yeboah's work to define my lineage because I am interested in highlighting the interior lives of Black folk but also the stories of those we hardly hear. Yeboah's work, like the work I intend to do, is rooted in the feminist praxis of consciousness raising which ultimately leads to deepening our collective understanding of social justice.

For Colored Girls

For my last consideration of performance and critical ethnography, I look to the seminal work that invigorated my love for theater and the power of storytelling, Ntozake Shange's, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*. I invoke Shange's work to highlight the challenges in conducting ethnographies across time, and the Black Feminist

[73] Nikki Yeboah. *About The M(others)*. The Mothers Play. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from https://www.themothersplay.com/about

obligations to account for the silences in these archival histories. I also utilize Shange's work to illuminate how critical fabulation is born from embodied and lived experiences, and allows us to challenge the true/false dialect around subjective lived experience. In For Colored Girls, Shange through poetry and choreography (choreo-poem), depict the interconnected lives of seven different women residing in different locations, sharing their experience as "colored girls." These experiences include abortion, sexual-assault and rape, discord between sisters, love of Black folk, black men, dancing, and music.[74] While Shange's ethnographic practice did not begin with traditional methods of conducting field notes and interviews, her positionality as a Black woman and her relationship to women of color in real time, undergirded her articulation of the women in the play. Shange states,

> In San Francisco, I lived in a women-centered world, taught by women's studies, belonged to women's cultural and political groups. The Third World Women's Collective is primary what I am speaking of. The show was literally *for colored girls,* which to me meant for women of color. The poems were addressing situations that bridged our secret (unspoken) longing. *For Colored Girls* still is a woman's trip, and the connection we can make through it, with each other and for each other, is to empower us all.[75]

Shange's experience of "living in the world" and her sisters who she encountered along this journey were the narrative subjects informing her creative practice; this was her field- note and experiential knowledge. This aspect of Shange's work informs my practice of doing ethnographic work with folks who are directly situated in relationship to myself. Choosing the method of interviewing and attending meetings of places I frequent regularly is a part of this lineage of allowing the community I am directly apart of guide my creative work.

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[74] Ntozake Shange,*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf : A Choreopoem*. (New York: Collier Books, 1989), 10.

[75] Shange, *For Colored Girls,* 11.

Shange also illuminates the Black feminist obligation to tend to the dead in the archive of Black womens' history–which continues to be subjected to ongoing silence. Shange's character, "Sechita", is a character that does not exist "in-time" as the rest of the characters, but rather, she instead exists during the 19th century Reconstruction era. Shange states

> "I created 'sechita' in a class I was teaching at Sonoma State University in California. I had given my students an in-class assignment to look at a classmate and imagine who else she or he could be in a different time or culture. To cross-check the effectiveness, I always do my exercise along with my classes. I chose a young women who was so opalescent and lovely, her eyes were so sad, her cheeks so hard, she brought me to tears. I immediately thought of fancy girls in New Orleans who had to find some kind of work after the Civil War and during Reconstruction…The fancy girl dancing, her being is seen, independent, poor, and implacable.[76]

Sechita, in this sense, is born from the practice of critical fabulation. In her article, "Venus in Two Acts", Saidiya Hartman describes critical fabulation as a process that plays with the basic elements of a story from a contested point of view, which in turn, "throws into crisis" what happened and when.[77] The intention of critical fabulation is to make visible lives that have been rendered invisible and disposable. Sechita, through Shange building a narrative upon circus dancers and 19th century Black women sex workers, is both creating an ethnographic account of what can be learned through the archive, but also utilizes subjective understanding of Black women to draw correlations between Black women in similar industries today, "While the poem is set in the distant-time of the post–Civil War, Sechita could just as easily have been a young woman working the strip bars on Second Avenue"[78].

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[76] Shange, *For Colored Girls,* 5.

[77] Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism*, *12*(2), (2008), 11.

[78] Shange, *For Colored Girls,* 5.

Shange's work highlights a desire in my own ethnographic practice which is to tend to the stories of Black women who are still with us in the flesh, but also to bring life and embodiment to those we cannot "know", buried underneath the literature of dominant recovery. My work must not only involve knowing the women of Cherry Fellowship Hall in the Central District, but also the first Black women of the recovery movement whose stories we are still piecing together but *know*.

My Critical Ethnographic Practice

My critical ethnography builds off the work of the aforementioned scholars in the following ways:

(1) Relationality: Through building authentic relationships with my interlocutors, five years specifically, before ever sitting down for an interview, I became as implicated in the storytelling as my interlocutors. Often they described my relationships to them as familial or important in some way.

(2) The person is political: My critical ethnographic practice requires not only being in relationship to and interviewing my community members, but also situating their stories within a context that redirects self-blame for addiction to systems and cultures that produce it. While many folk with long-term sobriety have internalized self-blame, my work as an ethnographer, through conducting prior research and situating the performance ethnography at the end of my dissertation, allows readers who are unfamiliar with critical ways of examining addiction to be able to properly analyze and received the stories in the performance ethnography. Lastly, normalizing the prevalence of addiction within cultures that produce it, helps move the audience beyond the framework of "those addicts out there" and "me right here."

(3) Performance: As the above performance ethnographers, such as Nikki Yeboah, Rodessa Jones, and Ntozake Shange depict, storytelling through performance, in the words and stories written and stated from interlocutors, puts them in charge of their own narratives and centers them as the knowledge holders.

Cherry Fellowship Hall, Central District, Seattle, WA

Cherry Fellowship Hall, founded in 1981, is a recovery center in Seattle's Central District, and one of the oldest Black institutions left in the Central District, in light of ongoing gentrification. Recognizing the need for Black folk to recover in a sober environment, Bill[79] and Rufus chose the location of 23rd & Cherry to establish Cherry Fellowship Hall as the first predominantly Black recovery space in Seattle.[80] As a Black Feminist scholar and ethnographer, acutely aware of what happens when there is not enough adequate documentation of Black cultural legacy, I chose Cherry Fellowship Hall as the site of my research and spiritual/ intellectual pursuits.

I argue that the ability of AA to retain Black fellowship, and sustained sobriety for Black people, is due the ways it reflects Afrocentric spiritual principles and cultural values. T*he essential question I am interested in is what are the methods that support Black people sustaining sobriety in AA*? The following are research methods I used to gain insight on this question:

(1) *Attending meetings:* Attending meetings at Cherry Fellowship Hall and observing the space through taking field notes. I am utilizing this because most of my experience in attending

[79] Because Alcoholics Anonymous is an Anonymous society, rarely in the last name of a person shared or known. People are addressed by first name only, with few exceptions.

[80] *About Us*. (n.d.). 23rd and Cherry Fellowship. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from http://www.cherry-fellowship.org/

meetings has largely been participating for the purposes of absorbing information to help me along my own personal journey in sobriety. Going in as an observer shifted me toward ethnographic practice rather than being an everyday participant. In the later stages of this project, I decided Alcoholics Anonymous was no longer a space I wanted to belong to for reasons that exceed the scope of this project. However, my obligation to highlight community voices allowed me to continue the ethnographic process.

(2) *Conducting interviews:* Ten members were asked to interview for this project and of the ten, three were able to commit. Their interviews were present in the performance ethnography. The interviews took place via zoom for recording quality and translations zoom provides. Questions the interviewees were asked is one that is highly familiar to members of AA, "Can you share your experience, strength, and hope? What was it like, what happened, and what is it like now?" I wanted to ask a question that is common to ask a member in order to establish comfort with the interview process and to make myself responsible for the scaffolding of their narratives, rather than diverting them from their routine and comfortability.

In translating these interviews, I utilized direct language to preserve the authenticity of their narratives–an approach Johnny Saldana describes as "verbatim theater."[81] Lastly, as already expounded on in context of the function of theater, I (3) utilized my findings in my fieldwork to create a performance piece that utilizes verbatim theater to share the words, lives, and experiences of Black women, queer, and trans folk, especially elders in the Central District. When grappling with my positionality, I had to look at myself in relationship to those frequenting Cherry Fellowship Hall, and with the Seattle Central District itself. While I am a Black queer

[81]Johnny Saldana. "Introduction" In *Ethnotheatre : Research from Page to Stage.* (Routledge. 2016), 14.

non-binary person, which is a marginal position in Black communities, I am also a researcher and by virtue of this title and conducting myself as the researcher, I was in a position of power.

(3) Utilizing my own experience: Like Dwight Conquergood and Tami Spry reminds, there is always a dialectical relationship between the researcher and the researcher, and for this reason, I was considering ways I could put my body on the line for parts of the performance as autoethnography. In relation to autoethnography, Spry states, "self-reflexive critique upon one's positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within socio historical contexts."[82] This self reflective critique is important for myself as a researcher. Returning to Jones, they highlight accountability, subjectivity, multivocality, participation ,and ethics as central to negotiating one's positionality.[83] In thinking about accountability to my community at Cherry Fellowship Hall, I thought deeply about how my interlocutors might want to be represented. As an interpreter of culture, and from a place that considers the agentic nature of Black folk, I neither romantice what is held as deep spiritual truth, while validating the truth as it is experienced for the story-teller. Lastly, dialogical performance continues to be seminal in that it allows me to return to what Conquergood describes as "Speaking with other cultures instead of speaking about them" as I bring together the multiplicities of beliefs and world views each of my participants and myself may hold.

Chapter Overview

[82] Tami Spry, "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis" In *Qualitative Inquiry*, *7*(6), 706–732. (2001), 711.

[83] Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity", 1–15.

The overall flow of *Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother*, begins with Addiction Studies, the to my conception of addiction as symptomatic of having loss our Mother, and *recovery as reconciliation,* or finding mother through creative practice and spirituality, all the while reconciling with the loss of social connection, spatial connection, and pleasure. These chapters help frame the performance ethnography.

Chapter 1: "Recovery" as a Historical Category and Man, Man Again traces the history of the term *recovery* as deployed in twentieth century institutions such as Alcoholics Anonymous, the Recovery Movement, and Addiction Studies. This chapter argues that twentieth century logic of recovery reproduces ideas of white-masculinity as the exemplar of the human and the *recovered*–which philosopher Sylvia Wynter cautions us against. T*his chapter is concerned with what is meant by what is meant by recovery when articulated in a dominant sense? How do Black folk redress this?* Rather than utilizing normalized notions of recovery, this chapter argues, *reconciliation* and reconciling of many forms of losses is a better way to conceptualize what is meant by recovery when articulated from the margins. Methods I use in this chapter are close reading of addiction history and literature, while deliberately utilizing Black scholars to help analyze other ways to be.

Chapter 2: Searching for Our Mother, situates the reader into a discourse about addiction that is already articulated through a Black feminist lens–structural and a norm in cultures, such as the United States, that not only produces anti-Black violence but vehemently discourages and historically denies access to pleasure, land, and resources, as articulated by bell hooks in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self- Recovery.* This framework is antithetical to discourses of "disorder" and "diseased" as pioneers of the recovery movement suggest we understand addiction as. It begins with my own personal relationship to the material negotiated in this book

and the ways I consider my experiences in a predominantly white suburb and how this fueled my alcohol addiction. I then turned to Dionne Brand's *Map to the Door of No Return* and Saidiya Hartman's, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* to address addiction as symptomatic of being severed from connection and being made stranger to one's cultural knowledge. This chapter engages the questions of, *in the quest to "recover" from addiction, what exactly are Black folk recovering from, to where are we being restored, and what does loss of mother have to do with this journey?* I utilize poetry analysis as a method to connect larger themes of losing a mother, to a practice of reconnection.

Chapter 3: Spatial Dimensions of Reconciliation and Loss of Place explores the state of environmental affairs that produce the conditions communities would eventually have to reconcile with. This is done through examining the Katrina disaster and the ways both discriminatory housing practices and the failure of the Federal Government to respond adequately, left millions of Black and Brown folk dead, displaced, and in complete destitution. *Here I wrestle with, what does it mean to recover from an unnatural disaster and to where are we being restored? How does one return if one has been displaced and has no place to return to?* I then use methods of poetry analysis and autobiography analysis by Black women writers and performance to argue they are best suited to guide us through the spatial dimensions of what it means to lose space and place. Through spoken word and hip-hop mapping the cartographies of addiction, and the Black feminist space-making practice as a formation otherwise, Black artists and writers reveal the genealogies of storytelling and petit-marronage as responses to loss of land.

Chapter 4: The Skies as Meeting Place & Loss of Pleasure looks at the phenomena of flight as depicted in both African and Indigenous folklore and uses that as a metaphor to think of

the Sky as material and ontological meeting place for Black and Indigenous folks to co-think what it means to reconcile the loss of pleasure. Flight, as it related to pleasure, it is negotiated by exploring "getting high" and fleeting to maroonage as an act of communal preservation. This chapter utilizes the method of poetry and music analysis. Music is analyzed in this chapter because not only is it one of the most important elements of culture–in that from a song alone, questions of how does place and politics impact individuals and communities can be extrapolated from music. In addition, it is one of the devices that has been deployed as commentary on systems and social dynamics, and is a creative practice that exceeds the limitations of traditional academic text. Voice, sound, and lyrics all become multi-dimensional vectors to analyze.

Chapter 5: Alcoholics Anonymous & 21st Century Black Life or As We Have Always Done: Preface to Performance Ethnography, sets up the performance ethnography at the end of the the dissertation. This chapter is concerned with what are the elements of Alcoholics Anonymous that supports Black people reconciling with conditions that produce addition. Through field notes, participant observation, and literature review of Afrocentric treatment programs, I engage an aggressive counter read of the archive of Black pleasure in AA in order to understand, *what qualities of African-Diasporic culture are responsible for the retention of Black people in AA?*

Chapter 6: Performance Ethnography is the culmination of the dissertation, a scripted performance based on my ethnographic interviews. Because I was forbidden by the Institutional Review Board to turn this dissertation to an actual performance for anonymity concern (Cherry Hall is a small place and members may be able to identify who stories belong to who), sharing on a public platform in community was cautioned against. With that said, the performance ethnography takes place in three acts, and then an intermission, which signals this project is

ongoing. Act I begins with myself as a person reconciling with addiction. Act II centers my interlocutors at Cherry Hall. Act III is a reflection on Sisters in Sobriety in Oakland.

Chapter 7: Conclusion highlights the overall stakes of this dissertation and the questions that guide my future research.

1 *"Recovery" as a Historical Category and Man, Man Again*

> *Recovery: the process of combating a disorder (such as alcoholism) or a real or perceived problem.*[84]
>
> *Recovery: a process of change through which people improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.*[85]

Sylvia Wynter makes an influential argument that the struggle for our futures will be the continued reproduction of the conception of the human–overrepresented as *Man*, and effectively functioning as interchangeable with the *human* itself.[86] There are two iterations of Man: Man1–the description of Man that formulated between the Renaissance period and the eighteenth century, which sought to replace the religious hierarchy of mortal/immortal and natural/supernatural to a secular being, who obtain hierarchical power through human/racialized subhuman other–and further, and Man 2– the post-eighteenth century description of Man that through colonialism and the acquisition of territories, helped further these hierarchical relations.[87] In order to talk about the ways systems impact embodied experiences, we must talk about the *human* accompanying the body and the histories of the *human* as it informs questions of who is allowed humanity. Within the current order of western societies, embodying particular

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[84] Recovery. 2022. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

[85] SAMHSA, "Recovery and Recovery Support."

[86] Sylvia Wynter. *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument*. 3, no. 3 (2003): 260

[87] Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,* 264.

categories subject people to degrees of humanity: whiteness, masculinity, wealth, heterosexuality, education, etc., are but a few categories that in the dominant imagination renders those who embody such categories more human, or the exemplar of the human itself. These ideologies, both reproduced and internalized, denote a certain kind of humanity that when considered alongside categories such as *recovering* or *addict* exacerbate the human/non-human divide. Additionally, Wynter argues that the systemic production of the hyper-incarcerated Black and brown population, the houseless, the unemployed, and the criminalized for drug offenses are but a small part of the intricate formulation of Man whose conception is born from drawing boundaries around what the human is and whom it is not, thus, "one cannot "unsettle" the "coloniality of power" without a redescription of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation.[88]

In the spirit of Wynter, this chapter argues that twentieth century narratives of *recovery,* deployed by Alcoholics Anonymous, Addiction Studies and the Recovery Movement, promotes the normalization of white masculinity as the exemplar of *recovery* through the pathologization of Blackness as diseased, promoting colorblindness through erasing the culture-specific, and failing to acknowledge how systems of power contribute to the phenomenon of compulsive substance use. I argue that this inscription of Man within recovery logics produces the same human/non-human ideologies Wynters gave warning to and produced the idea of the exemplar *recovered addict* as a white, heterosexual, masculine being–thus. While this chapter engages the re-inscription of man as harmful in recovery logics, is not meant to assert Black folks' right to belong to humanity or preoccupy a discourse to regain some rightful position as a human subject, like my feminist foremother Hortense Spillers, I am critically divested from the category of human as is bolsters cis-heterosexual normativity–often at the expense of those considered

[88] Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,* 257–337.

non-human/nature/animal. I do however argue that these ideas about who is allowed humanity, deployed in the twentieth century, continue to be re-inscribed today. For example, The United States' Department of Health and Human Services describes their mission as, "to enhance the health and well-being of all Americans, by providing for effective health and human services and by fostering sound, sustained advances in the sciences underlying medicine, public health, and social services"[89] Yet it's branch concerned with substance "abuse", SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), relies on racist ideas underlying *recovery,* defining recovery as "a process of change through which people improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential."[90] As we know, in the United States, there are centuries of practices, legislation, and legal and extralegal efforts intended to prevent Black and Indigenous folk from enacting these very autonomies SAMHSA suggests they encourage and support. Thus, this chapter intends to analyze the term *recovery* more closely, which I have argued to be taken for granted as it normatively circulates in public discourse as an unquestioned "good"; why would recovery not be a good thing? I conclude with making an argument for Reconciliation, an analytic I argue adequately addresses the experiences of Black folk and offers a wider capacity to account for the ongoing systems of violence, while producing opportunities for agency and self-definition. In order to get to the necessity of Reconciliation, this chapter is concerned with the following questions: How does *recovery* get redressed from normative notions embedded in power and dominance? What is meant by *recovery* when circulated twentieth century articulations? What is meant by *recovery* when articulated from the margins, such as when Black folk express, *I am in recovery* or *I am recovered?* My methods of

[89] "About HHS." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). https://www.hhs.gov/about/index.html.

[90] SAMHSA, "Recovery and Recovery Support,".

addressing these research questions are examining the histories of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Addiction Studies, and the Recovery Movement; conducting a literature review of the basic text of AA; utilizing Black feminist writer, bell hooks to help articulate another way to understand the condition of Black life interfacing with addiction.

Historic Narratives of Recovery in the 20th Century & the Over-Representation of Man

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) emerged in the U.S. in 1935 by founder Bill "Bill W." Wilson and Robert "Dr. Bob" Smith, marking the beginning of the Recovery Movement. After their involvement in Christian faith-based Oxford Groups failed to yield them the desired results of abstinence from alcoholism, they eventually came together to form the basis of the AA and the Twelve Steps. Often when historicizing the organization, scholars tend to situate AA within the Roaring Twenties and the stock market crash of 1929.[91] Its early members have also been considered members of the "wet generations," or generations that were coming of age during the early 1900s–marked by War World I.[92] The program of AA, which continues to be the most widely accepted understanding of recovery, reflects the disposition of a generation of white college-educated middle-class youth who were at the crux of rejecting Victorian morality and the values of Prohibition, who turned to drinking as an act of revolt.[93] Former AA Member Holly Whitaker reminds us that "A.A. may be the foundation of global recovery, but it wasn't made with everyone in mind. It's a framework created in the 1930s by upper-middle-class white

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[91] Trysh Travis, *Language of the Heart : a Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey.* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press. 2010), 85.

[92]Robin Room, *Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1945-1962: The Party Ends for the "Wet Generations"* , 1989, 3.

[93] Robin Room, *Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films,* 3.

Protestant men to help people like them overcome addiction."[94] AA's emerged alongside the height of the eugenics movement, and before the "dismantling" of Jim Crow, thus, not only was AA not made with Black folk in mind, its ideologies were also entrenched in eugenics, racism, and heterosexist patriarchy.

The earlier literature of AA suggested the alcoholism was due to the white-male ego and thus, was devoted to dismantling the beliefs and practices of the "self-made man", the productive capitalist citizen.[95] Literary historian Trysh Travis explains,

> The ideal of the self-made man has had an important place in U.S. culture since the early Republican period, when earlier models of white masculinity (the genteel patriarch, the heroic artisan) began to be crowded out of the collective imagination by the shift toward industrial capitalism. It was at this time, Michael Kimmel has argued, that American men ''began to link their sense of themselves as men to their position in the volatile marketplace.'' They were ''born anxious and insecure, uncoupled from the more stable anchors of land ownership or work- place autonomy. Now manhood had to be proved.[96]

Bill W. and Dr. Bob came to believe that these values lead to "unreasonable individualism" and "out-of-control egomania" which underpinned alcoholism, thus, in order to recover, they had to relinquish the self to a power greater than the self; they had to abandon seeing the self as God themselves.[97] While this sort of interrogation of self-grandiosity was likely essential in the recovery of folks who were of similar positionalities as these fore figures, it is indicative of the sort of power and privileges associated with white-middle-class-masculinity.

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[94] Holly Whitaker,"The Patriarchy of Alcoholics Anonymous." *The New York Times*, 27 Dec. 2019.

[95] Travis, *Language of the Heart*, 87.

[96] Travis, *Language of the Heart*, 87.

[97] Travis, *Language of the Heart*, 89.

Throughout the literature are heteronormative understandings of alcoholism and the emphasis on the patriarchal, nuclear family structure. During its founding, though later contested during multiple feminist and womanist movements, alcoholism was a term that exclusively denoted white men, while their counterparts were co-constituted as wives of alcoholics who also needed their own version of the twelve-steps to support their husbands.[98] Within the AA basic text, "The Big Book", the chapter entitled, "To Wives" encourages the wives of members of AA to not only reach out to other wives who may have alcoholic husbands, but to also reach out to other women who may have drinking problems.[99] Travis writes, "Reflecting the default assumptions about gender common to their class and culture, early AAs assumed that alcoholism was a man's disease. AA meetings, as a result, were almost exclusively male.[100]
Although the fellowship of AA has diversified since its founding, with a national and global reach, the origins of this white hetero-masculinist lens still permeate what is understood as the *recovering alcoholic* and who gets excluded ideologically from those assumptions.

Beyond the conflation of In the chapter entitled, "The Doctor's Opinion", in the AA basic text, a letter from William D. Silkworth, M.D., a specialist in the treatment of alcoholism in the 1930's opens the chapter endorsing the disease model. Silkworth describes working with a client whom he regarded as the *hopeless type*, seemingly unable to achieve sustained recovery, long-term.[101] Silkworth's client was Bill W., one of the founders of AA, and through learning

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[98] Bill Wilson, "To Wives" in *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*. (New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2002), 104.

[99] Bill Wilson, "To Wives," 104.

[100] Travis, *Language of the Heart*, 75.

[101] Bill Wilson, "How it Works" in *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*. (New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2002), 58.

about Bill's creation of the twelve-step recovery program, Silkworth began to endorse this new method of recovery, writing:

> I personally know scores of cases who were of this type with whom other methods had failed completely. These facts appear to be of extreme medical importance; because of the extraordinary possibilities of rapid growth inherent in this group they may mark a new epoch in the annals of alcoholism. These men may have a remedy for thousands of such situations. You may rely absolutely on anything they say about themselves. Very truly yours, William D. Silkworth, M.D.[102]

From the outset, an alliance is forged between Doctor of Medicine and the twelve-step program, as well as a subsequent condonation of alcoholism as a disease. According to Travis, "Silkworth championed the idea of alcoholism as a ''manifestation of allergy,'' one that, if untreated, progressed into a full-blown disease with a ''definite symptomatology and a fixed diagnosis indicative of a constant and specific pathology."[103] Feminist Addiction Studies scholar Jolene Sanders writes,

> In reference to the disease model, AA refers to alcoholism as an "allergy" and uses this metaphor to discuss what science had yet to fully understand – the obsessive, compulsive nature of addiction… While this allergy metaphor is not based on science, it does nonetheless convey that the excessive use and abuse of alcohol is out of the individual's control. It also helped to advance the abstinence model of the AA program, as well… AA, and later the wider medical community, helped to destigmatize alcoholism by reframing what was once thought a moral problem that required individual self-will to overcome a disease outside the individual's immediate control.[104]

Although Sanders describes AA's work in destigmatizing alcoholism through referencing it as a disease beyond human control, these efforts fall short when the experiences of Black people and

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[102] Bill Wilson, "The Doctor's Opinion" in *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*. (New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2002), XXV

[103] Travis, *Language of the Heart*, 75.

[104] Sanders, "Seeking Acceptance," 433.

alcoholism are centered. The disease model poses a problem in that it relies on a matter of genetics and pathologization of the individual, without context of the social world and factors that may shape a person's compulsion to drink addictively. This is demonstrated in one of the most widely cited chapters of AA's Big Book, *Chapter 5: How It Works*, the chapter that outlines the premise of all twelve steps. Typically, every official AA meeting opens with this chapter. This widely cited chapter, from the outset, is laden with language of plasticity and racialized notions of who is capable of recovery. The chapter opening reads,

> Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest. Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it — then you are ready to take certain steps."[105]

This excerpt speaks to the idea of which alcoholics are capable of malleability and being on the journey towards obtaining abstinence; while it is loaded with also assumptions around who is capable of recovering. Here, there is a clear distinction between those who are capable–defined by those who are not–the Others: the unwilling, the dishonest, the incapables, the low chances, the pitiful, all of which are born that way. These notions, however, are deeply entrenched in racialized and systemic violence. At the time in which AA was formulating ideas about who could recover, Black folk were rejected membership and forms of participation. In the book, "Heroes of Early Black AA", AA historian Glenn Chestnut shares the realities of the treatment

[105] Bill Wilson, "How it Works," 58.

Black AA members during AA's earlier years were subjected to. Jimmy Miller, the first Black woman in AA, recounted the gendered and racialized politics of the organization that aimed to keep her and other Black folk out. Miller explained that gaining access to meetings required relentlessly knocking on the doors of white meetings and receiving dehumanizing treatment once allowed entry (such as only being allowed to drink coffee from broken cups, and being told to stand in the back of the room), all the while navigating "a deadly addiction."[106] In "How It Works" and other literature, access related barriers are unaccounted for, and instead, blame is placed on an individual's morality and natural inferiority, asserting some folks are naturally incapable, born that way.

Today, Alcoholics Anonymous is structured on the premise that each member is "merely an alcoholic", and that alcoholism is an "equal opportunity disease." However, Black feminist theory has opened space to interrogate the problematics of *alcoholic* as an abstraction. In her writing, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality," Gender, Sexuality and Black Feminist Studies scholar Jennifer Nash co-thinks with legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw who coined the term *intersectionality*.[107] Nash describes the slippery nature of abstract/universal categories by introducing the dialectical relationship between "visibility" and "invisibility", through examining the visibility of Black women at the moment of their erasure.[108] Nash describes how abstractions, such as "Black" and "woman", fail to acknowledge the experiences of Black women, thus, subjecting them to further marginalization. An example of this is the ways social movements,

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[106]Glenn Chestnut, . "Jimmy Miller: First Lady of Black A.A." in *Early Heroes of Black AA: Their Stories and Their Messages*, (South Bend, IN: Book Patch LLC, 2017), 82.

[107] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw,. 2005. "Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Cahiers du genre* 39: 51–82.

[108] Jennifer Nash,"Re-Thinking Intersectionality." In *Feminist Review*, 89, no. 1, J(2008): 1 – 15.

such as Black Lives Matter, became dominated by stories of state violence and extralegal violence enacted on Black men–Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, George Floyd, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile– may they all rest well, yet the stories of Black women, queer, and trans folk failed to be highlighted as regularly– Malissa Williams, Sakia Gunn, Kendall Chapman, Crystal Jackson, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, Ayana Stanley-Jones. The Women's March too centered white women and did not take seriously the growing prison population of incarcerated Black women, criminalized for survival related offenses. Both examples: Black Lives Matter and the Women's March, are movements that began with Black women as leadership. If we consider the asserts around "equal opportunity disease" and "merely an alcoholic", alongside the narratives deployed in the basic text of AA as explicated above, *alcoholic,* as an abstraction, reflects standard and normality–wearing a face that does not resemble Black women, queer, and trans folk; alcoholic, assumingly all-encompassing, denotes specifically, white masculinity. This is evident when it comes to drug treatment programs and their recommended treatment plans where Black women often are invisibilized as these plans are typically male-centered.[109] there is also a lack of serious effort in revising these plans out of a notion that it would be expensive to retraining counselors and social workers to be more culturally competent.[110] The male-centered universal treatment plan denotes an understanding of the "norm" as white and masculine. Black, as racial categorization has almost always meant *Black men,* and the gendered terms *woman* and *man* have almost always referred to white bodies.

In 1993, Black feminist writer bell hooks published, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self Recovery,* which describes recovery as a "liberatory political practice."[111] "Living as we do

[109] Carlton-LaNey, Mary Jackson, Roberts, "Revisiting the Need for Feminism," 908.

[110] Carlton-LaNey, Mary Jackson, Roberts, "Revisiting the Need for Feminism," 908.

[111] bell hooks, "Healing Darkness," in *Sisters of the Yam:Black Women and Self Recovery,*

in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing "wellness" is an act of political resistance."[112] hooks' writing is produced in the wake of not only the Civil Rights Movement, but in an era where Black women such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Anita Hill are seriously thinking about the ways Black women's physical, spiritual, and mental well-being continued to be infringed upon. Radical Black lesbian feminists in the Combahee River Collective expressed a similar view in the 1970s:

> There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women.[113]

Considering the stakes of moving the disposition of Black women's psyche to the forefront as expressed by the Combahee River Collective, hooks' argument about having a firm grounding oneself: knowing the self in context of the communities one comes from, is paramount to hooks' idea of recovery. Choosing wellness is not a neutral act, but rather, an act of resistance–critical to movement building.

An Argument for Reconciliation

Rather than utilizing normative notions of recovery, which I have argued reproduces Man, emphasizes the diseased individual, relies on ideas of linearity, while failing to trouble the concept of normality, I instead argue for the term *reconciliation* to address the complications of regaining or returning. Reconciliation highlights a process of moving through loss, which

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(Rutelege, 2014), 7.

[112] bell hooks, "Healing Darkness," in *Sisters of the Yam:Black Women and Self Recovery,* (Rutelege, 2014), 7.

[113] BlackPast, "(1977) the Combahee River Collective Statement",, August 29, 2019, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

includes the loss of social and spatial connection, time, and pleasure, produced by the same cultures that exacerbate addiction. I came to this word through a chapter entitled, "The Joy of Reconciliation" in *Sisters of the Yam*, where hooks uses reconciliation to describe the process of forgiveness, releasing bitterness, and communing with those who have caused harm to us and those who we have harmed. She reflects, "Reconciliation is one of my favorite words. Evoking our capacity to restore to harmony that which has been broken, severed, and disrupted. The very word serves as a constant reminder in my life that we can come together with those who have hurt us, with those whom we have caused pain, and experience sweet communion."[114] From this, she encourages Black women to practice compassion and forgiveness, especially to Black men and each other, and asserts, this is what "makes reconciliation possible."[115] While the exploration of forgiveness might be rich in thinking through processes of healing from that which produces compulsive substance use, for the scope this project, I diverge from hooks and the investment in the individual healing through forgiveness and compassion, and I am especially disinterested in the communion and forgiveness towards systems responsible for the premature death of Black folk. I am, however, inclined towards reconciliation for the ways it has been taken up as a favorite word that, for my Black feminist foremother invokes joy. Additionally, unlike *recovery*, which I have argued to be rooted in individualism, reconciliation is contingent on relationality and communion, which in the context of an anti-Black world, is crucial to our survival. I take up Reconciliation, then, as a word to explore more deeply its potential to articulate another way for Black folk to be and its ability to disrupt the ways our social lives have been impacted by

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[114] bell hooks, "The Joy of Reconciliation" in *Sisters of the Yam:Black Women and Self Recovery,* (Rutelege, 2014), 125.

[115] bell hooks, "The Joy of Reconciliation," 129.

recovery projects, with the hopes to highlight the capacity of Black joy to resound through relationality.

Though the concept of reconciliation has not been used as addiction specific terminology, it has been used to describe processes of marginalized groups responding to government administered violence, while cleaning up the pieces left behind by colonialism. We see this in the case of “Truth and Reconciliation Projects" that take place globally and have aimed to make right the relationship between government administered violence and the victims of that violence, such as the Indigenous peoples in Canada, and Black folk in South Africa. The spirit of my use of *Reconciliation* deals with addressing rupture through truth-telling and uncovering the stories of those who have been silenced, yet understands the *reconciling parties* as not between the state and the people, but the State’s responsibility to the people and the ways the people continue to exist amongst one another anyhow. Further, reconciliation does not function adjacent to reparations from the United States–knowing that there is much difficulty in repairing that which continues to be blown apart, packed in cages, and brutalized at incalculable rates. But like those harmed by colonialism and white supremacist projects, reconciliation becomes a process for the most vulnerable parties of making-do with the fragments and material realities produced by histories of violence.

Recovery requires reconciling with the loss of social connections such as being severed from one’s Mother in the case of chattel enslavement, loss of land due to gentrification, loss of time through disjointed relationships to spirit and ancestry across dimensions, and historical denial of pleasure that impedes the *recovering* or *retrieving* pleasure and desire. Because of the ways the very idea of *recovery* has been tainted by anti-Black notions, I redefine the term 'reconciliation’ to name the ways communities deal with rupture caused by state violence. At the

same time, my analysis suggests that reconciliation allows something else to emerge from the rupture, a byproduct that highlights one's capacity to discover joy, healing, and soundness of mind despite loss. I am interested in Reconciliation as an analytic to understand the condition of Black women, queer, and trans folks' wellness, which includes the ability to transcend the grips of compulsive substance use. I explore this through looking at its connection to space, relationality, and time. In redressing the dominant notions of recovery, I offer reconciliation as not merely a process undergone by an individual, but a process always in motion for communities subjected to ongoing violence, therefore, there is no neat ending to the process. It is an ongoing project.

2 *Reconciliation & Searching for Our Mother*

she stands in the mirror
and it sounds too much like a dial tone
like a you have reached the number of–510…
the whole house ruptures
in wail
and clash of furniture
flimsily glued together.
photos of store bought families in gold frames
quarrel with a f l u n g godey's lady's book.
a startled voice whispers
fool chil' you gon' wake massa' and miss's up
but she keeps collecting wallpaper in her fingernails.

and
when
all the frag-ments of shards
glass scale
the floor
pounces on
she them
like puddles of mamas faintly remembered cry
& wonder
if it still count as hurt if she is the only witness.
wonder
if she still Black if there be no more mirrors.
and at 21,
this will be the best understanding of displacement
from our African diasporic roots
that we will know.[116]

I open with an excerpt from my first published book, *This (Boi)yant Body: Narratives of*

[116] Bobbi Kindred, "The 13-Year-Old Living in Us" in *This (Boi)yant Body: Narratives of a queer Black boi and the waters that carry them.* (New York: Conviction 2 Change Publishing LLC, 2018), 11.

a queer Black boi and the waters that carry them, which I've expressed as a gift to my Black boihood, my inner child, and the many iterations of water that have supported my livelihood. "The 13-Year Old Living In Us" is a poem that explores the learned self-hate I acquired through being raised and displaced in the suburbs of San Ramon, California, which the book argues is an integral part of what later fueled my addiction to drugs and alcohol. In this poem, this version of myself is seemingly trapped within a home that I do not belong to, decorated with cardstock images of families that are not mine, and magazines such as Godey's Lady's Book– prominent in the nineteenth-century which depicted images and entries of what it means to be a "true woman." This was a womanhood that was pious, submissive, domestic, feminine, childbearing, pure–and white middle class.[117] At thirteen, I knew I could not embody this womanhood. As the poem progresses, I begin destroying the space around me, a space that does not belong to me, but perhaps belongs to "massa'" and "miss's", which is prompted by the act of looking at myself in the mirror. Massa and miss's , in this case, represents the space of authority taken up by the white bodies in San Ramon. When I've grown tired from the destruction, I am left with pieces to reconcile with: the loss of my "mother"– (represented by the dial tone, the voicemail of 5-1-0.., and her faintly remembered cry), the loneliness of grief born from loss, and the self-distortion from being phenotypically Black. The scenario the poem depicts articulates what it meant to be severed from my African diasporic roots due to spending my formative years in predominantly white neighborhoods and schools.

This chapter reveals how reconciling with the loss of African-diasporic culture and connection is tantamount to navigating through addiction. I argue that narratives of loss of ancestral connection, as written and expressed by Black women writers: Dionne Brand, Saidiya

[117] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 – 1860. *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151 – 174.

Hartman, and Alice Walker, animates the challenges of "recovering" from addiction, and "recovery" as normatively understood, and in turn, reveal processes of reconciliation that support Black folk experiencing such losses to move towards closing the wounds left by what has been attempted to be stolen from us—our cultural and ancestral knowing of ourselves. Additionally, utilizing poetry as a method is used here in the spirit of Audre Lorde, who expressed in her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", that poetry is "a vital and necessity of our existence."[118] Although the English language is limiting and colonial, poetry–in all its refusal to adhere to proper form, semantics, and void of feeling, is a method in which chapter argues is vital to understanding Black life through the tongue of the creative.

While the previous chapter argued that the meanings of recovery deployed in the 20th century harkened back to eighteenth century productions of the human as white-masculine embodiments, this chapter asserts that the problematic history of "recovery" continue to pose problems in the 21st century, still producing the same kinds of harm. For example, Marriam-Webster defines recovery in the following ways:

> *A. The process of combating a disorder (such as alcoholism) or a real or perceived problem.*
> *B. A return to a normal state of health, mind, or strength .*
> *C. The action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost.*
> *D. Time required for recovering.* [119]

These conceptions of recovery rely on the following notions: addiction is a disorder; there is a such thing as a state of "normality" in the realms of health, mind, and body; something that is stolen or lost can potentially be reacquired; and there is a relationship between time and

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[118] Audre Lorde. "Poetry is Not a Luxury" In *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007): 35.

[119] Recovery. 2022. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

recovery. These notions prove problematic when we examine cultures that produce addiction. Beyond the pathologization of addiction as a disorder, normality is a term that reflects power and positions certain subsects of society as beneficiaries of that power (often those possessing white-masculinity). When we think about colonial legacies of enslavement and displacement, and how these processes produce cultures of addiction, then the acquisition or regaining of what has been stolen or lost becomes laden with difficulty, such as the loss of land or social connections. Thus, Black feminist writers offer an alternative way to understand what recovery means when centering the experiences of Black folk. These Black women writers highlight for us how reconciling with loss is as much about going backward as it is going inward.

Situating Myself: Loss of Self, Loss of Mother

San Ramon, California, established in 1984 and historically composed of nearly all white-residents, has since been deemed not only one of the wealthiest cities in the United States, but also a majority-minority town, with folks of Asian descent being the majority.[120] With this growing diversity in mind, Black folk make up less than 3% of the population; this was the case when I began my formative years there in 2007, at age thirteen. By the end of my first year of middle school, I was acutely aware that Black girls were the most hated, and Black boys were admired only for their athletic contributions and through being hyper-sexualized. Thus, by my second and last year of middle school, I leaned into masculinity as a survival mechanism, seeking to be admired for something, rather than being ostracized for the texture of my hair, my skin color, and they ways the embodiment of my femininity failed to meet the expectations of white femininity. These challenges were exacerbated by being out and queer. Deemed the

[120] Bay Area News Group, "San Ramon's Population Has Exploded over the Past Decade," East Bay Times, August 15, 2016, https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2012/10/24/san-ramons-population-has-exploded-over-the-past-decade/.

"militant dyke" and being reprimanded by the principal of my middle school for expressing interest in another girl student, being told I am not allowed to talk about such desires on campus, I felt an acute rejection and dirtiness and internalized my Black queer embodiment as such. There continues to be ongoing efforts to highlight the racialized violence that has long existed in this suburban Bay Area city. In a 2020 interview with *The Wildcat Tribune*, a newspaper for Dougherty Valley High School, the high school I graduated from in 2012 while being the third class to graduate since its opening in 2007, Black students recounted the overt and covert forms of racism experienced on campus, including being deemed "ratchet" for wearing braids, heckled for not being "over" slavery, being handed bananas, and accused of incidents they did not commit.[121] One student states, "People think our school is diverse…since it is mostly made up of Asian Americans, they make it seem that racism can't exist," and elaborates on the socioeconomic disparities of the students by stating, "Specifically at Dougherty, it's definitely more of a socioeconomic problem because most students are super well-off while the rest are just aren't as privileged."[122] These racialized and classed dynamics, for young people in their formative years, creates a post-traumatic stress that students must reconcile with.

In 2015, after completing middle school, high school, and three years of community college in the Tri-Valley Bay Area suburb, I attended the University of California, Santa Cruz and lived in the Rosa Parks African-American Themed House. It was there it occurred to me that I had internalized blackness as inferior, and was finally learning a new version of myself through an African Diasporic belonging, at a highly segregated and racially tense academic

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[121] Daniela Wise-Rojas, "A Snapshot of the Unheard Experiences and Stories of Black Students in SRVUSD," The Wildcat Tribune. https://thewildcattribune.com/10190/news/a-snapshot-of-the-unheard-experiences-and-stories-of-black-students-in-srvusd/.

[122] Wise-Rojas, "A Snapshot of the Unheard Experiences,"

institution. What separated this sense of belonging, from merely understanding that I was phenotypically Black, was a new learned context of existence and a beginning towards the reverence for Black culture and African ancestry that the suburbs vehemently denied to me through the Eurocentric construction of American history in every subject taught, and the constant microaggressions I experienced with teachers and students that fueled my internalized anti-blackness. It was the Black students at UC Santa Cruz that gave me those contexts, and the same ones that suggested I may have had an alcohol problem.

It is through my experiences of abstaining from drugs and alcohol for the last seven years, alongside the process of acquiring language to describe the psychological trauma of being displaced in white neighborhoods, while connecting more deeply with my ancestry, community, and history as a Black trans person in the United States–that piecing together a holistic sense of who I am in context of where my ancestors brought me through has shaped the questions that motivates this chapter: *in the quest to "recover" from addiction, what exactly was I recovering from, to where was I being restored, and what did Mother have to do with this journey?*

While reading Dionne Brand's, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, the answer to *what did mother have to do with this journey* became simpler: Mother had everything to do with it. Through her use of poetry and autoethnography, poet and essayist Dionne Brand materializes a quest that many folk of the African diaspora are tasked with reconciling with: the grief of separation, and the realities of loss, pain, and disappointment that come with the attempts to locate belonging in contexts of being uprooted and stolen, and winding up at countless dead-ends, or Doors of No Return. The Door of No Return is both a metaphorical and material place–located at the first slave post in West Africa, at Elmina Castle.[123] Before boarding the ship

[123] Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return : Notes to Belonging*. Toronto Doubleday Canada. 2001, 11.

for the "New World", Black people walk through this door–of no return.[124] As Brand articulates, the material site functions as a location of trauma and wounding, but also produces a psychological wounding due to the absences it materializes for Black life that exists in the wake of this moment and the unknowing of ancestors and place to return to. It is this lack of context, unanswered questions, unreliable maps to nowhere, absences in the archives, failures of DNA testing to prove authenticity, stories in which have long been forgotten, ruptures and woundings from that which we cannot know about the specificities of our origins, that Brand helps elucidate: produces hauntings, self-hatred, and the anticipation of doom.[125] For many Black folk across the globe in the Americas whose ancestors endured the slave trade, we've lost our Mother, or rather, we were stolen from our Mother–creating loss, and we are tasked with understanding ourselves in context of a violent rupture that ripped apart pieces of our historical and cultural knowing.

Born and raised in Guayaguayare, Trinidad and Tobago, a place where African people where transported during the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, Brand observed the vestiges of chattel enslavement. In the book, she recounts a moment of witnessing two men brawl on the beach of Guayaguayare to the point of bloodshed:

> People here believe in uncontrollable passion, in mad rages, and in the brusque inevitability of death. Or damage. As if a face would not be a face without a scar, a finger not a finger without being broken, or a foot not a foot without a limp. Or a life without a tragedy. These things I knew before I knew they had something to do with the Door of No Return and the sea. I knew everyone here was unhappy and haunted in some way. Life spoke in the language of brutality, even beauty was brutal. I did not know what we were haunted by at the time. Or why it would be imperfect to have a smooth face, or a moment of hatred would take hold so easily if the sun had simply come out. But I had a

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[124] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 11.

[125] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 11.

> visceral understanding of a wound much deeper than the physical, a wound which somehow erupted in profound self-disappointment, self-hatred, and disaffection. Someday the man with the bloody seam in his arm would catch the other man and do him the same harm. This I saw when I was small."[126]

Wounding, as powerfully explained in this excerpt is not simply one of the body itself–when a physical body becomes wounded, its cells immediately move into repair, attempting to replace the injured cells with new.[127] But bigger than Brand herself when witnessing the fight, and far exceeding the size of two men in brawl, and larger than the cluster of onlookers and people attempting to interject on the conflict, is the psychological and spiritual impacts of being severed in a diasporic sense, and even bigger that, to which Brand would argue, is the vastness the ocean can provide–rich in history, and other methods of way-finding, such as provided by spirit, poetry, and turning inward.

I utilize the poetic theorizing of Brand and the Door of No Return as a foundation for understanding the wealth of contexts that are integral to thinking about reconciliation for Black folk: the Door happened, and by this Brand would argue, is the unequivocal truth–we know that our ancestors were made captive, we're violently taken, dispersed, and utilized as forced sexual and productive laborers across the Americas–and though there has been attempts to return to in order to know about the places and people that existed prior to colonization, the *place* does not exist. "Door of No Return is one of irreversible losses of those very things which make returning possible. A place to return to, a way of being., familiar sights of sounds, familiar smells, a welcome perhaps, but a place, welcome or not."[128] Parallelling this sense of loss is an anecdote

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[126] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 24.

[127] Temecula Center for Integrative Medicine. 2024. "Is the body designed to heal itself?" Temecula Center for Integrative Medicine.

[128] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 24.

Brand shares about her relationship with her grandfather and the rupture that began to grow between them from the ways he was unable to remember details about her ancestry and tribe her family came from–a wounding that Brand describes as "*profoundly disturbing."*[129] This sense of irreversible loss and profound impact of the Door of No Return, which Black folk did not ask for yet must reconcile with, is profoundly disturbing in that alongside the grief of what we cannot know and how it produces hauntings and potential for self-hatred, the severance of social connection and intimacy through knowing is compromised. These are challenges that are further elucidated by scholar Saidiya Hartman.

In, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along The Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman travels to Ghana to trace the history of the Transatlantic slave trade, further revealing the complexity of searching to reconstruct loss, or "recovering" lost histories. Through the process of returning to Ghana, Hartman reconciles with the reality that the slave trade produced a people that were strangers to their native land and severed from historical and cultural knowing, "To lose your mother is to be severed from your kin, to forget your past, and to inhibit the world as an outsider."[130] In reconciling her position as *Obruni*, or an outsider/foreigner, Hartman writes,

> Obruni forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong any place. The domain of the stranger is always an elusive elsewhere. I was born in another country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana. I had grown weary of being stateless. Secretly I wanted to belong somewhere, or at least, I wanted a convenient explanation of why I felt like a stranger.[131]

This deep grief born from statelessness, coupled with the desire to belong, is a theme carried throughout Hartman's work. This grief is not unique to Hartman, nor to myself in the experience

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[129] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return.*

[130] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother : A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

[131] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother.*

of un-belonging I acutely felt in San Ramon. Hartman recalls the disposition of African Americans who expatriated to Ghana during the twentieth century, who carried such a disdain for the realities of the status of Black people in America in the wake of chattel enslavement, that the fantasy of Afrotopia provided a direction for escape.[132] Like traveling to Ghana motivated Hartman to find belonging, like the fantasy of Afrotopia provided an opportunity for escaping disbelonging in America, like drugs and alcohol provided an escape from my realities of disbelonging, there is a direct correlation with the desire to escape pain and the desire for the opposite: pleasure, and this, I reassert, is the norm in cultures of addiction. bell hooks reminds us that addiction in Black life is interrelated to a desire for pleasure as well as a desire to escape pain.[133] This correlation of escapism, life satisfaction and pleasure, as it is linked to compulsive substance use has been reasserted in many ways. The American Psychological Association describes escapism as, "the tendency to escape from the real world to the delight or security of a fantasy world"[134] Sociologist and addiction studies scholars Honnu Joukhi and Atte Oksanen are researchers who have drawn parallels to the ways lower life satisfaction produces a desire to escape life and amplifies addictive behaviors.[135] In addition to this, a common sentiment echoed in the experiences of members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), was that members felt a love of the *effects* produced by alcohol–lowered inhibitions and numbing of pain. *Lose Your Mother*, through its themes of loss, escape, and pleasure, and the ways these themes parallel compulsive

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[132] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

[133] bell hooks,"Growing Away from Addiction," 52.

[134] "Apa Dictionary of Psychology," American Psychological Association, https://dictionary.apa.org/escapism.

[135] Honnu Joukhi and Atte Oksanen" To Get High or to Get Out? Examining the Link between Addictive Behaviors and Escapism." In *Substance Use & Misuse 57*, no. 2 (2022): 202–11.

substance use, is fertile grounds to think about not only coping strategies but the contexts that produce the events that communities cope from.

This brings me to questions which primarily concern themself with the notion of *recovery* itself. If there's an idea that one can recover from addiction, how does one recover from that which continues to be entrenched in ongoing systems of violence and at the backdrop of massive psychological, social, spiritual, and geographic rupture? Dionne Brand, as a method of reconciliation suggests: *way-finding*. In *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Dionne Brand invokes author David Turnbull's book, *Maps are Territories: Science is an Atlas*, where Turnbull reveals the complexity of cartography and the ability for maps to depict accuracies of location but cannot account for the ways peoples and cultures shape, relate, and respond to such lands. Turnbull states, "In Order to find our way successfully, it is not enough to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as a practical mastery of way-finding."[136] Brand then describes stories of Flying Africans or being "mounted" by Orisha and African spirits as methods of way-finding, ones that maps or dominant historical consciousness cannot account for. Way-finding is a form of reconciliation, a method of navigating through loss– suggesting a desire for motion despite loss. For Black folk across the diaspora, dealing with the normality of addiction, stemming from the loss of Mother and the subsequent colonial violences in the wake of that loss, way-finding as reconciliation requires a turning backward and turning inward. This turning backward and turning inward is exemplified in the ways African-diasporic spiritual practices have been used as a method of way-finding through navigating the loss of autonomy, land, and disconnection, but subsequently, wayfinding through cultures of addiction.

Way-Finding: Losing Substances, Finding Mother

[136] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 16.

There are extensive histories of Black folk expressing a concern about substance use as it relates to Black life, and though not always utilizing the language of "recovery" or "addiction," recognizes the material and psychological death, that results from being disconnected from having a deep knowing of oneself in the context of Black cultural histories *(intimacy with mother)* or from being uncritical of white supremacist-regimes invested in the rapid distinction of Black life. Thus, these groups of Black folk throughout history have argued how periods of abstinence or the sacrificing of vices is integral to that reconnection. The vehicle by which these reconnections to mother have been fostered is through spirituality, religious institutions, and activist organizations. Spirituality, religion, and spaces dedicated toward Black liberation have utilized these means to arm Black folk with knowledge about themselves as a mechanism to bridge the rupture of being severed from Africa to the preservation of Black mental, physical, and spiritual wellness. I highlight a few of these examples below. While many of the examples promote-abstinence only, I utilize them not to promote total abstinence–as the rigidity of "abstinence only" rhetoric can promote stigma, shame, and repression. Additionally, Black feminist, such as adrienne marie brown, have argued for a harm-reduction movement, which instead of criminalizing drug-use, turns the paradigm towards agency, public health strategies to reduce harm, the reformation of drug policies, and the eradication of other harms caused by the state's inability to keep people safe.[137] I align with the efforts of harm reduction, yet cite the following examples for their clear articulation of the relationship between periods of abstinence and decolonization. The question guiding this section is *what is the relationship between abstinence and African diasporic culture*?

[137] Adrienne Maree Brown, Rodriguez, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. "Weed On, Weed Off." In *Pleasure Activism*, Vol. 1. (United States: AK Press 2019), 140.

The Temperance Movement

The Temperance Movement, for example, often credited Middle-Class white women as central activators of the movement–largely due to the ways historical accounts of temperance highlighted the experiences of women such Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and other white suffragists of the nineteenth century who were outspoken about the correlation between domestic violence inflicted on women and compulsive alcohol use.[138] While these stories are important in understanding white feminist interventions, it participated in the longstanding efforts of depoliticizing Black activist work and historical contributions to U.S. society. Temperance was of concern for Black communities dating back to1789 and the establishment of the Free African Society of Philadelphia, which refused membership to those who participated in the consumption of alcohol.[139] Over time, other groups sprang up throughout U.S society, such as the New Haven Temperance Society of the People of Color, which encouraged abstinence as a way to combat American colonization.[140] The most prominent of Black prohibitionism, however, was the nineteenth century movement which recognized and actively combated the ways that the production of liquor created social and economic disadvantage for Black people and was supported by many civil rights leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth.[141] Prohibition, while often talked about in terms of morality, for

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[138] "The Forgotten History of Black Prohibitionism" - Politico, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/06/forgotten-black-history-prohibition-temperance-movement-461215.

[139] Donald Yacovone. "The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement, 1827 – 1854: An Interpretation" in *Journal of the Early Republic.* 8. No. 3 (1988): 282.

[140] Yacovone, "The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement," 282.

[141] Politico, "The Forgotten History of Black Prohibitionism."

Black folk, was a critique on the ways predatory capitalism sought to promote drunkenness amongst Black people in order to make a profit.[142] Black folk in eighteenth and nineteenth century U.S. society understood the facets of alcohol industry–distillers, brewers, and saloonkeepers, as systems that promoted the domination by white folk, while continuing the economic, political, and social disadvantage of Black folk.[143] Prohibitionism, for Black people, was understood as a project of emancipation. Thus, activists such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany organized abstinence-only temperance societies, while Black women's rights activist, Frances Harper–president of The Women's Christian Temperance Union, mobilized nationwide political activism, specifically around suffrage, prison reform, and labor laws.[144]

Black Churches

Prior to the emergence of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and prior to Black peoples' admission into the program, Black churches functioned as both physical locations and spiritual institutions, responsible for the safety, health, and well-being of Black folk in America, and aided Black folk with drug and alcohol dependencies. In the article, "Sources of Care for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems: The Role of the African American Church," behavioral scientists conducted a study on 272 Black churches in Los Angeles from various denominations, including Baptist, Church of God in Christ, Methodist, Pentecostal churches, and non-denominational Protestant. Their findings concluded that Black churches play a critical role in assisting communities with issues regarding drugs and alcohol.[145] From their study, 71% of the churches

[142] Politico, "The Forgotten History of Black Prohibitionism."

[143] Politico, "The Forgotten History of Black Prohibitionism."

[144] Politico, "The Forgotten History of Black Prohibitionism."

[145] Kathryn Derose, Paula Litt, Jeremy Miles, and Eunice Wong, "Sources of Care for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems: The Role of the African American Church." In *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 4 (2018): 1200-1210.

reported supporting community members with such problems by providing spiritual counseling, prayers and healing services, treatment referrals, and bible studies.[146] When encouraged to attend a treatment program by referrals, many of the church members expressed concern about the lack of cultural sensitivity, affordability, or embarrassment. In the article, "Incorporating Spirituality and Religion Into the Treatment of African American Clients," Black Psychologist Nancy Boyd-Franklin describes the history of the reliance of Black folk on clergy for support in addressing alcohol-related problems due to the ways churches have been trusted institutions for Black folk and have been active in combating the stigma and social norms that deny Black folk access treatment.[147] Boyd-Franklin shares her research findings of how "staying connected to a religious congregation while in AOD (alcohol and other drug) treatment has been linked to a variety of improved outcomes including better treatment retention, longer durations of abstinence, and lower rates of recidivism" for folks seeking treatment in areas within California.[148]

I utilize the above example to highlight how Black churches historically were responsible for retention of African diasporic culture, while subsequently aiding in supporting its members to overcome substance use. While sobriety was not always weaved into the fabric of Black religious space, the Nation of Islam depicts an example of how sobriety was weaved into the fabric of the institution as a Black cultural value.

Nation of Islam

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[146] Derose, Litt, Miles, and Wong, "Sources of Care," 1203.

[147] Nancy Boyd-Franklin. "Incorporating Spirituality and Religion Into the Treatment of African American Clients "in *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38, no 7. (2010):976–1000.

[148] Boyd-Franklin, "Incorporating Spirituality and Religion," 983.

The Nation of Islam is a Black Nationalist political and religious organization, founded by Wallace D. Fard Mohammad in the 1930's in Detroit Michigan.[149] One of the organizing missions was to teach "the downtrodden and defenseless Black people a thorough knowledge of God and of themselves."[150] Encompassed in being a member of the Nation of Islam was studying the Quran, worshiping Allah, accepting the prophet Mohammad, and promoting Black Nationalism.[151] Black Nationalism, articulated by Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney and Mary Ann Shadd Cary in the 1850's, gained traction in the twentieth century for the ways it promoted racial uplift. It became a growing religion for incarcerated Black men who overwhelmingly dominated the prison population.[152] Historian Ula Y. Taylor, whose research led to the exploration of women in the Nation of Islam and the forces that drove them to their participation–found part of the interest on the behalf of Black women, such as Anna Karriem, was the pull towards resisting political and racial violence. In recounting the narrative of Anna Karriem, Taylor describes Karriem's political commitment to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960's and the ways witnessing barriers around poll and voting injustice bolstered her militarism.

While the members of the Nation of Islam are subjected to the prohibition of consuming alcohol, the cultural significance of belonging and resistance continues to be of primary importance to its participants.

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[149] *Nation of Islam (NOI)*. Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Retrieved April 16, 2019, from https://crcc.usc.edu/report/national-association-of-real-estate-brokers-nareb-religious-literacy-primer-2019/nation-of-islam-noi/

[150] *Nation of Islam (NOI)*.

[151] *Nation of Islam (NOI)*.

[152] *Nation of Islam (NOI)*.

Finally, I explore Lucumi, a spiritual tradition that encourages the prohibition of alcohol as a part of their spiritual customs. Though the above examples are centered in U.S. culture and society, this dissertation makes a larger argument about the ripples of slavery across the African Diaspora, which impacted more than just populations in the United states.

Lucumi

Lucumi is a language, people and practice associated with Afro-Cuban culture and the Yoruba, deriving from enslaved Afro-Cubans; it is also referred to as *Santeria*.[153] When describing the function of West-African derived religions, such as its syncretism with Cuba to produce Lucumi, spiritual teacher and Yoruba Lucumi practitioner Luisah Teish states, "West-African religion was a force of bonding and for connection, among real people who knew each other deeply and intimately. Under slavery and the oppression that followed it, Black community was a powerful force of survival."[154] With this significance in mind, those who undergo the initiation into priesthood in the Lucumi tradition, the Iyawo, undergo prohibitions during this fifty-three week period, such abstaining from alcohol.[155] Though this element of abstinence is not necessarily correlated with addiction, it does show an intentional relationship between sobriety and African-based spiritual practice.

I explore these examples to reassert that Black folk have attempted to bridge the loss of cultural identity and substance-use through Black cultural tradition, including African-based spiritual practice. These practices alone suggest that there is a longstanding concern for Black

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[153] Lucumi. In *African Religions : Beliefs and Practices through History* (2019):155

[154] Luisah Teish. *Jambalaya : The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

[155] C. Lynn Carr. "Iyawo Experience." In *A Year in White*, (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2019). 70

wellness through knowing oneself in contexts of African-Diasporic histories and respective community. bell hooks develops this notion further when she describes the process of recovery as healing through the violence enacted by white-supremacy and patriarchy, and urges how this form of recovery is integral to self-preservation in the Black Liberation struggle, stating:

> Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice. Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing "wellness" is an act of political resistance. Before many of us can effectively sustain engagement in organized resistance struggle, in black liberation movement, we need to undergo a process of self-recovery that can heal individual wounds that may prevent us from functioning fully.[156]

One of these modalities, as hooks suggest, is moving away from addiction, as depicted in the chapter, "Growing Away from Addiction."[157] This assertion that exploitation is most possible when a lack of knowing of oneself and identity is present, is similar to a sentiment echoed by Toni Morrison in the foreword of her edited collection, The Black Book, an archival project and compilation of African-American history, life, cultures, and inventions. In 2009, when referencing the popularity of *The Black Book* and its continued circulation since its origination in 1973, Morrison writes, "Its new life is more than a welcome gift; it is a requirement for our national health."[158] This is to suggest and reaffirm that historical contexts and knowledge of the self, which in this case is born from engaging The Black Book which celebrates and uncovers

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[156] bell hooks, "Introduction: Healing Darkness," 7.

[157] bell hooks, "Growing Away from Addiction," 49.

[158] Toni Morrison. "Foreword" in *The Black Book.* (United States: Random House, 2019).

Black histories that would have otherwise perished in the archives of American history, is integral to the health of our most intimate communities and societies at large.

If we take Hartman's quest in *Lose Your Mother* and Dionne Brand's *Door of No Return* as a valid example of an alternative narrative of "recovery"--one that infuses understanding oneself in cultural context as well as reconciling with loss, then both writers give us a foundation to think about how recovery, for Black people, denotes something about the journey, that dominant notions of recovery have not accounted for. I argue, recovery, instead, is a process of reconciling with loss: the loss of social connection, the loss of land, the loss of time, and the loss of pleasure.

Mother Lost, Mother Found

The story of understanding addiction and what it means to reconcile with loss does not end at the loss. The story instead continues with what we know which has been gifted from our mothers and their mothers, to ourselves, that we will too pass on. We need not look any further than the theorizing produced by Black women writers, creatives, and artists, who gifts us creativity not only as theory, practice, and pedagogy, but as mechanism for healing the *mother sized hole* some of will carry in our chests: Hartman who gifts us critical fabulation to revive the interiority of black girls who'd otherwise die on the pages of ship legers, court documents, and overseer journals; Phyllis Wheatley who through her poetry teaches us the power of spirituality as a response to state violence; Harriet Jacobs who provides a praxis to building otherwise worlds; I am suggesting these theorists are best positioned to articulate addiction and what it means to recover– therefore are best suited to compass the way through such hardship. In turn, I am suggesting that the *gifts inherited* by Black women are a part of answering the question of "*what does Mother have to do with recovery*?" In the article, "In Search of Our Mothers'

Garden" by Alice Walker, Walker suggests that in the search of Black womens' creative practice, especially the Black women of the everyday– the not famous, the quotidian, in the gardens and in the workforce, we need not look any further than what is already in reach. When speaking of this search, Walker writes:

> I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day. But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit? The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high-and low.[159]

Walker then elucidates the creative practice exemplified in her mother's everyday: in the quilt and clothing making, in the storytelling, in the gardening. These acts, she later ponders, are perhaps a re-articulation of gifts passed down from a mother which may have existed in Africa centuries ago; which is to say that the search of our mother and their gardens, or the search of our mother and the contexts that fills the holes of loss, and grief, and displacement, or creative practices that have the potential to generate new worlds, is already inside us; is already vibrant in our spirit and flesh. This historically and culturally relevant knowing of ourselves, and uninhibited access to the repository of our mind, spirit, and ancestral guidance, is ours for retrieving. This search for our Mother yielded *Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother,* a Black feminist creative intervention into the harms enacted by hegemonic studies of addiction. The Black creative writers and artist I co-conspire this dissertation with, sing the songs of our ancestors, write the poems of our foremothers,

[159]Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens : Womanist Prose*. (San Diego :Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

and paint the portraits of our origins. My hope is through the scope of this project, we be brought back to what we've lost: the most abundant tools necessary to our collective healing are the lineages of creative power. We have everything we need.

3 *Spatial Dimensions of Reconciliation and Loss of Place*

Recovery: *the action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost.*[160]

the Mississippi River's toothless jaw and salivating lips
carry engraved tombstones and entire cemeteries
submerged.
histories/ legacies/of plantation/ of bone/ of flesh/
make river floors.
symphony/ hymn of young Black girl's laughter & wit/
& church bell/ make ripple and current through the waters/
the waters that tasted of petrified sweat and sob
when the river dam broke.

they canoed over carcass/
of Black bodies with bulging eyes looking for loved ones/
and aid/ and refuge/ and care in the clearing.
they searched the corner store for foods/ to find a sustenance
and flung themselves on mattresses to stay a float/ undrowned

and ain't they already seen enough to know/
and ain't nothing natural about disaster.
and ain't nobody comin.

and man man-made (nods in shame)
ain't nothing can keep the waters from runnin.

What we've come to know about "nature" and "natural" is instability and contentiousness. In the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, discourse around harsh climate as naturally occurring and potentially disaster-inducing became diminished by the emergence of discourses asserting the "natural" to be as inherently socially and structurally produced as science itself.[161] We heard that the hurricane came through but not of the levees that

[160]Recovery. 2022. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

[161] Spike Lee et al. *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,* Home Box Office , Production Company, HBO Original Programming, and

had been built to keep the flood out, being sorely neglected. Thus, when they failed, it left thousands of Black and brown folk dead and millions of others draggled, dislocated, and completely destitute[162]. Black civilians were the first responders as the federal and local government failed to respond swiftly. The locals risked their lives to ensure the safe refuge of others held hostage by the flood, and overpacked themselves in the Superdome, breaking sanitary code. Many New Orleans residents attest "Katrina was not an equal opportunity storm" as the realities of discriminatory housing practices made it so Black homes were three times as more likely to be flooded during hurricane seasons, than homes owned by white folk[163]. If, as the dominant notion of recovery suggests, that *recovery* is *the action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost[164],* then the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is useful in thinking about what recovery means for communities experiencing ongoing histories of loss. This is particularly true regarding the loss of land and spatial connection, ultimately making the regaining and reinhabiting such spaces, or re-possessing lost or stolen land, laden with difficulty and disappointment. How does one *recover* when tasked to reconcile with what may never be able to be regained? How does *recovery* account for the lack of desire to return or repossess something that reflects abject, dehumanizing, prior conditions such as the pre-existing racist housing practices in New Orleans? How does one return if one has been displaced and has no place to return to? These sets of questions surrounding Hurricane Katrina are applicable to "recovery" conceptualized more broadly.

HBO Documentary Films,]: 2006.

[162] Spike Lee et al. *When the Levees Broke.*

[163] Gary Rivlin, "White New Orleans Has Recovered from Hurricane Katrina. Black New Orleans Has Not" in *Talk Poverty.* Last modified August 29, 2016. https://talkpoverty.org/2016/08/29/

[164] Recovery. 2022. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

This chapter begins by arguing for the urgency of exploring the environmental state of affairs that produce the conditions that communities, such as Black communities in New Orleans affected by the hurricane, would eventually have to *recover* from and the difficulties of return. In doing so, I argue that recovery and recovery projects fail as an effort to address the theft of land and the displacement of peoples, and lack an understanding of how communities reconcile with loss of space, place, and geographic connection. I then turn toward the work of Black women artists and writers who help us to better understand these dimensions of reconciliation.

While many of the chapters are concerned with the relationship between loss and addiction, this chapter specifically is written against the backdrop of the work scholars of Black Geography have helped elucidate, that spatial matters exacerbate addiction. This is evidenced in Angela Davis' book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. In the chapter "Abolitionist Alternatives", Davis describes the context challenges those navigating addiction face, criminalization and prevention from treatment access due to the cost of treatment, such as the way one of the leading treatment centers, The Betty Ford Center, charges 1,175 per day.[165] Black Geography scholar Rinaldo Walcott reminds us that we cannot separate the idea of "crimes" and the ways the carceral state profits off the construction of crime, rather than actual holistic healing and rehabilitation.[166] Mass incarceration, as a geographic rupture exacerbates the phenomenon of addiction because not only are those navigating these positions tasked with reconciling with conditions that produce carceral geographies, but cultures of addiction as well. Thus, I return to the guiding questions of this chapter to add, what are the landscapes that exacerbate addiction and how does one *recover* from this?

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[165] Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003, 109.

[166] Walcott, Rinaldo. *On Property : Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition*. First ed. Field Notes (Biblioasis) ; #2. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2021.

"Recovery" Projects in the Wake

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many residents were not able to return to their homes, and recovery projects put forth by the federal government caused more harm than good for Black people. For example, the Road Home Program, a federally-funded program implemented to help Louisiana *recover* from the storm by providing nine billion dollars to residents for rebuilding, instead exacerbated racial inequity by supplying more money and aid to those in wealthier areas and fewer resources and aid to poorer neighborhoods.[167] This underinvestment in Black communities and racial segregation made it difficult for many families to return or rebuild. In addition, many of the lower-income families who received aid were sued by the state who alleged that these families had misappropriated their funds and misspent under the rules of the Road Home Program.[168] Although eighteen years later the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) forgave the debt accrued by the homeowners, this did not apply to those who had already paid back thousands of dollars of debt ($46,000 on average) or were displaced as a result.[169] In the book, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast,* two-time United States Poet Laureate, Natasha Tretheway, poses a similar question when exploring the impacts of Hurricane Katrina and the histories of decades of wetland development that impacted the communities located along the Gulf Coast. When conversing with

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[167] "New Orleans Homeowners Still in Financial Storm 18 Years after Katrina," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 31, 2023, https://www.splcenter.org/news/2023/08/31/new-orleans-housing-crisis-18-years-hurrican e-katrina.

[168] Southern Poverty Law Center, "New Orleans Homeowners Still in Financial Storm 18 Years after Katrina."

[169] Southern Poverty Law Center, "New Orleans Homeowners Still in Financial Storm 18 Years after Katrina."

Derrick Evans, a historian and activist raised on the coast, Tretheway posed, "Can the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, caught in the aftermath of Katrina— of recovery and rebuilding— conquer this storm?", to which Evans replied, "I don't want to be able to say I can see the future, but the devastation of the storm will not surpass the devastation brought on by the recovery."[170] In this book of prose, Tretheway explains the ways recovery left a scar on the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, stating how post-Katrina, the cost of living along the Gulf-Coast had significantly risen, and although the state was required by congress to spend a portion of its billions of dollars helping low-income citizens recover, only about ten percent actually benefited from the federal money. Tretheway argues that despite claims that the state does not discriminate on the basis of race or class, poorer residents were ineligible for some of the aid programs as result of not being able to afford homeowners insurance.[171] Perhaps of the most devastating aftermaths of the hurricane, Tretheway shares about her brother Joe, a community construction worker who supported many locals, including their own family, in building infrastructures both before the storm, and to salvage homes after the storm. Unfortunately, due to major financial despair post-Hurricane, Joe ultimately became incarcerated:

> In the midst of all that devastation and loss—in the spring of 2007, nearly two years after landfall—with no money left from all the work he'd done on the houses before the storm, with taxes due on the vacant land and no buyers for the property, Joe made a desperate decision. When someone he'd known a long time asked him to transport and deliver several ounces of cocaine, he did. He made four thousand dollars. So he did it again. There was still the possibility of a life he imagined— prosperous, stable, perhaps even emotionally rewarding, as it had been when he was first renovating those houses.[172]

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[170] Natasha Tretheway, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010, 28.

[171] Tretheway, *Beyond Katrina*, 17.

[172] Tretheway, *Beyond Katrina*, 92.

Both Tretheway and Joe profoundly understood how the cost of living for the residents of the Gulf-Coast created such a difficulty to imagine a future in which they could continue to exist there, and when reconciliation took on the form of "crime" for survival, no system was culpable, only the people experiencing loss, displacement, and grief born from the dismantling of social and communal networks.[173]

So far this chapter has explored the Federal Government's idea of recovery, which has exacerbated the harm and grief produced by neglect and displacement. I now turn to Black women writers and performers for an opportunity of redress. The following interventions explore the poetic landscapes of reconciliation, as expressed by Hip-Hop and spoken word artist, Sunni Patterson, and the textual landscapes of reconciliation, as illustrated by Harriet Jacobs in the narrative of her enslavement, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. At the epicenter of reconciliation of loss of space, with Patterson being from New Orleans and directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina, and Jacobs born into slavery in North Carolina, both Black women writers are uniquely positioned to give accurate accounts of the spatial dimensions of reconciliation and the challenges of *recovery*, since both writers have experienced the brunt of anti-Black decision-making around land, space, and place. Taken together, these writers navigate us through the spatial dimensions of loss of space and the ways it compromises the mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of Black women. In doing so, authors propose alternative ways to *be* in *response to* and *despite* the conditions of place–carrying the spirit of Zora Neale Hurston when she expressed, "*I am not tragically colored.*[174]" With Sunni Patterson leaning into the art form of

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[173] Tretheway, *Beyond Katrina*, 59.

[174]Zora Neale Hurston, . *"How it Feels to be Colored Me,."*in The World Tomorrow,11, no. 5, (1928):1-4

Hip-Hop Storytelling and the ways it speaks truth to power, and Harriet Jacobs utilizing her position as a literate free and formerly enslaved woman, these Black women writers reclaim the narratives of what it means to reconcile loss, and they liberate others as a product of their art forms.

Cartographies of Addiction: Storytelling and Knowing this Place

I'm from the 17th repin Hollygrove slow
On the slick like cause my skins light and the pigs might
Try to follow me home
So I blur out where I come from
I camouflage in the southern breeze
By the bourgeois
The creoles in the east that can do slick backs without hair grease
Bragging over tea about their house slave genealogy.

Blend in and stay out the sun
Because the darker you are
The shorter the run.[175]

I'm from a stock
that pitch cocktail bombs and hand grenades
We pour cayenne pepper around the perimeter of a building
to keep the police dogs at bay.
I'm the . Panther Party
in the Desire Housing Projects of New Orleans."
I'm a nigga turning the gun on the national guards
Take a long, long look![176]

Broken glass everywhere
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far

[175] Mykia Jovan. "16 Shots," Letras, letras.com/mykia-jovan/16-shots/

[176] Clyde Woods et al, "We Made It." In *Development Drowned and Reborn*, (United States: University of Georgia Press), 2017.

Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under.[177]

Harkening to griots throughout history, whose role in life involved the sacred position of preserving the historical narratives, genealogies, and cultural traditions of the people of their respective communities, Hip-Hop artists, poets, lyricist, and word-smiths, weave stunning narratives together through the use of rhyme, form and truth-telling, as our modern-day griots.[178] Utilizing spoken word as a vehicle for storytelling, these artists act as community archivist, cultural preservationist, and orators of the status of the communities they come from and the conditions that produce their life chances, desires, and future directions. From Grandmaster Flash's "The Message", to Ice Cube's "It Was a Good Day", Eve's "Love is Blind", and Lauryn Hill's "I Get Out", throughout time, spoken word, and its derivative, the hip-hop, has recounted the spatial dimensions of culture and society and the direct impact of systems of power on place and space.

Hip-Hop derives from spoken word poetry, which, in its modern formation, traces back to the twentieth century with the Beat Generation Poets and the Black Arts Movement. The Beat Poets, emerging in the 1940's and 50's across the major cities of New York City, Los Angeles,

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[177] GrandMaster Flash. "The Message." Genious. https://genius.com/Grandmaster-flash-and-the-furious-five-the-message-lyrics.

[178] Griots, according to Area Studies scholar Tonia Leigh Wind, are "the guardians of universal knowledge and the stories and experiences passed down through the voices and echoes of the various generations of women of African descent".

Tonia Leigh Wind, "Griots: Guardians of Universal Knowledge." In *Black Women's Literature of the Americas*, 145.

and San Francisco, were poets who organized in the wake of WWII [179] This particular group formed against American nationalism and used their poetry to make social commentary and speak back against power, politics and oppression.[180] Poetry has always been instrumental to language and mobilizing for resistance, this is evident in the work of the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement describes Black poets who emerged following the Black Power Movement, from the 1960's-1975, particularly Imamu Amari Baraka who opened the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem. . The poets utilize poetry to uplift Black pride and history; this time was not exclusive to Black artists of poetry, but also Black musicians as well and visual artists as well.[181] The Black Arts Movement was up for critique of the ways it was again, male-centered, and still, it emerged some of the foundation poets that we know and revere: Nikki Giovnanni, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, June Jordan and Audre Lorde.[182]

There is a strong correlation between Spoken word, its derivative Hip-Hop, and spatial identity. In the effort to illuminate the crucial aspect of space as an organizing principle in Hip-Hop culture, Communications and Media studies scholar Murray Forman argues, "Rap music is one of the main sources within popular culture of a sustained and in-depth examination and analysis of the spatial partitioning of race and the diverse experiences of being young and

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[179] "The Beat Poets." Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/147552/an-introduction-to-the-beat-poets.

[180] "The Beat Poets." Poetry Foundation.

[181] "The Black Arts Movement" Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/148936/an-introduction-to-the-black-arts-movement

[182]"The Black Arts Movement" Poetry Foundation.

black in America."[183] Through the prioritization of space and place in Hip-Hop culture, such as the ways Hip-Hop artist map the dimensions of *Where I'm From*[184], rep their city–*"Don't need no handouts, shawty I'm from Hollygrove"*[185], express pride in regional affiliations, or rival over territories, Hip-Hop storytellers often highlight reverence, pride, and dignity of where Black folk are born and bred, and celebrate the grounds, culture, people, and memories that contribute to deep esteem for such places that raised the artist. Additionally, through journeying us through localized sites of significance, Hip-Hop storytellers reveal to us land struggles constructed by social inequities and uneven distributions of power that produce loss, neglect, grief, and addiction.

As cartographers of more than just celebration, but also pain, Black artists circumscribe internal insights, and thus, show us how we find our way out of such conditions. As a compasses of the "local experience", whereas doctors and social workers may be seen as tourist in such places when the methods of treatment and diagnosis is not rooted in histories that inform place, Black artists journey us through reconciliation, calling attention to systems seen and unseen–hyper-invisible, while highlighting the reality of life in their respective locations. Thus, Black artists have a unique way of understanding place and the constant shifting of what can be known as belonging to place; they offer an ongoing account of what it means to be in reconciliation, when such communities encounter the ruptures.

"*New Orleans, Sunni Patterson*"- Yasiin Bey

One of the artists contributing to such legacies is Sunni Patterson. Hailing from New Orleans' Ninth Ward, cultural worker, grassroots activist, and poetic word smith Sunni Patterson

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[183] Murray Forman,"Represent': Race, Space and Place in Rap Music." *Popular Music*, 19, no. 1, (2000):66 *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/853712.

[184] Digable Planets. "Where I'm From." Genius. https://genius.com/

[185] Ambre Perkins. "Preach." Genius. https://genius.com/

is a politically engaged artist and educator, and uses her creative form as a tool of liberation and elevation of social consciousness. Patterson was one of thousands of Black people forced to relocate from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina–migrating to Houston before eventually returning to New Orleans a year later, only to be displaced again from Hurricane Gustav in 2008.[186] Patterson's experiences and artistic work offers us a way to complicate dominant notions of "recovery" through outlining the terrain of Post-Hurricane New Orleans and the conditions that produced the social inequities within the city. In one of her poems entitled, *"We Know This Place"*, Patterson journeys us through New Orleans five days after the hurricane stating,

> And we know this place,
> for we have seen more times than we'd like to imagine
> bloated cadavers floating through waters of a city gone savage,
> foraging the land for what can be salvaged.
> But what can be saved when all is lost? …
> Few things are certain: one, we have no food;
> two, there are more bodies lying at the roadside
> than hot plates being distributed
> or first aid being administered
> or recognition as a citizen.
> Fourteenth Amendment, X, refugee, check.

To know a place, is to know the landscape, the people, and its histories; is to know the object markers, like "take a right at the 7-11" or "it's down past the pink house on the corner where the Johnsons used to live." *Knowing place* is knowing the changes; what it was before and what it came to be thereafter, and the host of memories of both the dead and the living conjured by place. Patterson's affirmation of *we know this place*, points to the fact that for most of her life,

[186] Jordan T. Camp, "We Know This Place": Neoliberal Racial Regimes and the Katrina Circumstance in *American Quarterly*, 61,no 3, (2009):693.

she lived in New Orleans' Ninth Ward and Algiers before being displaced by the hurricane.[187] The *we*, refers to the community she grew alongside and how the art she makes is intertwined with this community. In an interview with researcher and author, Jordan T. Camp, Patterson expresses this relationship between her art, her community, and the city "I know and understand the type of beat . . . they want to hear . . . and it is a beat I like too because I come from these same streets."[188] Patterson concludes this stanza by stating, "Fourteenth Amendment, X, refugee, check", highlighting the contradictions of how the citizens of New Orleans were neglected–as if considered non-citizen, a right the Fourteenth Amendment was guise to ensure, relegating those displaced to the status of refugee. Nastasha Tretheway in, *Beyond Katrina,* reminds us of the power of language through recounting her sister Aesha who was also displaced by the storm and her frustration with the term "refugee", correcting the term by asserting–"Evacuee" and continuing, "I am an American— not a refugee in my own country."[189] Through the use of irony, Patterson shows the absurdity of being rendered an outsider and relegated to non-citizen in a place you've known and have been native to.

On a 2006 episode of Def Poetry Jam, a television series airing from 2002-2007, created by Hip-Hop mogul Russell Simmons and hosted by Brooklyn bred Hip-Hop artist Yasiin Bey, to highlight the voices of novice and established spoken word poets,Patterson premiered her spoken word poem, "*We Made It.*"[190] This particular episode was filmed in New Orleans and before coming on stage, Patterson is introduced by Yasiin Bey with, "*New Orleans, Sunni Patterson.*"[191]

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[187] Camp, "We Know This Place, 694.

[188] Camp, "We Know This Place, 694.

[189] Tretheway, *Beyond Katrina,* 2.

[190] "About Def Poetry Jam," Def Poetry Reunion, https://www.defpoetryreunion.com/about/.

[191] "About Def Poetry Jam," Def Poetry Reunion.

At first glance, the introduction "*New Orleans, Sunni Patterson*" can be interpreted as a formal introduction between the audience (*New Orleans*) and Sunni Patterson (*herself*). However, by placing *New Orleans* alongside *Sunni Patterson*, the phrase can also be read as a list of synonyms, suggesting Sunni Patterson as one in the same of New Orleans, that the two are interconnected in deep relationality, that Sunni Patterson *is* the city of New Orleans–this is to reiterate, people are entrenched with place/space and the wisdom and experiences located in such places are as integral to "being" as one's own literal flesh, bone, and body.

In "We Made It", Patterson makes associations with "good" and "death" through recounting moments of blackness brushing up against state-sanctioned violence, including the abject auction block and the plead of Emmitt Till to his mother Mamie, "Tell them Mama, keep the casket open."[192] Throughout the poem, "Death ain't always this good" and "Death don't always taste this good" are repeated, often describing acts of death that counter "good death"--death that may be understood as free of corruption or as the Irmandade de Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte (Sisterhood of Our Lady of Good Death) may render "good" as peaceful, such as the death of Virgin Mary.[193] Patterson's "*We Made It*" not only acts as radical historiography, documenting the subjugated histories born from social neglect and anti-Black violence, but also serves as a cartographic portrait of legacies of premature death and how we overcome them. Patterson begins,

> So I'm from a stock
> that pitch cocktail bombs and hand grenades.
> We pour cayenne pepper around the perimeter of the building

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[192] Clyde Woods et al, "We Made It." In *Development Drowned and Reborn*, (United States: University of Georgia Press), 2017, 706.

[193] A. Moraes Ribeiro & J. H. Kennedy, "The Good Cause," In *Brazzil* 14, no.196, (2002): 33.

to keep the police dogs at bay.
I'm like the Panther Party
in the Desire Housing Projects in New Orleans."[194]

From the outset of the poem, Patterson invokes the lineages of resistance that have had to take place in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. The Desire Housing Project, constructed between the years of 1949-1956, was supposedly a solution to the ways urban renewal projects displaced many Black folk, locating them to the Ninth Ward. This was a shoddy project, as the buildings were poorly constructed and existed on a site that was once a landfill, generating toxins from housing built on wasteland.[195] The project itself contained more than 13,000 residents, all of whom lived amongst each other in 262 two-story buildings, with a total of 1,860 apartments, on an 100 acre plot of land. In 1965, the bottom floor of the project was flooded by Hurricane Betsy and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), responsible for building the project, failed to respond.[196] In the 1970's, the Black Panther Party established the Desire Housing Project as its headquarters and began organizing, providing educational classes, food programs and free sickle-cell screenings.[197] The governor at the time, Governor John J. McKeithen publicly stated he would not allow the Panthers to establish themselves in "his state", and on September 15, 1970, over 100 law enforcement, State Troopers, and the FBI, opened fire on the headquarters

[194] Woods, "We Made It." 706.

[195] Michael Matsumaru, "Desire Housing Project, New Orleans, Louisiana (1956-2001) August 8, 2019, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/desire-housing-project-new-orleans-louisiana-1956-2001/.

[196] Matsumaru, "Desire Housing Project, New Orleans, Louisiana."

[197] Matsumaru, "Desire Housing Project, New Orleans, Louisiana."

for over twenty-minutes.[198] Though no one was killed, members of the Party were arrested.[199] This is thirty-five years before Hurricane Katrina, and speaks to racist housing practices and historic anti-Black violence informing areas of New Orleans.

After expressing some of these histories in her poem, and repeating, "Death don't always taste good," Patterson turns to a story that depicts post-hurricane terrain. As we know, neglect did not just happen with Hurricane Betsy, it was acutely felt in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which had a tremendous emotional, psychological, and physical toll on the communities most impacted. Patterson writes of a family and the ways they reconciled with the loss produced by the Hurricane, because of neglect,

> Nah, Death don't always taste good!
> Just don't sound like something I wanna eat
> Often, I hear them say it was a train came through the room
> Left Mama so depressed she was unable to move
>
> Until one day . . .
>
> It was a few months after the Hurricane
> Husband and child found the trinity bloody in bed
> His wife, his son, his other daughter—dead!
> And on the end table there was a letter that read . . .
> it said,
> "I couldn't stay here . . .
> not for one minute longer,
> and it made no sense for me to leave here alone,
> cause who would take care of my babies with their mama gone?"

In this segment of "*We Made It"* Patterson describes the mental and emotional health impacts of post-Hurricane Katrina. She describes a husband and child finding the mother and two other children dead at home, in the wake. From these stanzas, we can infer that the mother (wife), is responsible for suicide and infanticide. The letter left on the end table suggests that whatever

[198] Trent Smith Paper Monuments, "Desire Standoff," New Orleans Historical, accessed May 14, 2024, https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/1428.

[199] Trent Smith Paper Monuments, "Desire Standoff."

conditions endured by the family, fueling Mama's debilitating depression, were so unbearable to live through that the decision of death, made on behalf of the mother, surpassed the desire of continuing to do life. Further, the more *sensible* thing to do, because *it made no sense* to leave her children behind, was to take them with her. In thinking about *sense* or *sensibility*, one might question how suicide or infanticide become a *rational* response to a set of stimuli and a form of reconciliation with loss of place. Was Hurricane Katrina so bad that death was a more sensible option? Perhaps this is the sort of question nineteenth century Margaret Garner may have encountered when her maternal judgment led her to slit the throat of her own baby when slave catchers arrived at her doorstep with the intent to return them to enslavement. Considering the robust literature outlining the correlation between declining mental health, post-traumatic stress, and disaster, alongside research exposing how two-years after Hurricane Katrina there was an uptick in mental illness and suicidality, the question of how killing oneself and loved ones become a rational response to disaster is worthy of exploration.[200]

Patterson's poem, thus, takes us to a locality within discourses of reconciliation that problematizes notions of recovery as *a return to state of normality,* for it asks us to challenge the notion of *normalcy* itself, who and what gets rendered as *norm,* and the relationship between *normality/rationality.*[201] Here, I'd like to think about "norm" as twofold: the norm embodied and the norm spatially conceptualized. If the embodied norm is not Black, queer, or woman, and the norm of space reproduces poverty and displacement, then what is sensible or normal, when articulated from the margins may be understood differently. Unpacking such differences may

[200] P.S. Lassiter andT.S. VanderGast, "Reflections 10 Years Post–Hurricane Katrina: Implications for Addiction Counseling" in *Journal of Addictions & Offender Counseling*, 38 no. 2, (2017): 84–97.

[201] Recovery. 2022. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

help us better understand the dimensions of reconciliation for Black people navigating loss of space.

Discourses around self-definition, for Black people, help us locate a sense of self that is often buried underneath notions of who we are–often determined by power. Afrocentric scholar, Wade Nobles, for example, defines self as, the "extended-self," an African-diasporic conception of self that recognizes the belief that, "I am because We are, and because We are, therefore I am"[202] This de-emphasizes individualism and instead calls for a self that only exists in contexts of interdependence with community. Black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," explicates the ways the American Grammar Book has buried Black women so deeply under terms such as *jezebel a*nd *sapphire*, that to know a Black women from a grammatical sense, we would have to scour to find her under such reproduced controlling images and languages.[203] Spillers concludes her essay by calling forth Sapphire, or the "loud mouth angry Black woman", as having the potential to write a new narrative of Black existence, engaging in what I call, "flesh talk," or the object making itself subject through expressing subjective experience and thought.[204] If Blackness has been depicted as the antithesis to rationality and normality, and Black women be always already buried under the identity of "insane" and "non-sensical", then being freed from the boundaries imposed by *rationality* in the dominant sense, shakes the Black actor from the rigid confinement of the rational, allowing for a re-definition of such term from the margins. Stated even more plainly, anything is possible when the rules don't apply or when one is always in violation of such rules. I am by no means

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[202] Wade Nobles. "Extended Self: Rethinking the So-Called Negro Self-Concept," in *Journal of Black Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1976): 20.

[203] Hortense Spillers. "Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In *Within the Circle*, (New York, USA: Duke University Press), 2020, 454.

[204] Spillers. "Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe," 480.

romanticizing suicide, but rather, suggesting that suicide when enacted under conditions that defy what is considered "normal" or "rational" in a dominant sense, reveals more about the social conditions that foster inequity and point to the contemporary and historical contexts that breed the conditions that precede processes of reconciliation. To further illuminate this point, the spoken word poem, "Sandra Bland", performed by poets Kai Davis, Nayo Jones, and Jasmine Combs during the 2016 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational at the University of Austin, Texas, raises important questions around the intricacies of "suicide" when enacted by communities undergoing deep oppression. In their poem, they centered Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old Black woman from Chicago who was taken into police custody in Texas for an escalated traffic stop (and for flesh-talkin), in July of 2015, and was later found hanging in her cell *allegedly* by suicide. For Bland's immediate family and for Black folks' familiarity with the violent and disreputable American policing system, Bland's death by suicide was seriously challenged and dismissed. However, these poets took a different approach to thinking though the death of Bland, and wrote,

> They called it suicide. We called it murder. What if it was both? What if they dragged her so hard against the pavement she did not want to get up. What if they laid brick over brick until the Texas highway was a catacomb– the culmination of all our past lives caving in on her. Until the weight of it was too much… Whether I jumped or was pushed, someone still put me on a cliff. Oppression can kill you from the inside out, break you until you are a body of casualty. Strangle you until death is a distant memory. We've gotten so used to dying, we've begun to expedite the process.[205]

[205] Taryn Finley, "This Poem about Sandra Bland Is a Powerful Reminder to 'Say Her Name,'" HuffPost, June 1, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/this-powerful-poem-about-sandra-bland-is-a-reminder-to-say-her-name_n_574f0b41e4b0eb20fa0c68a1.

Poets highlight the dialectal relation between suicide and murder and suggest the weight of Black womanhood and the abuse that Black women continue to undergo, could be responsible for the death of Bland, making Bland irresponsible for her own death. This important intervention not only asks us to interrogate the legitimacy of the term suicide, but asks us to explore the many meanings of the metaphorical rope and stool– and if the hung are Black, and woman, and mother, or queer, to whom and where are we being returned to in recovery projects?

Patterson concludes "*We Made It*" with the following stanza, which highlights an alternative path for the colored gworls who considered suicide, but moved to the ends of their own rainbows[206]:

> So, no matter how treacherous . . .
> They'll try to trap us in them trenches
> They'll dig deeper ditches,
> but all that matters is this:
> Which side will we pick?
> Which path will we choose?
> It's either win or lose
> Cause death don't come in vain.
> Not for us to remain enslaved
> Or our spirits to remain in cages
> It comes so we might be courageous
> To fulfill our obligation to our God and all creation
> To stand in determination,
> able to look Death straight in the face and say . . .
> We made it! We made it! We made it! We made it![207]

Patterson uses the conclusion of her poem to make a clear stance: that despite the efforts to regulate space (trap us in them trenches) and limit the life chances of Black folk, there is a spiritual and communal obligation of resistance and continuing to live in one's purpose despite. The content of the last stanza functions as a form of hope and dreaming an alternative way of

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[206] Shange, *For Colored Girls*.

[207] Clyde Woods,"We Made It," 706.

responding to the violence. Here, I take up *hope* as a form of dreaming up new map makings as my final consideration of Patterson's example of reconciliation. *Hope*, as negotiated here, is not the kind of hope we have seen deployed in a empty, mythic, and detrimentally unquestioned "good" kind of way, such as the ways hope was used in the ascendency of president Barack Obama–serving as a symbol of *hope* but ultimately reifying meritocracy and false notions of hard work lending to Black social mobility. I am not using hope to insight the warm–fuzzy–feels, but instead, suggesting hope, when backed by a spiritual and communal obligation can signal us towards a new way of being and dreaming a world anew.

This is demonstrated by the ways survivors of the Hurricane continue to reconcile with loss, long after the initial event. On the fifth anniversary of the Hurricane in 2010, Patterson spoke with news outlet Democracy Now! on the continued aftermath of Katrina, stating,

> Yesterday we had an event in what's called Hunter's Field. We started over in the Ninth Ward and second-lined down to this park area called Hunter's Field. But it rained all day yesterday. And to see, at the same time again, the people stand there just to even call the names of people that they knew, that they have lost in the hurricane, and even as a result, after the hurricane, people that have been lost to post-traumatic stress, you know, heart attacks, cancers that have been festering and all kinds of other health–overdoses that we've been dealing with. So to see these things and then, at the same time, to still see a glimmer of **hope** in the people's eyes is still an amazing, amazing thing.[208]

Since Hurricane Katrina, countless articles have been written documenting and raising concern about the correlation between post-Hurricane Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and there is still much to be said about the increase in substance use for displaced New Orleans residents. Studies show that for Black displaced communities, post-hurricane, alcohol consumption, for example,

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[208] Democracy Now!, "Displaced New Orleans Poet Sunni Patterson: I Will Be a 'Cultural Ambassador to Bring a Light to Every Injustice,'" Democracy Now!, March 13, 2012, https://www.democracynow.org/2010/8/30/displaced_new_orleans_poet_sunni_patterson.

significantly increased by 185% just one year after.[209] However, as Patterson highlights, alongside the stress, addiction, and other health issues, hope continues to be a mobilizing force and operates alongside the rituals of commemoration. "I know for myself," Patterson concludes, "not being able to be in the city full-time, it's something that still tugs at my heart, of course. But what I do know is that, you know, we have a lot of work to do, and I know that wherever I am, I'm certainly going to be a cultural ambassador, you know, for the city, to bring a light to every injustice and even bring a light to, you know, all of the stories of **hope** and **victory** and resiliency that go on every day and every moment."[210]

Like Patterson's poetry powerfully depicts, there are lineages of struggle that give birth to the generations that came thereafter to continue practices of resistance, knowing that in the everyday–there is victory. Patterson is on the lands of a city that long before her, such as the Panther Party in the Desire Housing Projects, and before them, our enslaved ancestors who resisted enslavement in Louisiana, laid maps on how to move despite setbacks. The next section explores the maps laid by formerly enslaved writer, Harriet Jacob, and how Black recovery groups thrive in her legacy.

Finding Place in the Loophole,
A Lesson in Reconciliation from Harriet Jacobs

A woman who calls herself Harriet is still peering through a tiny hole carved in wooden slats, witnessing the breath of her babies and their coaxing laughter, from above. In hideout, concealed in a small sliver between the roof of an attic, with shared occupancy of gnawing mice and thousand-strong insects-moving, she exists within a loophole--an undetected space, in the midst of the egregious conditions of chattel slavery. In this space, immobile, cramped, and with

[209] C.E. Beaudoin, "Hurricane Katrina: Addictive Behavior Trends and Predictors," in *Public Health Reports (1974)*, 126, no.3, (2011):126.

[210] Democracy Now!,"Displaced New Orleans Poet Sunni Patterson."

limbs growing increasingly debilitated, she possesses an all-seeing gaze on the outside and uses this carved freedom to eventually escape slavery. In this seminal memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Harriet Jacobs (1813-1987), utilizing the pseudonym Linda Brent, describes the "incidents" that informed her experiences as a mulatto enslaved girl from childhood to adulthood; of these incidences, Jacobs recounts the racialized and sexualized realities of Black enslaved women in Edenton, North Carolina, and the lack of sexual agency Black enslaved women were subjected to by slave masters. After experiencing years of persistent sexual advances and coercion by her master Dr. Flint, beginning when she turned fifteen, alongside the constant threat of her new born children being further abused by Dr. Flint as a means to assert continuous power over Jacobs, Jacobs devised a plan of escape which landed her in the attic above her free grandmother's home, a few miles away from the plantation Jacobs was enslaved to.[211] In this three foot high, seven foot wide, nine foot long triangular entrapment, with the assistance of her grandmother and other relatives, Jacobs manages to evade Dr. Flint and slave catchers for seven years, before making her way up North to freedom, along with her two children.[212]

Jacobs' narrative in some ways, challenges the current imaginary of the condition of slave life. In 2024, there are a host of films and media depicting the horrors of life in enslavement, often encumbered with imagery of brutal branding, graphic lynching, explicit lacerating, and unfiltered sexual exploitation and rape. It's difficult to deny the egregious conditions of enslavement, and Jacobs recounts witnessing some of these horrors throughout her novel. Jacobs, though never explicitly experiencing the act of rape, brandings, or beatings,

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[211] Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. (Boston: Published for the author), 1861.

[212] Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

describes the spiritual and psychological tortures and unbearableness of enslavement however that drove her to flee her plantation and seek refuge out-of-sight. When describing her experiences in the garret, or the Loophole of Retreat–the place which materially marked her insurgence, and the conditions that brought her to such a place–leaving behind her children for seven years, Jacobs states,

> This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others.[213]

Though Jacobs was exempt from many of the physical horrors of enslavement, including evading being raped, beaten, whipped, or branded–unusual for Black enslaved women who often were subjected to a treatment that of a *breeding object*, Jacobs' narrative highlights the psychological toll and continuous tormenting fear of rape, assault, and beatings, of not only herself, but of her children. Such psychological distress have caused Black women like Jacobs to seek an *otherwise* marronage from the ravages of white supremacy. Scholar Ashon Crawley poignantly states, "The urgency of our times, times that began *before* the inaugural events of Christopher Columbus's 1492 blue oceanic colonial expansionist mission, demands a thinking about what we might call "*otherwise*" possibilities, *otherwise* inhabitations, *otherwise* worlds. The *otherwise* in all its plentitude vibrates afar off and near, here but also, and, there. Black flesh knows this truth, the truth about the necessity of *otherwise* possibilities. In the midst of ubiquitous, seemingly unceasing violence, we need: imagination."[214] Jacobs, like those maroon societies of the Great Dismal Swamps of North Carolina, less than 50 miles away, depict an example of the ways

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[213] Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 174.

[214] Crawley, "Stayed / Freedom / Hallelujah," 28.

maroon societies functioned as a world-otherwise. Seminal in these otherwise formations, are practices of place-making as an act of agency and self-definition.

Jacobs' powerful recollection highlights the power of undetected spaces, and the sorts of autonomy over body, mind, and spirit that can be harnessed by refusal to submit to colonial regulations of space. By forging a path to freedom through reclaiming space, though cramped and disabling, Jacobs' autobiography creates a major pathway that explains the cunning ways Black women have *always* carved out spaces of refuge that function as sites of self-definition, within the many manifestations of genocide. If Jacob's *place*, like other Black women's lot in life, was under the lashes of humanity, then Jacobs is of the lineage of Black women who, as bell hooks describes, "have also dared to move out of our "place" (that is away from the bottom of everything, the place this society suggests we should reside)."[215] In doing so, we move from captives of manipulation to liberated subjects.

There is much to be gleaned from Jacob's Loophole and the ways it continues to have relevance today, particularly for Black women reconciling from addictions and the cultures that produce compulsive drug use–the same colonial cultures that produced institutions such as chattel slavery and institutions like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Of the many things Jacobs' autobiography gives us, is the foreseen escape of Black women who are asked to exist comfortably and compliantly within oppressive structures. This is poignantly seen in the case of Sisters in Sobriety, a Black-women centered group who fled traditional AA meetings for an otherwise reality. The culture of general meetings that cause this group to flee, abided by colorblindness and erasure of the culture-specific as a community value, while overwhelmingly

[215] hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. (United Kingdom: Routledge), 2014, x.

centering the experiences of white men and prioritizing racist European ideologies.[216] Despite these infrastructural faults, however, Black folk like those in Sisters in Sobriety, still sustain sobriety, empowering, culturally relevant, and are generative sites of Black Feminist theory. Black feminist, queer, and trans folk have made interjections into such ruptures, and reveal what Black folk have always done--create "worlds otherwise," loopholes within the many manifestations of genocide and indigenous ways of knowing.

A Loophole of Resistance: Sisters in Sobriety, Oakland, CA

If you came here without purpose, suppose you made a wrong turn to meet an end-dead, you'd never know us, otherwise. Only if you'd approach the succulent stained porch from weathered pots and perch your ears to the entry door, you'd finally hear the laughter belly-born. We meet here, in what reads as just another North Oakland block, where the Black babies run the concrete worn, buzzing of syncopated hymns and songs of youth–rendered the possibility of such existence. When the meeting commences—unofficial, ours, *otherwise*, we light sage to cleanse the living room space of Alondra's[217] home, in which we have all been invited to convene. The Sisters in Sobriety, regular Tuesday night meeting. At the intersections of the out-there un-recovered, and not quite AA approved, for we know "outside issues" fester on the inside and cannot be relegated to the unspoken. We take three minutes, then unapologetically speak over-time. We crosstalk; gumbo ya ya—snapping, grunting, affirming, ooh yessing and me too-ing, otherwise. We create kinship, Black and Brown— we know our recovery relies on this. A consciousness raising circle, all-sober, all-siblings, and if you had not come over here with purpose, you'd never know us.

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[216] Colorblindness, as described by , is the vehement denial that color discrimination continues to impact Black communities.

[217] Name changed for Anonymity.

If you've seen us at an official meeting, perhaps mixed meetings where the white
folk gatekeep any utterance of race—*an issue of the outside* they say,
you may have mistook us for "fellows amongst fellows"
not ever knowing we were scouting out our own,
not ever knowing the kinds of desperation that lead us to such place,
not ever knowing we are maroons,
not ever knowing we were hidden, right in front of your face.

In 2018, what once was informal gatherings became a regular ritual of running an unofficial Alcoholics Anonymous meeting out of a member's home. Collective in our desires, was an exclusively Black and Brown space to thoroughly process the many interconnected factors that contributed to our personal and communal wellness and ability to sustain sobriety, which for us, included speaking to the ways violence against Black people impacted our sobriety, especially in light of the murder of Nia Wilson, an eighteen year old Black girl brutally stabbed and murdered at the MacArthur Bart Station in July of 2018 by a white man. In addition, this meeting was born out of a growing frustration of general body meetings (meetings where anyone is welcome), relegating our concerns around race-neutral politics, racism, and queer and transphobia as "outside issues" or issues unrelated to alcoholism therefore as something that should not be discussed at group level. Here, with the Sisters in Sobriety (SIS), no topic was considered a derailment to recovery, but instead, every topic invoked as it pertained to gender, sexuality, and race, and proved to be a necessary part of working through barriers to recovery and relapse prevention.

Due to being an *unofficial* meeting and therefore having no *official* record of its existence, only known through word-of-mouth, the Sisters in Sobriety existed at the *interstices.*

When analyzing the efficacy of Harriet Jacobs' Loophole of Retreat, Gender and Writing Studies scholar Miranda Green-Barteet describes the loophole as an interstitial space–built for a specific purpose, yet is unbeknownst to those who are not the intended user or to the casual observer. Its rests between the known and the unknown which she argues, makes for its usefulness.[218] She further suggests that Jacobs' life too, is interstitial, for in the garret "she is neither one thing nor another, she is neither free nor enslaved, neither able to mother her children nor removed from their lives, neither subject to her master's tyranny nor completely safe from his threats. Jacobs is, however, more in control of her body and her life while in the garret than she has been at any other time of her life."[219] The interstice is a place rendered nothing as it is unknown in dominant consciousness but allows for space-making as rootedness. Interstice is useful in thinking about reconciliation in that in its existence, it offers an alternative or a reprieve from stringent racialized violence–making possible wellness. For the Sisters in sobriety, in the in-between-ness and un-charted space, we were neither un-recovered (in active addiction) nor participating officially in Alcoholics Anonymous. In order to be an *official* meeting, one must submit documentation to the Alcoholics Anonymous Central Office in New York, in which initially, the Sisters in Sobriety did not do. In this space of in-between-ness, we were able to operate outside the gaze and expectations of official membership regulations, thus, making this a space where uninhibited agency was most possible in the lives of these recovering folk: able to cross-talk or comment on another person's share, vehemently discouraged in official meetings, to defy the time restraints and expectations of confining one's share to three minutes, and sharing about the impacts of sexuality, class, and absolutely and of course, race, on one's recovery. The living

[218] Miranda Green-Barteet, "The Loophole of Retreat': Interstitial Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.'" in *South Central Review* 30, no. 2 (2013): 54.

[219] Green-Barteet, "The Loophole of Retreat': Interstitial Spaces," 54.

room space, in which we convened, in many ways functioned as a reprieve space, or space of refuge from the ravages of white supremacy.[220] The interstitially of SIS, allowed for members to operate outside the gaze of whiteness, while exploring the intimacy born from the ability to share honestly and vulnerably.

Spaces such as these are the crux of what it means to reconcile with loss of place/space. These meetings, Loopholes, or "otherwise" inhabitations, are central to the healing that can take place. *Otherwise* is how we heal, is how we are given space to reconcile. bell hooks notes, through her findings engaging with recovering Black women,

> Though a number of Black women I spoke with had worked through recovery programs that use the twelve step model, each spoke of the difficulty of attending meetings where few if any Black people were present. They all agreed that support and affirmation does not need to come from someone who shares the same race or gender, but they also acknowledged that it was meaningful and especially affirming to be able to share the recovery process with folks like themselves.[221]

Resmaa names, "Healing does not occur in a vacuum. We also need to begin mending our collective body. This mending takes place in connections with other bodies—in groups, neighborhoods, and communities. This communal healing can help us steadily build respect, recognition, community, and, eventually, culture."[222] These loopholes are spaces of reprieve, a place where Black folk can seek shelter amongst each other. Unbeknownst to us, we were taking the ancestral maps laid out for us, left behind by the Harriet Jacobs, to find our sense of place despite infrastructures designed to keep us in captivity.

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[220] Resmaa Menakem, "Body Centered Activism" In *My Grandmother's Hands : Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017): 240.

[221] hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam.*

[222] Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands,* 11.

4 *Flight Acts: The Skies as Meeting Place & Loss of Pleasure*

We crow walked and we learned to fly.[223]

The first time I saw Black people ascending, I was in disbelief--miraculous.
It was an August 9th, a frigid end of summer.
Awoken by commotion, of blinding blue and red hues,
dispatches, and bombing, and bullets,
of "get down now"'s,
and shrills and shrieks,
and "they killed my baby"'s.
I looked out my window and there it was:
Black folk leaping into the ether, first one foot then the other,
hovering over the ground like unholding to gravity.
There were no wings, no parachutes,
no bodies tethered to a million balloons.
Just young and old, and in between,
Black boys and Black girls, and those non-conforming.
Ayana and Trayvon,
Mike Brown and Sandra, ascending.
Oscar and Rekia leaping like leopards in flight.
Eric, Alton and Philando floating in the indigo night.

And I cried.

Forgetting to remember
That despite the dealings in flesh, the spirit was always meant to soar.

All I and all those others who witnessed the take-off on that day,
say those folk glided off the ground gracefully

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[223] Karen Recollet, *Aural Traditions: Indigenous Youth and the Hip Hop Movement in Canada.* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010, 4.

and floated away *deliberately*.
That is to say that nothing about Black ascension is mishap.

Black flight has long existed in African folklore and oral traditions and has largely been attributed to Black escapism within chattel slavery–speaking to the many ways in which Black folk have vanished, disappeared, evaporated, run away from or flown away to, to escape the egregious conditions of enslavement and to practice agency by transcending. In the popular folkloric story, *"The People Could Fly,"* retold and documented by Virgina Hamilton, Hamilton narrates the tale of African people having the ability to grow wings and fly, yet through being enslaved, forgot that flying was an actionable reality. They needed to be reminded. They needed to remember. Hamilton recites a scene in which enslaved Black folk take flight from the plantation,

> Say the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away. [224]

This excerpt depicts the moment of ascension at the time where death and hopelessness seem like the only possible outcome; *flight occurred at the moment of a doomed present*. In describing flight in folklore, Black feminist writer Barbara Christian states, "People of African descent emphasized their power to determine their own freedom, though their bodies might be enslaved."[225] Flight then becomes an *otherwise inhabitation*, an o*therwise possibility*, and an act of reconciliation against the backdrop of colonial violence.

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[224] Virginia, Hamilton. "The People Could Fly." In *the Book of Black Folktales 1934 - 2002.* New York: Knopf.

[225] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism Perspectives on Black Women Writers Barbara Christian* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 151.

Flight has been asserted not only in an African Diasporic sense, but also in other Indigenous ways of knowing. Writer, Leanne Betasomasake Simpson, takes up flight in her book, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, where in effort to redress the legacy of settler colonialism, industrial development and the centuries of dispossession of the Mississauga Nishnaabeg peoples –indigenous to what is now known as Southern Ontario, Canada–Simpson recounts the injustices produced by treaties, the implementation of residential schools, and education systems that denied their ancestry and knowledges, and leans on the guidance of Nishnaabeg Elders to compass, what she calls, her *flight path out of settler colonialism*.[226] For Simpson, this was done through learning the ways of the Nishnaabeg.[227] In the chapter, "Nishnaabeg Brilliance as Radical Resurgence Theory", Simpson provides us with a theory of flight, describing the concept of "Biiskabiyang" as

> The process of returning to ourselves, a re engagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out… an individual and collective process of decolonization and resurgence… It is the embodied processes as freedom. It is a flight out of the structure of settler colonialism and into the processes and relationships of freedom and self-determination encoded and practiced within Nishnaabewin or grounded normativity. In this way, it is a form of marronage."[228]

Through the possibility of freedom being located in indigenous ways of knowing for the Nishnaabeg people–language, customs, culture and the ways its produces self-determination, similar to that of the enslaved Africans in *The People Could Fly* who took flight upon hearing

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[226] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Nishnaabeg Brilliance as Radical Resurgence". In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Univ of Minnesota Pr, 2020), 17.

[227] Simpson, "Nishnaabeg Brilliance as Radical Resurgence," 17.

[228] Simpson, "Nishnaabeg Brilliance as Radical Resurgence," 17.

the words of their ancestors, Indigenous writers show us the importance of *flight* as a central concept to reconciling with the harms enacted by colonialism.

In a short story entitled, "Lost In The World Where He Was Always the Only One", Simpson recounts an old Nishaabeg story where in a skyworld, there existed seven grandparents who would take a young child from its parents on earth, bring the child up to the sky–raise him–teach him the forgotten ways of its people, then send him back to share with his people on earth.[229] I invoke this story to argue that in addition to flight as an act of reconciliation, *The Sky itself* becomes a material and epistemological space of encounter for Black and Indigenous people. The Sky becomes a material and epistemological place that gathers the souls of those taking flight–catching us as we leap into new worlds *otherwise*–free from anti-blackness, settler-colonialism, and white supremacy.

The concept of "taking flight" is not unfamiliar to any person navigating addiction. Intoxication, once colloquially referred to as getting "High as a Georgia Pine", denotes an alternate state of being, an escape, a levitation, a being lifted. When tracing the etymology of the term "alcohol" it too suggested escapism, as Arab scholars described the term *alcohol* as driving from *al-kol*, or *al-ghol,* which translates to "the genie or spirit that may take away the mind."[230] Adrienne Marie Brown, in her book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, though not self-proclaiming to be an addict, Brown expresses the relationship with decompressing from the harms of the world by using weed and implicitly asks the question, "with the level of

[229]Leanne Simpson, "Lost in the World Where He Was Always the Only One," MUSKRAT Magazine, January 21, 2015, https://muskratmagazine.com/lost-in-the-world-where-he-was-always-the-only-one.

[230] Rachel Hajar. *Friend and Foe The World & I.* 16. (2001).

violence and life stressors in this world, are you seriously expecting Black women to be present in their bodies at all times?"[231] Brown then describes getting high as a reprieve from that place.

This chapter looks at the phenomenon of flight as a project of reconciling with the loss of pleasure. The loss of pleasure can be interpreted in many ways so for the scope of this chapter, I am specifically negotiating loss of pleasure as a loss of social connection, evidenced in the ways chattel enslavement and settler colonialism not only disrupted land belongings, but severed entire communities. Being in the wake of that disruption, Black and Indigenous communities are tasked with reconciling with this social disconnection. To remedy this loss is to look towards social reconnection or the pleasure of relationality. Here I suggest, the *skies as a meeting place,* where Black and Indigenous communities experience the pleasure of relationality as an *otherwise world.* If as bell hooks suggests, addiction is related to the desire to escape pain along with a desire for pleasure, then this chapter is concerned with the correlation between flight, the erotic, and relationality in order to address the question of *what it means to recover pleasure*?[232]

I begin this exploration through utilizing Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic as subjective, creative, and in concert with others with whom we relate. We start with Lorde because The Sky as a Meeting Place is all about relationality and the relationships that become fostered in processes of decolonization. It is through those relationships that joy, pleasure, and ecstasy can be accessed. Because we cannot talk about moving away from addiction without talking about decolonization, I offer a close read of lyrics and poetry that deals with themes of "flight" and "escapism" by legendary musician Marvin Gaye and prominent poet Sonia Sanchez in order to make an argument for the urgency of relationality as a remedy for cultures of social

[231]Adrienne Maree Brown., Rodriguez, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. "Weed On, Weed Off." In *Pleasure Activism*, Vol. 1. (United States: AK Press) 2019. 140

[232] bell hooks,"Growing Away from Addiction," 52.

disconnection producing addiction. Then, I turn to flight in another iteration, as an act of resistance, catalyzing movement toward otherwise spaces and its ability to foster refuge from the denial of pleasure–such as the creation of Loopholes of Retreat.

FLIGHT I is the form of flight through escapism, or "getting high", particularly in the realm of drug use as a solution to seek pleasure. While *FLIGHT I* describes getting high to escape the pain of social disconnection, the examples used in the section highlight the temporary nature of escaping that pain, but does not necessarily bear the results of social *reconnection*. This section elucidates the limitations of "the high" as a possibility of sustainable pleasure because it disengages relationships with community. This is evident as the folks experiencing the high in the section reconcile with the pain of disconnection when coming down from the high, and the realities of the wounds that still gape–the high could not fix. This section is not to suggest getting high does not happen as a form of social activity or a way to bond with others that are also partaking, but instead aims to elucidate the very real realities of the limitations of getting high to heal the wounds of social disconnection. *FLIGHT II,* turns to flight as a form of maroonage, in order to create *otherwise worlds*.[233] This form of flight is still a fleeing of pain, specifically painful and harmful institutions, but argues that flight *requires the collective* to be possible, and thus, the possibilities of pleasure or the erotic, rooted in relationality becomes possible. Taking seriously the various forms of Black and Indigenous genocide, such as beautifully expounded on in Tiffany Lethabo King's, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, this chapter continues the work of Kings' *shoaling methodology*–bringing together Black and

[233] In *Freedom as Marronage*, scholar Neil Roberts describes the marronage as a concept derived from Awawak and Tainos thought which denotes a person or a group separating themselves from society and creating an autonomous community.

Neil Roberts. *Freedom as Marronage.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Indigenous thought to open up the space within Black Studies to contend with the direct relationship between enslavement and indigenous genocide, while refuting the idea that Indigenous ways of knowing is relegated to the land, as Blackness is relegated to the sea–together, as *FLIGHT II,* we make The Skies a meeting ground–and refute Eurocentric ways of understanding recovery.[234]

Pleasure, the Erotic, and Relationality

Black women, Black feminists, and Black queer folk have arduously articulated the need for a Black sense of being and connection to others, rooted in the exploration of the erotic: a realm of Black beinghood often relegated to hyper sexualization, objectification, and diminished subjectivity. We have seen this form of the erotic in what Hortense Spillers explains as the body being made "flesh," such as Black erotics as ungendered flesh or property producing/birthing other property for capital and labor.[235] This sort of regulation of the body and denial of pleasure for Black women, since the inception of modernity, poses a problem towards dominant notions of recovery which argue for a return to these "normal" states of being, or prior conditions. However, the story of the erotic process of reconciliation does not end in wounding. Here, I find it useful to look towards multi-hyphenate Black lesbian scholar-author-theorist-poet, Audre Lorde, who explicated an understanding of the erotic, that is, the erotics of relationality, which guides us toward the subversive power of intimacy with others. The erotics of relationality help explain how the lack of connection exacerbates the use of drugs within cultures of addiction, and further, how connection is the key to accessing pleasure.

In Audre Lorde's writing, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", Lorde argues that the erotic is something deeply innate in all women (and might argue today in many

[234] Lethabo King . *The Black Shoals.*

[235] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 68.

gender-diverse bodies), that is often suppressed in a male-dominated patriarchal world. Lorde describes the erotic as self-affirming, joy, a resounding yes, and intuitive pleasure sourced from the inside; it is laden with 'feeling' and being deeply in-tuned with the self.[236] Since Lorde's conception of the erotic takes shape both within the realm of sex, and also in the everyday, erotic then can be found in making music, dancing, and any other form of creating. Central to the erotic, as Lorde states, is "The erotic cannot be felt secondhand," and continues, "As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before."[237] I am interested in this reading of the erotic as felt, a manifestation of creativity and process of making, and in communion with others with whom we relate on an intimate level. This form of the erotic makes possible the retrieval of something in which Black and Indigenous folk have always possessed despite modernity, that is the erotics of relationality. Working in tandem with Lorde's theory, in *Black Aliveness or A Poetics of Being,* Black feminist queer poet and writer, Kevin Quashie argues for a conception of Black subjectivity through relationality and aliveness, stating, "In a black world, one can be of relational oneness, relation as a world of one's becoming that includes being more than one,"[238] this he asserts is counter to the western imaginary's understanding of being, which often emphasizes individuality. Quashie's *something else to be,* through invoking Black women's epistemology and aliveness as poetic praxis, reveals that the audacity of knowing and becoming in a Black world as an epistemological divergence from Blackness as already knowable and

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[236] Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic" In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* (Berkeley: Cross Press. 2007), 49.

[237] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 45.

[238] Quashie, "Aliveness and Oneness," 32.

defined from the outside. Is it through operating from this knowing that questions centered on how I live in this body, in this world, how do I grow, expand, and continue to acquire a knowing of myself through relation with others, emerge.

Building on these theories of pleasure, reconciling with the loss of pleasure means accessing a oneness which allows for the deeper connection with the self and others, allowing for the retrieval of where one might find innate joy, pleasure, and ecstasy. These erotics of relationality help us examine what happens when those experiencing addiction are severed from connection, and how connection allows us to preserve the future of our worlds. The next section explores getting high as a remedy for loss of pleasure and social disconnection, followed by another way to be.

Flight I

i want to do it again it felt so goooooood
Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict

I begin the exploration of the relationship between flight, pleasure, and the role of relationality with prominent poet, writer and activist, Sonia Sanchez's poem, "Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict." Before I delve into the content of the poem itself, the title alone suggest a few things salient to my argument for reconciliation: the importance of Black subjectivity and self-definition–for based off the title alone, we know the poem is going to depict the interior life of Sistuh Addict in her own words–despite being labeled "addict," a subject position I have argued to be vulnerable, stigmatized, and pathologized. Additionally, Sonia Sanchez does not seem to be speaking about her own personal story in the poem itself; by giving the protagonist the name "Sistuh Addict," Sanchez suggests a care, familiarity, and communion with the protagonist as *Sistuh* denotes kinship. This acknowledgement of kinship and worthiness of care is very Black and emblematic of Black culture and the reverence of even someone struggling

with addiction, such as suggested by rapper Tupac Shakur when he expressed, "Even as a crack fiend, Mama, you always was a Black queen, Mama," referencing his mother who struggled with crack addiction during his childhood.[239] From the outset, Sanchez sets the reader up to reorient the story of addiction as one that holds the full complexity of Black women's experiences. The poem begins with Sistuh Addict describing turning to dope because of a conflict between her and her mother on a Sunday after church. Sistuh describes:

> got mad at my
> motha cuz she got mad at me.
> u dig?
> went out. shot up
> behind a feelen gainst her.
> it felt good[240]

Sistuh Addict then goes on to affirm "I did it" and further, that she desires to do it again. The emphasis on feeling good as a counter to the negative feelings conjured as result of the conflict reflects a desire to escape the pain of discord, and in this case, discord with the maternal figure. There is an unapologetic and justified tone in the Sistuh Addict, evidenced by the short phrasing of each line, reading as matter of fact and leaving little room for another to interject into the story. Sistuh Addict argues that not only did the high feel good, but perhaps, it felt good getting high *at* her mother as well, stating it all happened, "behind a feelen gainst her", while doubling down on, "i want to do it again." Here, Sistuh Addict is claiming her pleasure and her desires to experience more of it, and how the act of flight, or getting high, brought her to the place of pleasure–a space she otherwise did not feel.

In the second half of the poem, the perspective shifts from the first-person storytelling of

[239] Tupac Shakur, "2Pac – Dear Mama," Genius, https://genius.com/2pac-dear-mama-lyrics.

[240] Sonia Sanchez. "Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict" in *The Black Scholar* 18, no 1 (1987): 32.

Sistuh Addict, to a witness. The poem describes Sistuh coming down from her high and someone leaning in "gently" to ask her, "sistuh. did u finally learn how to hold yo/mother?" and concludes with music drifting into the room as Sistuh cries, with a closing line of "and we all sing."[241] As the last stanza suggests, once the high came down, Sistuh is asked about the feelings she harbored towards her mother, and seemingly reverts back to the state of having access to the negative feelings–suggested by her tears. While I cannot assume the interiority of Sistuh's tears–be it born of anger, or sadness, or grief, we can assume that Sistuh feels good when she and her mother are not in discord, or, when she is able to escape the pain of the discord. This poem depicts how at the core of "feeling good" for Sistuh, if not a high from escape, then from being in harmonious connection. Additionally, the second half of the poem highlights the power of relationships, and specifically, the kinds of care that gets fostered through relationships. Though it is unclear who the voice of "sistuh. did you finally learn how to hold yo/mother?" is coming, I am reading this line as tender and caring, as Sistuh is not shamed, reprimanded, or seen negatively because of drug use, but rather, there is an investment in Sistuh getting to the root of the pain she is harboring.

Social work scholar Mimi Kim reminds us when thinking about the role of community, especially in spaces that call for a Transformative Justice framework rather than a carceral framework that "Communities are sites for prevention, intervention, and transformation, spaces where interventions can be imagined, initiated, and implemented."[242] This is not to romanticize community, for we know that communities can maintain violence against Black women queer and trans folk, however, community can also be generative sites of resistance and often become

[241] Sanchez. "Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict," 32.

[242] Kim, "From Carceral Feminism to Transformative Justice," 219 – 233.

obliged to the wellness of individual members within the community. The space for Sistuh Addict to shed tears, in which *we all sing*, is the antithesis of social disconnection, but pleasure in the form of what Lorde suggested, feeling, everything, firsthand and with another.

While the above example guides us towards understanding the role of flight, escape, pleasure, and the role of relationality in processes of reconciling with loss of pleasure, music artist, Marvin Gaye, takes us through this journey through claiming his own subjective experience. Through Marvin Gaye's life and music, the importance of relationality as a remedy to social disconnection is urgently highlighted.

Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)

By the time musical genius and legend Marvin Gaye releases, "Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky), on his 1971 studio album, *What's Going On*, already in his sphere is cocaine dependency, PCP "angel dust" use, deep depression and a suicide attempt.[243] In a series of interviews conducted over the span of his musical career, between the 1960's to mid-1980's, Marvin Gaye was vocally expressive about his experiences of living with depression and how he turned to cocaine as a panacea. In a 1980 interview, when asked about his biggest rock-bottom in the last few years, Gaye expressed, "When I tried to commit suicide through an overdose of cocaine…about three years ago in Hawaii. I was in an emotional state of–I've never been quite so depressed, I'm a bit of a manic depressive anyway, most of the time I put on quite a face and

[243] "Marvin Gaye on Depression, Drugs and Taming His Ego from 1983.: On This Day in 1990, Marvin Gaye Gained a Place on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A Gifted but Troubled Musician - He Candidly Discussed His Depression,...: By Bonafide Magazine," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/bonafidemag/videos/10155626612791777/.

an act, but I'm pretty depressed most of the time."[244] The source of this depression can be summed up to a fracture of relationality– the divorce of his wife Anna Gordy and the fear of the loss of love again, "I'm afraid if I ever fall in love again and I met the wrong woman, I don't imagine I'll live. I have a very fragile heart." Also the extreme level of physical abuse in his childhood, at the hands of his father who struggled with alcoholism.[245] There has also been speculation about Marvin Gaye's queerness that has circulated in public commentary, although Gaye never expresses this himself, could have absolutely contributed to his sense of isolation. When asked, "How do you feel about love?", Gaye asserted, "Love is misery. Love is miserable…Marriage, miserable...Sex is marvelous." and further, "I didn't feel like I was loved, and because I didn't feel loved I felt useless."[246]

Gaye was able to channel his grief through his music and the "What's Goin On" album continues to be one of the most important records in American Music. I am interested in the sequence of the tracks on this particular album and how Marvin Gaye positions "Flyin' High in the Friendly Sky" after the first two tracks, "What's Going On" and "What's Happening Brother", two songs that deals with themes of war, police brutality, pushing back against state violence, joblessness and poverty:

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[244] "Marvin Gaye on Depression, Drugs and Taming His Ego from 1983.: On This Day in 1990, Marvin Gaye Gained a Place on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A Gifted but Troubled Musician - He Candidly Discussed His Depression,...: By Bonafide Magazine," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/bonafidemag/videos/10155626612791777/.

[245] Jenna Inouye, "What the Last 12 Months of Marvin Gaye's Life Were Like," Grunge, August, 21, 2023, https://www.grunge.com/243462/what-the-last-12-months-of-marvin-gayes-life-were-like/.

[246] "Marvin Gaye Interview 1983," YouTube, September 19, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfIjkcCE_lU.

By the time the album situates us within those themes, Gaye sings:

Flyin' high without ever leaving the ground, no
Rest of the folks are tired and weary
Oh Lord, and have laid their bodies down
I go to the place where danger awaits me
And it's bound to forsake me
So stupid minded…
But I go crazy when I can't find it…
Well I know I'm hooked my friend
To the boy who makes slaves out of men.[247]

"Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)" drastically diverts sonically from the opening tracks. Whereas "What's Going On" and "What's Happening Brother" are played in the 4/4 time signature, a signature that is four beats per measure (think about songs you snap to on every second and fourth beat), "Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)" utilizes a 12/8 time signature, which is typically more common in jazz or gospel music, allowing for a more fluid and improvisational approach.[248] With a 4/4 time signature, the beats are consistent and predictable, steady and stable. The themes of state violence, protest, and social commentary presented in the first two songs pair well with the choice of the 4/4 time signature as the signature suggests a head-on approach to social commentary and stabilizes the contexts of the duration of the *What's Going On* album.

"Flyin' High in the Friendly Sky" begins with Marvin Gaye singing in falsetto, a range of sound in which a singer typically sings higher than their chest range, or "normal" range, and has been associated with male singers.[249] Falsetto has also been likened to a sound emoting pleasure, such as suggested in Rhythm & Blues singer, the Dream's "Falsetto", in which the singing in the

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[247] "Flying High in the Friendly Sky / Flying High without Ever Leaving the Ground, No," Genius, https://genius.com/1770312.

[248] Richard Wentk *Hands-on Music Theory*. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning PTR, 2015),75.

[249] "Falsetto," *Musical Terms : Music Glossary, Terminology.* Hong Kong: Naxos, 1996.

range of falsetto suggested noises during sex.[250] From the outset, the listener is immediately brought into a world of levitation, through the vocals and musical accompaniment alone. Though the content of the lyrics itself uses language such as "stupid minded," "I go crazy," and "I ain't seen nothing but trouble," the tone of the song evokes bliss, pleasure, and soothing, further attributable to the slow pulse of the drums, the strings instruments, Gaye's harmonizations in the background, and the periodic light crashing of the symbols–perhaps signifying the "hit" that sparks the levitation. This bliss, as depicted in the lyrics and the sound, is sourced from the high, allowing the flyer to experience "good feeling" despite being required to interface with pain, danger, and destruction. In the background of the song,

Though Gaye never claimed the story of "Flyin' High" as his own story, there are many similarities between Gaye and the character in the song who juxtaposes himself to everyone else. In the song, the protagonist recognizes that while on the quest for the high, the "rest of folks" have gone to lie down, and later states, "And I ain't seen nothing but trouble baby, Nobody really understands, no, no"[251] This highlights a state of being alone and misunderstood–a journey through social disconnection. Beyond the interpersonal, Gaye understood the contexts of reconciliation and the systems that produced cultures of addiction, here, I am reading the order of the tracks on Gaye's, *What's Going On* album as commentary on the global and its impact on the micro. Gaye begins the album with the track, "What's Going On," which has been expressed as an anti- Vietnam War song, highlighting the ways the war and police violence disrupted community and social connection: "Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying; brother,

[250]The-Dream – "Falsetto," Genius, https://genius.com/The-dream-falsetto-lyrics.

[251] Genius, "Flying High in the Friendly Sky"

brother, brother, there's far too many of you dying."[252] From here, the themes of addiction in "Flyin' High" respond to systems of violence, they do not produce it.

Although escapism through drug use is not what the theorists grounding my ideas of flight had in mind when expounding on the act of flight as revolutionary, I still however return to the concept of *The Sky as a meeting place* and a space of relationality to engage the title of this song. Personifying the sky as "friendly", suggests that the sky possesses a quality of care, and as a character of friendliness, the sky is a safe relationship; Gaye receives intimacy in the meetings in the sky through flight. Through this song, Gaye shows us the importance of close relationships. For those navigating addiction, the importance of a connection that brings us closer to reminding us we have a different set of wings, becomes of utmost importance.

Density of Connection

Before the woman who is my sponsor became my sponsor, her face came across a documentary screening in a course I took at San Francisco State University, Women and the Prison Industrial Complex.[253] Our professor, Dr. Janelle White, paused the film to explain that the woman in the video was the author of our course textbook at the time. A few months later, this same woman in the video, held my hand at a twelve-step recovery meeting and asked me if I wanted her to sponsor me; I knew in that moment God was speaking to me in a language that resonated as this was a Black, queer, Black studies scholar, and prison abolitionist. When we communed to read the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous, there were moments in which I

[252] Marvin Gaye – what's going on lyrics | genius lyrics, https://genius.com/Marvin-gaye-whats-going-on-lyrics.

[253] A sponsor in Alcoholics Anonymous is a person, typically who has been through all Twelve Steps, who walks another person with lesser time and experience through the same process.

forgot that the book was designed for white cisgender heterosexual masculinity. She brought the book to life through the ways her sharing of her own life experiences interjected the books narratives, and through her listening to my story and offering guidance rooted in her spiritual practice, passing it down to me, our relationship aided my process of finding the joy in the process of witnessing myself emerge from the depths of despair alcohol brought me. I use this story to illustrate the ways in which erotics of reconciliation account for the resuscitation of which was buried under the overconsumption of alcohol. It is through this continued relationship with my sponsor that I can retrieve a sense of connection and belonging and see myself as a reflection of another elder who has gone through the similar depths I have experienced–even as I still exist in an anti-Black, transphobic, world. Together, she and I build new worlds together, and if not intimacy with her, I would need it elsewhere. I do not use this term "world-building" lightly, in fact, it is the crux of what it means to collectivize outside of colonial logics. Here, I find it useful to think with Latinae Studies scholar, Mary Pat Brady. In *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child and Extinct Lands,* Brady directs us towards an ethos of world-building that problematizes scalar thought–a way of organizing, entrenched in the logics underlying colonialism and deploys "scales of captivity" to denote the ways that "scaling up" or "rescaling" creates variants of capture.[254] This is poignantly seen with modernity and other forms of colonial expansion; as we scale up, bodies become captured; European exploration bread the capture and enslavement of indigenous and black people, resource extraction in the global south bread occupation and containment of local communities, and militarizing borders while bolstering imperialism, migrant communities and families become contained in the crossfire. As an alternative to scalar thought, Brady proposes "density of connection" or "queer horizontality,"

[254]Mary Pat Brady, *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 29.

which she suggests, "exposes the rich connections that underpin the collective labor of making meaning through relation, and thus worlds more multiple than scalar binaries such as small/large or global/local would permit."[255] I found this particularly useful in thinking about the ways relationality and the dynamics that exist on a meso/communal level, are thought to be smaller and lesser important than what can be learned through zooming out and engaging the global, the transnational, and the worlds beyond the uniworld. Density of connection acknowledges that marginalized beings are always in the process of making new worlds, multiple worlds, resisting the impulse to conflate the globe with a uniworld–a singular world. Queer Horizontals is a form of relationality that pushes back against social disconnection in processes of reconciling with loss of pleasure.

Flight II

So far, *Flight I* has illuminated what it means to reconcile with the loss of pleasure through flight acts and relationality, particularly with utilizing substance use as a form of seeking pleasure and escaping pain. This chapter began by expounding on the role of flight as an act of self-definition and a precursor to building new worlds. Those new worlds can be spaces that support communities in addressing the harms of compulsive substance use while living in an anti-black and anti-indigenous world, such as the Sisters in Sobriety, Loophole of Retreat outlined in the previous chapter, where Black and brown women, queer and trans folk fled spaces like Alcoholics Anonymous general meetings that ask for their Blackness to be abandoned while asserting whiteness and race-neutrality as the exemplar of the recovered model. More generally, however, *Flight II*, denotes revolutionary acts that simply refuse to live by the standards and expectations cultures of addictions bound its citizens to. The following examples seek to argue

[255] Brady, *Scales of Captivity*, 29.

for the importance of relationality in a different flight act: fugitivity from larger institutions, spaces, and ideologies that promote Black and indigenous premature death. Not only is this kind of flight the kind of miraculous such as depicted in the word of mouth origin stories of the Africans that flew, but they are also the grounds for revolutionary possibilities–one that flips a center finger to quotidian violence, and seeks *otherwise.*

Action
Revolutionary
Into
Leap

Flight as a revolutionary act is echoed throughout Black feminist and Black trans scholarship. When discussing the structural and psychological dispossession of Black women and their lack of access to power and resources, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier name, "We might use our position at the bottom…to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."[256] The Combahee River Collective beautifully outlined the stakes of *leaping into action* and how the future of our world depends on taking the spiritual, physical, and psychological wellbeing of Black women seriously. Gender Studies and Asian American Studies scholar Grace Hong affirms, "This language of the "leap" is evocative; revolutionary action requires a moment in which one refuses the status quo. A leap defies the real—the demands of physics, of gravity—in order to be impossibly airborne, even if for a moment. The "clear leap" implies a work of imagination, the ability to believe that a different future might be possible, despite the seeming

[256]BlackPast, "(1977) the Combahee River Collective Statement •," •, August 29, 2019, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

inevitability of a crushing present."[257] Trans femme writer and archivist, Che Gossett, reminds us of power that orients itself away from center, "Centrifugal work begins with good-bye, wants to bid all givens goodbye. In the face of a widespread fetishization of collectivity, it dislocates collectivity, flies from collectivity, and makes flight a condition of collectivity. Making flight a condition of collectivity harkens back to the figure of the maroon."[258] Building from the work of these theorists, flight requires decolonial refusal, requires redefining reality, requires imagining new possibilities, *requires the collective,* requires the deliberate production of a world, otherwise.

Worlds, Otherwise: Collective Strategies for Survival

In the Spring of 2020, Alcoholics Anonymous pivoted from in-person meetings to virtual zoom, to virtual zoom meetings in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This allowed for new meetings to form and there emerged many exclusive meetings, promoting themselves as spaces designated solely for "BIPOC" Black, Indigenous, People of Color and "Womxn/Trans/Non-Binary/Intersex" members, and all-Black meeting groups. Customary to these meetings were members including their names, pronouns, and respective locations in which each member zoomed in from. Making visible these sorts of identity markers otherwise would not have happened in general Alcoholic Anonymous meetings that were in person, naming such identity markers would have been seen as "outside issues" or not relevant to one's recovery. Additionally, because zoom allowed meetings to transcend geographic borders, more conversations around land emerged. For example, in a recent meeting I attended, I noticed many

[257]Grace Kyungwon Hong. "The Future of Our Worlds: Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization." In *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.)* 8, no. 2 (2008): 95–115.

[258]Che Gossett. "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility" In *Trap Door : Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 187.

of the members referred to the locations in which they resided as native territories: “Marshall (They/Them) Ohlone Lands”[259], “Remi (they/them) unceded territory of the Lenape peoples”, etc. These land acknowledgements are material and epistemological sites of Black and Indigenous encounters, as not only are these acts of claiming indigenous lands taken up as a issues within spaces centering folks of color in twelve-step meetings, but both Black and Indigenous communities are actively working against cultures that produce addiction–through re-writing the violence of land theft and the depoliticization of Black and Indigenous bodies in twelve-step recovery.

The power of narrative rewriting and storytelling: evidenced in name changes via zoom and the use of folklore which opens this chapter, is further expounded on in the dissertation, *Aural Traditions: Indigenous Youth and the Hip-Hop Movement In Canada*, where Gender Studies scholar Karyn Recollet discusses the poetics of hip-hop in Native communities as collective memory and storytelling, disrupting discourses of dominance and formulates “counter-narratives that shape new visions of what it means to be Indigenous in a contemporary urban context.”[260]

> It's like we come from the stars. Our voicings do not follow the 'traditional' Western melodic stylez, but rather artfully integrate the break beats and the ruptures to reflect our experiences and visionings. We come from the stars...from above. *We crow walked and we learned to fly. Me and my sketchbook break dancing on rooftops* look down at the patterns below, creating art to carve out spaces, building new conceptual frameworks to move within your city while we are in it. We resist your classifications and will infuse our creative praxis to reflect where we are at any given moment...This is our voiced presence,

[259] Name changed for anonymity.

[260]Karen Recollet, *Aural Traditions: Indigenous Youth and the Hip Hop Movement in Canada.* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010.

originating from our world(s) - effectively changing/mixing up the ways in which you see and experience yours.[261]

In many ways, Black Studies can look to Indigenous Recovery Studies as collective efforts to the implementation of culturally relevant methods of reconciling with loss and seeking pleasure in the erotics of relationality and writing new narratives. Wellbriety, created by 2009 Purpose Prize Winner, Don Coyhis, is a program designed to help Native American people heal through addiction utilizing Native culture, community, customs, and traditions. The vision of the program as elucidated in its website is to provide "culturally based healing for the next seven generations of Indigenous people," while the mission states to, "Disseminate culturally based principles, values, and teachings to support healthy community development and servant leadership, and to support healing from alcohol, substance abuse, co-occurring disorders, and intergenerational trauma."[262] In the book, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*, Indigenous feminist Dian Million states, "Groups such as Wellbriety! can be understood as serious social movements, bringing into play social, medical, and psychiatric techniques for producing culturally competent wellbeing, in offering new social subjectivities grounded in well individuals and communities. Indian practices have actually successfully altered the practices of AA, as Indigenous peoples have successfully lobbied the global AA to adapt their nondenominational ecumenism to include specific and pan-tribal ceremonial practice in Indigenous groups."[263] Black and Indigenous communities depict a mutual desire to speak

[261] Recollet, *Aural Traditions,* 4.

[262]"About Us," Wellbriety Movement, October 21, 2021, https://wellbrietymovement.com/about-us/.

[263] Dian Million. "Unmaking the Biopolitical Citizen" In *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 154.

back against discourses of dominance, or perhaps, the potential for co-articulating possibilities grounded in our shared experience of enduring the violence of epistemicide and genocide in existing recovery infrastructures. Our textual, material, and ontological encounters make available processing of bearing witness, despite what has been vehemently denied and suppressed by dominant twelve-step programs. This is not a trauma bond, this is the ancestor guiding you, recognizing the ancestor guiding me.

5 *Alcoholics Anonymous & 21st Century Black Life or As We Have Always Done: Preface to Performance Ethnography*

"Wherever blackness dwells–slave ship, spaceship, graveyard, garden, elsewhere, everywhere–those captives accessed what Spillers calls a "richness of possibility."[264]

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), who have turned a space historically denied from them, into a culturally relevant place to support sustained sobriety amongst themselves. The limitations of Black folk accessing recovery through AA has been a challenge since the program's inception. In the book, "Heroes of Early Black AA", historian Glenn Chestnut shares the realities of the inaccessibility of alcohol treatment Black folk were subjected to during the early years of AA. Highlighted in the book is Jimmy Miller, the first Black woman in AA, who recounted the gendered and racialized politics of the organization that aimed to keep her and other Black folk out. Miller explained that gaining access to meetings required relentlessly knocking on the doors of white meetings and receiving dehumanizing treatment once allowed entry, such as only being allowed to drink from broken cups and being told to stand in the back of the room.[265] These narratives of access prevention due to racism and sexism fail to make it in the foundational texts of AA and blame is instead placed on the individual. In contemporary contexts, significant barriers continue to be identified that prevent Black folks' access to treatment. Language barriers, lack of resources such as funds for travel expenses to and from

[264]La Marr Jurelle Bruce,. *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. 1st ed. Durham: Duke University Press.2021, 3.

[265] Glenn Chestnut. "Jimmy Miller: First Lady of Black A.A." in *Early Heroes of Black AA: Their Stories and Their Messages*, (South Bend, IN: Book Patch LLC, 2017), 82.

meetings, lack of discussion of culturally relevant issues amongst treatment circles, and distrust of the treatment process due to medical racism and the subjection of Black people to medical experimentation are all factors that point to systemic infringement on Black wellness.[266] However, despite these infrastructural faults, Black folk still sustain recovery--empowering, culturally relevant, and are generative sites of Black Feminist theory. This chapter seeks to uncover, *what qualities of African-Diasporic culture are responsible for the retention of Black people in AA?*

As We Have Always Done

Audre Lorde asserts "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"--yet some of the most abundant tools utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous to mobilize sobriety is storytelling, forging community, knowing oneself, and connecting with spirit/God/ancestry.[267] Reliance on spirit, ancestors, and orishas, as well as knowing thyself, being of service, and healing with community are practices that have *always* lived in the bodies of Black folk and existed in Black cultural traditions, regardless of recovery affiliation and are reflections of principles of Afrocentricity that has been called forth as a theoretical backing to understanding the needs of recovering Black people. Afrocentricity, afro/center, is a liberating ideology and praxis, rooted in the cultural image and interests of people of the African diaspora.[268] From this perspective, the culture and beauty of Black folk and their attributes are celebrated, perpetuated myths of inferiority are dispelled, and our strengths are the center focus rather than deficits.[269]In

[266] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 88.

[267] Audre Lorde: 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 2000. In *Gender Space Architecture*, 69–71. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203449127-13.

[268] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 88.

[269] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 88.

taking an Afrocentric approach to addressing addiction, which is to also take a Black feminist approach, cultural values such as deepening one's relationship to spirituality, the centrality of community, and the creation of self-identity and dignity become paramount.[270] Without deliberately moving from this theoretical standpoint, Black recovery spaces in AA already inherently embody these principles, and I argue, are largely responsible for the retention of Black people to obtain sustained sobriety. In this section I will highlight some of the tools utilized by AA and the ways it aligns with Black diasporic culture and spiritual values.

In the article, "Afrocentric Treatment in Residential Substance Abuse Care: The Iwo San", an argument is made that drug treatment programs do not support the needs of Black folk seeking addiction treatment, thus, proposes an Afrocentric Approach utilizing the Iwo San community as an exemplar. The Iwo San is a residual treatment program in Cleveland, Ohio, that specializes in addressing drug and alcohol abuse for Black women and their children.[271] In addition to treatment, the recovering women are offered counseling, therapy, and training such as deepening employment skills.[272] Here, I want to highlight the Afrocentric methods of treatment in order to argue that many of these principles are largely, already, responsible for the retention of Black folk in predominantly Black Alcoholics Anonymous spaces, such as Cherry Fellowship Hall in the Central District. The following are the Iwo San's Methods and methodology:

(1) ***Emphasizing the importance of spirituality–*** According to the Iwo San, spirituality is innate the experience of Black people and our ancestors. Nothing is

[270] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 87.

[271] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 88.

[272] Jackson, Stephens, and Smith, "Afrocentric Treatment," 87.

divorced from spirit, and everything encompasses spirit. Spirituality, then, is foundational to the recovery experience much like every other facet of Black life.

(2) **Emphasizing the importance of Respect for Tradition**- Ceremonies and Rites of Passage, as argued by the Iwo San, including teaching the histories of Black folk in America/ visiting museums of Black culture, are hallmarks of Black cultural traditions, this important to the recovery process.

(3) Emphasizing the importance of Harmony with Nature- While this element, according to the Iwo San, emphasizes the encouragement with land/human harmony, it also emphasizes the importance of harmonious relationships amongst human beings and the relationship to self.

(4) **Emphasizing the importance of Community**- In alignment with "I am because we are" and Black diasporic cultural understandings of the village being responsible for the child (figuratively and literally), the residents are encouraged to build deep relationships with each other, in fact, this is a dialectal encouragement on behalf of staff, residents, and the community at large.

(5) **Emphasizing the importance of Elders-** Due to the ways elders are respected and revered in Black Diasporic cultures, in the Iwo San community, an appointed counselor of elders (based off age, recognition, and place in community) serve as mentors and leaders and often determine the readiness of a resident to transition out of the residential treatment center.

I utilize the principles underlying the Iwo San treatment center to argue that wherever Black folk dwell in terms of spaces dedicated towards healing from addiction, so does the afrocentric principle, inherently embodied in the relationships between Black folk, which I suggest is

responsible for the retention of Black people in twelve step programs. To explicate my point, I use Cherry Fellowship Hall in Seattle's historically Black Central District to highlight the overlap in the Iwo San's Afrocentric principles. In doing so, I reveal the ways Black folk have reconstructed AA to be a culturally relevant institution.

Cherry Fellowship Hall, Central District, Seattle, WA

Cherry Fellowship Hall, founded in 1981, is a recovery center in Seattle's Central District (CD), and one of the oldest Black institutions left in the CD, in light of ongoing gentrification. Recognizing the need for Black folk to recover in a sober environment, Bill and Rufus chose the location of 23rd & Cherry to establish Cherry Fellowship Hall as the first predominantly Black recovery space in Seattle.[273] After conducting a four-year long participation an observation in the room, alongside conducting oral histories with a few of the members, I have identified afrocentric practices within the group, revealing what we have always done:

Cross Talk

In many recovery rooms it is not uncommon that one may come across the topic of *cross-talk.* Cross Talk is defined as commenting on or referencing another person's share, as well as offering advice to another person in response to their share. In some spaces, *cross-talk* is also seen as making any utterances during another person's share that may be seen as distracting. However, in Black AA spaces, including Cherry Fellowship Hall, cross-talk proves to be emblematic of Black culture. An example of this is when a person introduces themselves in a meeting, one typically states "My name is ____ and I'm an alcoholic." Cross-talks looks like one of my favorite occurrences at Cherry Hall when Shari K. shares and states, "My name is Shari..", only to be interrupted every time by James who finishes Shari's statement by calling out, "and

[273] 23rd and Cherry Fellowship, "About Us."

she's a REAL alcoholic!" The sorts of interruptions, which also look like "mmhmms" and "ooh yes" when folks are resonating with a person's share, are not only iterations of *Call and Response*, but also *Gumbo Ya Ya.* Call and Response is deeply influenced by Black Church Traditions–*let the church say Amen* (call)…*Amen!* (response) promoting an interplay and social connection between the pastor and the congregation, which allows community to be fostered and a sense of resonation and familiarity.[274] This diasporic tradition is also linked to Black protest cultures, such as the call "*Holla Back*" and the response "*I got yo back!*" Cross-talk, though strongly discouraged in dominant AA spaces, becomes overwritten in Black AA spaces, creating new traditions in AA. This may also be understood as "Gumbo Ya Ya", a Creole expression meaning "everyone talks at once", like the blending of voices around the kitchen table, or family gathering where many conversations happen at once but we know what's been said.[275] Cross-talk, in Black spaces, becomes a manifestation of Black Diasporic culture, rather than a hindrance to healing.

Storytelling

I remember my first meeting, enthralled by the ways members articulated their stories in their share. Beginning with "My name is…" and following would be a profound story articulating what brought them to their knees in their addictive journey. Sometimes the stories would read as testimony, other times, they sounded like cautionary tales, "Don't get complacent because your disease is always doing push-ups in the parking lot." In the writing, *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise,* Africana Literary scholar Dr. Christel N. Temple describes

[274] Tomeka M. Robinson, Sean Allen, and Goyland Williams. "Yes, Mmmm, Snaps: The Influence of the Call and Response Tradition of the Black Church into Forensics". Journal of the Speech and Theatre Association of Missouri. 2018, 10.

[275] Lena M. Ampadu "Gumbo Ya ya: Tapping Cultural Stories to Teach Composition". *Composition Studies*, *32*(1), 2004, 73–88.

the function of Africana literature, stating, "the function of narrative with respect to memory, storytelling craft, rhetoric and persuasion, the documentation of culture and custom, advancing a racial-cultural worldview, and speculative modeling.[276]" Black Literature, which encompasses oral narrative, storytelling, and memory conjuring, is the vehicle by which Black folk exemplify subjectivity and self-definition. Storytelling is a black as the griot and the testimony.

Sponsorship

A sponsor in Alcoholics Anonymous is a person, typically who has been through all twelve steps, who walks another person with lesser time and experience through the same process. At Cherry Fellowship Hall, composed mostly of Black folk over the age of fifty, sponsors walk the younger and more inexperienced fellows through the steps. Sponsorship, in Black recovery spaces, are in alignment with reverence for elders in that many of the young recovering Black people are being sponsored by Black Elders. It is this relationship that reflects Black cultural values, ultimately making the program of recovery work for Black people due to this.

Burning Desires:

Meetings typically close with the question, "Is anyone here having a burning desire to drink? If so, you may share…" During this time, members who this applies to, come up to the front of the room to express what is causing them to desire to drink and for additional support. This extra support typically encourages others to check on the person asking via talking to them after the meeting or calling them on the phone for additional support. The call for burning desires can be seen as its own form of an altar call, prevalent in Black Churches where the pastor calls forward folk in the congregation, potentially needing saving.

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[276] Christel N. Temple. *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise.* Lexington Books, 2018. Print.

Community

Luisah Teish tells us a bit about *Imminent spirituality*–"rooted in human community. There is no concept of individual salvation (there is nothing to be saved from) nor of an enlightenment that leaves others behind. The dynamic interaction of energy through the use of work, celebration (music, song, dance, myth), and placation (sacrifice, offering) was the standard mode of worship for early African peoples."[277] We will come back to it countless times, Black folk reconcile in relationality, amongst and with each other.

The following is an aggressive counter-read of Twelve Step through highlighting the stories of those attending Cherry Hall. My readers have the tools to critically read these stories and show their complexities in the light.

[277] Luisha Teish. *Jambalaya : The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

6 *Performance Ethnography*

The following is a performance ethnography that amplifies the voices and experiences of Black folk recovering from addiction. Although logistical constraints prevented the actual performance, the script presented in three acts reflects the ongoing nature of this project. By centering narratives of personal reconciliation and community support, this performance ethnography underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the systemic factors that contribute to addiction within Black communities. Coro's narrative, for example, describes how arriving at Cherry Hall marked a pivotal moment of finding a sense of belonging and familial connection. Hearing stories of others' struggles and resilience, from desperation to calm, provided a transformative awakening tha*t reconciliation does not require fixing or eliminating one's addiction,* but rather accepting oneself amidst it. Relationality is the guiding force for a fuller sober life. This story had no neat ending, as Coro depicted an uncertainty about the future path, torn between the possibility of returning to the rooms for deeper growth and the challenge of reconciling recovery principles with the outside world. Coro's testimony, still, highlights the power of collective belonging but challenges notions of linear directions of "recovering."

Act I: When the Levees Broke

Character List

GRIOT (Narrates the cautionary moments)**:** Black trans person, age 40+

BOBBI (Protagonist)**:** Black masculine non-binary person, mid-late 20's

CIERRA (Bobbi's Inner Child and Younger Self)**:** Black girl, age 5-8 years old

CECIL (Bobbi's Older Brother) **:** Black boy, age 14-17 years

TRE (Bobbi's Childhood Friend) **:** Black boy, age 16-early 20s

MAMA (Bobbi's Mother) **:** Black woman, age mid 30's- early 50's

SETTING:

This play opens using the Katrina Disasters as a cautionary tale. It takes place during the 2020's in a Twelve-Step Meeting.

MOMENT 1:

(Lights Up. Footage from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is projected. The Griot is alone and approaches center stage. They speak with conviction and a commanding presence, with a bit of sarcasm. Think of the way a story of Anansi the spider might be told. They are overlooking the tragedy of the aftermath of the Katrina Disaster. While they do not know the lives of those lost, they intimately know the waters themselves.)

GRIOT:
The Mississippi River's toothless jaw and salivating lips
Carry engraved tombstones and entire cemeteries
submerged/
Histories/ legacies/of plantation/ of bone/ of flesh/
Make river floors
Symphony/ hymn of young Black girl's laughter & wit/
& Church bell/ make ripple and current through the waters
The waters that tasted of petrified sweat and sob
When the river dam broke.

They canoed over carcass/ Of black bodies with bulging eyes looking for loved ones/
And aid/ and refuge/ and care in the clearing/
They searched the corner store for foods/ to find a sustenance
And flung themselves on mattresses to stay a float/ undrowned

And ain't they already seen enough to know/
Ain't nothing natural about disaster.
And Ain't nobody comin/

And man man-made (nods in shame)
And ain't nothing can keep the waters from runnin.

(Blackout.)

MOMENT 2:

(in Black out, the full cast continuously repeat the phrase *i do not wanna let my waters run*, in a rhythmic cadence, while Bobbi repeats the phrase *running, gotta keep running.*)

CAST:
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :(runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :(gotta keep runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :((runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :((gotta keep runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :((runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
BOBBI :((gotta keep runnin)
i do not wanna let my waters run
i do not wanna let my waters run

(Lights Up. Bobbi, Cierra, Cecil, and Mama all sit with one another in an Alcohol Recovery Meeting. Bobbi is recounting their memories throughout their lifetime. Their inner selves are helping piece together the histories).

BOBBI : My brother mocks the ash on my kneecaps, say
CIERRA /CECIL: Heh, it look like Pookie lips from New Jack City
BOBBI : Before Mama say
MAMA: Lil girl put some lotion on them legs
BOBBI : The musky scent festering in my underarms follow me out the front door
I be the Black girl that play basketball in cowboy boots
& I am unbothered
CIERRA: The boys still can't catch me/ I be seven-years-old and be the fastest-bestest runner in the first grade.
BOBBI: The Pink barrettes enclosing my pigtails-
Weaved by Mama Ja'Queen's dark black hands
Blow off, slicing the wind behind me.
The sweat makes my slicked edges raise defying gravity
And I am scuffed boot and K-Swiss sneaker

Kissed with field grass and playground pavement
CIERRA: That Mama go make me clean with toothbrush and soap
When I get back home/ But for now, wild I run
BOBBI: The organisms of my body rush and sweep past leaning tetherball poles
A young running Black girl/ A river/ raging/ Howling
CIERRA:(tauntingly)
catch me if you can
But you can't catch me huh,
you can't catch me

BOBBI:
I wet my lips for the first time,
A young Black boy say,
TRE: Here/ take a swig of this/
It's cheap but it sho' do the job/'

(Tre and Bobbi lean into each other)

BOBBI/TRE: *This shit right here, this shit right here.*
TRE:A dam that close the floodgates/
Keeps all the ghosts in your river at bay
BOBBI: Say,
TRE: You don't gotta deal with all your waters at once.

BOBBI:

By twelve my waters wore a face of a Black girl who couldn't love herself/ While Black/ It, the carrier of shame/ Of echoes chorused/ Of "quiet, someone's coming"/ & adolescent thighs as lands of trusted relatives to find themselves in/ It reeked of murk and filth/ & reflected my father's face/ flush, crimson red rivers winding in his eyes/ spitting mouth of Jack Daniels and inebriated laughter/ every night he came home,/ Gregarious/ drunk/ jovial/ A high five hands turn fist to Mama's JaQueen's face/ He can switch in a second/ two-faced man looking a LOT like mine/

MAMA: (endearingly) You look just like yo daddy.

BOBBI: (sarcastically) Drink like em too.

CIERRA: (Interjecting, bragging) My Daddy is Italian. I'm Italian.

CECIL: (Annoyed) You're only 1/8th.

MAMA:
You know, my favorite story about you. Me and yo dad was goin back and fourth arguing and we wasn't letting neither one of us get a word in and you said
CIERRA: Hey! You have to talk one at a time so yall can hear one another *(make a back and forth motion with hands)*
MAMA:
We both bust out laughing. Couldn't even fight no more. You couldn't hav been no more than 7. Ha! Said *you have to talk one at a time.* You was so amazing.

BOBBI:

My mother said I was breached, born upside-down with my feet trying to get out first. I'd grow to a child who'd put toothpaste on quarters, and squeeze the iron-mint concoction in my hands while I sat on the toilet. My brother would call me "gay" as a joke, before I knew it to actually be true–

CECIL: (realizing he was right) I knew you was gay

BOBBI: because he is clairvoyant and amazing

And I'd quickly learned that to be Black and queer in the suburbs is to grow up feeling like a freak/ To be the only queer body in heteronormative spaces, especially Black spaces where you are seen as a derailment to Black liberation/ is to always feel like you do not belong/

With each shot/ I felt the installation of each cement block build within me/ It barricaded/ The violence, the torment, the self-doubt, the hate/ The repulsion for my flesh, and bone, and skin/ Every gulp from the rim of the bottle electrified me/ Padlocked the pain/ Memories became manageable/ Trauma became trivial/ I became invincible.

GRIOT:
Now, when the dam breaks/ Not if/ When/ Which it always *Will* if made by mortals/ human/ flesh/
Silence will ensue as if to not have seen the warning signs/ Of a stone wall caving in on itself/ Shattering all the mechanisms built to keep the water out/ Ain't nothin can keep…

BOBBI:

It was a Saturday night/ where we conjured in compact places/ body counts exceeding the rooms capacity/ Ass being thrown by the Black girls, and all the Black boys too scared to catch it, so the girls dance with themselves/ And me, introvert coy Capricorn/ spend hours finding courage to dance, to live, to be/ The street corner store packaged courage in a bottle and you'd catch me in the corners dancing with vodka until lights down/ My world goes Blackout/ Blank/ The news

was disorienting/ I physically assaulted someone at party/ and got suspended. And the me awake grew resentful of the me asleep/ and in the events recounting and capture on camera I wonder/ who is this drinking me up/ what is this filling me up and keeping me out/ When people ask why I entered a twelve step program at age twenty three I say because I have no qualms/cause ain't nothing like acquiring casualties in self-refusal/ and ain't we drowned out enough.

When the stark silence crept over the eruption/ And I laid open, covered in the depths of my blue/
God revealed themselves, vantablack/ Bursting a core of Alona Jean light, warming my spine/ My God/
They were not in a bottle/ They were not white nor man/ They were not Black nor woman/ They were as complex as the gender that never feels right on my tongue/ When I try to give it name/I resuscitate the girl in my body I blocked away/ I cannot avoid her tears and wail/ Sending ripple through *our* body/ Tell her she's loved/ She's seen/ & I take rebuilding Us a day at a time./ Tell her, Cierra/ I am in awe of you/ How you awaken in the morning, Lace your shoes and remind me/ The door is always ours to run through.

BOBBI/ CIERRA:
Runnin', Gotta Keep Runnin'
CAST:
Runnin', Gotta Keep Runnin'

Act II: RELATIONALITY

The Following are monologues gathered from oral histories. These monologues highlight the unique experiences of three Black folk in AA, from three different generations. The monologues are written in the style of "verbatim theater", as explained by performance studies scholar, Johnny Saldana, who argues this style of theater preserves the authenticity of the stories gathered.

SETTING: Cherry Fellowship Hall, Seattle, WA

CHARACTER LIST:

CORO (Protagonist)**:** Black light-skin trans-man, mid-late 20's

BOBBI (Coro's Friend)**:** Black masculine non-binary person, mid-late 20's

JORDAN (Coro's Friend)**:** Black, woman, age 30+

AMINTA (Elder in Coro's Community)**:** Black light-skin, woman, age 40+

SANDRA (Protagonist)**:** Black, woman, age 50+

JAMES: (Member of Cherry Hall)**:** Black man, age 50+

COLLECTIVE: Multiple members of AA Meeting

CORO:
they brought us into a world that we couldn't function in
then gave us a thing that could help us function
then told us that thing was bad.

CORO/ BOBBI:

they brought us a world
we couldn't function in
told: *us, was bad*.

CORO/BOBBI/ JORDAN:

we couldn't function
help us function.

CORO:
a world,
gave us a thing–

CORO/BOBBI/ JORDAN:
us.

(lights up on Coro)

Coro's Monologue

My arrival in the rooms was through the legal system, which I know is a story that a lot of people hear. And that's obviously not where my story started, because it takes a while to get to the legal system, especially even for like a light skinned, queer kid that had a lot of resources, a lot of money, I had a lot of chances to stay out of the legal system–that I think I can look back now and say didn't do me a lot of good. Because it was just prolonging the time, prolonging the suffering that I was in.

I was just one of those, like highly sensitive kids who was just wrought with anxiety and shame, in some pretty overwhelming ways that as a kid that I didn't have language for. Anxiety, shame and responsibility. And the responsibility was what I think many A-fab, or assigned-female-at birth humans get– the caretaker for the family. And you're the one who's supposed to hold the family together.

I was introduced to alcohol, weed, and then pills, in high school–middle school to high school. I think a lot about something that I heard in a random room and in West Seattle, one time I heard a young person, it was the young people's meeting, and I heard a young person say that they, "they, whoever they is brought us into the world that we couldn't, like couldn't function in and then gave us a thing that could help us function and then told us that thing was bad." And I think about that a lot because that was like the turning point for me was all of a sudden I had a way to function. Function in the world, I had a way to get beyond like beyond the weight of all those things, it didn't get rid of the anxiety, the shame, the guilt, the responsibility, but it took the weight out of it. it just wasn't heavy didn't weigh me down anymore. And, and it just started fracturing me from the beginning. It broke down my connections to self, my connections to family it took away, it like both relieved my my the weight of responsibility. But it also took away the like connection that the line that ties responsibility to person I hope that makes sense. But I just like I I didn't feel responsibility for people that I didn't feel connected with because I didn't the connection had been fractured through my use.

And so when I got to the rooms for the first time and the first the first time I came to the rooms, I had just I'd spent my first night in jail and was so I was like I was just so traumatized by that experience that might like my first arrival in the rooms. I don't I don't know I wonder if it had been in a different way I would have I would have it would have clicked sooner but I was I like have no memory of that time of my life but first year that I was in King County courts and and then I immediately went back out like I don't I don't remember any of the people I met I don't remember anything I heard at meetings I was there in it. I mean, I heard I must have heard something that must have heard something that brought me back I don't I can't put a finger on it. But the difference between then that first time and this most recent time also was walking into a room and seeing people who looked like me, or looked like my family, who talks like my family, who greeted me like my family, and that was Cherry Hall; Cherry Hall was like arriving arriving to family.

I was Yeah, I was right where I needed to be for that. I needed to hear a lot of stories about how bad it had gotten for other people. And what I had been spared from, and I needed to hear other people who are still in that like desperate clinging to every 24 hours every hour probably, but every 24 hours of sobriety just like I was feeling and I needed to hear people who were just a little ways beyond that that were, I don't know, still still knew the desperation but had also found some calm… and then I needed to hear people who had been doing it for as many years as I'd been alive/ double as many years as I'd been alive/ and see the full lives these people were living/ with all the things I didn't even imagine that I could have/ but they were also still saying the same things/ that I was saying inside my head that I attributed to my sickness to my disease/ and it was just like I don't know it was an awakening.

It was a it was a stark moment of realizing that I get *to be*
I get to be myself in spite of this disease.
I don't have to get like I don't have to get rid of it.
It doesn't have to go away
I don't have to fix it
And I still get to have all those things that I thought that I could only have if I got better got well/ and between that and those relationships the like few relationships that I made/ close relationships I made in recovery/ ushered me out of the rooms and into real life as recovery/

seeing people my age, who were in AA, but also pushed back against it/ and loved it respectfully and also held it to the things that we hold hold our society to hold it held it up to the light and didn't lett it exist as canon/

I think the closer that people got to me the more I ran away because people see you
in a in a in a way that you can't skirt by in the real world

and that was scary.

And it was it was scary both because I didn't like it feels like people especially at Cherry hall/ I think more than anywhere else that I was it feels like it's a place where you can't sit on the edge for too long/ like you can't hover on the edge/ like people show up there and they just dive in/

I don't go to meetings really at all anymore/ and I don't think that I would still be sober if I hadn't spent the time that I did at Cherry hall/ and I don't necessarily think I'll stay I'll be able to stay sober if I don't find a place to go back to at some point in my life/ because I feel I can feel the difference/ I can feel the difference in myself from when I was going regularly to meetings and now it's a different kind of sober to different/ life is not as full and it's not as robust.

I think part of the part of the reason why I had to walk away is how like in in contradiction the life that I was living when I was in the rooms was the life that I was living outside of the rooms/ and I didn't feel like I could change the life that I was living outside of the rooms enough/ I couldn't make my life a place where we talked openly and deeply without a time limit/

I couldn't make it a place where where elders were respected and given the floor/
and given the room/
I couldn't make a world where were relationships weren't a transaction/
and you could just care for someone else and someone else could care for you/
and there wasn't a limit/
and where we could just pray, like a world where you can just pray
or when like singing is praying/
or laughing is praying/
or crying
I just didn't it didn't fit and I was too scared to let it fit /so I think now I don't know I wonder think there's two ways that my life can go /which feels I don't know again dramatic to say/ I think there's a world where I end up giving in/ and giving over to that walking through Cherry hall doors again/ And I might have to get desperate again like it might have to get bad for me to end up back there/ for me to lose that that fear that comes with success again/ are I continue down this path that I'm living that is sober/and a lot healthier than I used to be/ but isn't full of the growth that I had when I was going to meetings/

Like Sunday/ Sundays was like what one of the things I loved / it was it was like going to church/ and it reminded me a lot of when I was younger and I would go to church and I would feel I would leave feeling filled up in the way that I used to feel leaving Sunday service with my grandma/ sometimes it was the fuller life was that people were talking/ about how full their life/ colorful and exuberant/ and then there was a way that I felt like my life was filling up/ not from

material like not material ways/ I think it if I if I had to guess it would be a connection to spirit and a connection to a community that is connected to spirit.

(lights fade from Coro, lights up on Amenta)

Aminta's Monologue

I have been sober now, since October 8, 2015/ and it's not my first trip through sobriety/ I come from a family who struggled deeply with alcoholism, mental health issues, systemic poverty, and criminal legal engagement as a lifestyle/
Now I don't know if there was a bunch of reverence around it/
it was just born of necessity.

> But you know, I'm in my 50s, my mid 50s. And at the time, when my mother and father got together–
>
> > my family is deeply religious/ my father's people are from the south/ Louisiana specifically/ and my ancestors came in on Haitian slave ships, and cotton, and my mother's people are German, Germany and Austria/ And then there's some French in there, too, some European.
>
> But at the time, my mother and my father were deeply religious people/ deep Southern Baptists/ and there's some Roman Catholic on my mother's side/ and much love of Jesus and faith and all of that stuff/ And while I don't have as much history, in the nature of the disease, on my father's side, there was deep alcoholism/ lots of trauma–but deep alcoholism on my mother's side, but my mother and my father got when they were young, and I was born into the world– into a black man, white woman in the 70/ out of wedlock into deeply religious families/ And so there was a lot of narrative that played out, you know, culturally, historically, at the time, in which all that stuff happens, and then having parents that were trying to navigate the world, the culture, race, religion, and their own disease, because my father was alcoholic, my mother was alcoholic/ And so all this stuff was, you know, those were contributors to my own early understanding of the world. Connection/ family/ the way that we lived all of that stuff, it was skewed by a child's eyes, of course, but there was deep trauma / lots of wounds/ instability and insanity/ and I picked up that ball I ran with it/
>
> I heard somebody share this in a meeting recently/

they were talking about there was never a time where they did not/ when I did not / when even you know, as I had resisted– I always had a belief in God
I wanted to be a person that was moved and transformed by the realm of the spirit.
And it proved unsatisfactory/ often/ because there were components that I didn't understand in the relationship to willingness and surrender.

I was curious, and it often manifested as defiance/ And it was in deep conflict with the moral teachings that I had grown up with religious and otherwise and so I always felt like I was in conflict with myself and in conflict with the world and as a result in conflict with God/ And so that played out

there were many back alley/
back of police car prayers/
and as may you know/
petitions to the universe/

If you can please just help me navigate my way out of these circumstances,
I will change I will honor my relationship with you/
God, you know, I will be different/
And you know, interestingly enough is that I would dodge trouble/
& my cortisol would lower & my simmering blood would smooth
and then and I would instantly forget/
And I would chalk it up to my own cleverness/
and forget that there was a petition or a prayer ever said/
and that happened over and over again.
And the only time I finally remembered my relationship, or, you know, those prayers and petitions,
when I would get sober.

And what would happen is, I would remember that I had made them and negotiated or reneged on them, and, and then my, you know, journey to God became such that is that I didn't know how I would go to God/ having been the liar that I had been/ to be able to receive divine help or appointment/ if that a note was going to be called do and it would be larger than I could pay, or something I would be unwilling to do. And so and so I renounced that relationship.

There was also this thing is that I had a life that front to me felt evidence of an absence of care, when I was looking at, you know, relationship with God is kind of a protect parental figure. And, and I just thought, what if I pray and really surrender my life into the care of this thing, and I have, actually, a, because of my, you know, lifestyle choices and conduct, condemned myself to

be, you know, ineligible, for God's grace, and I would rather not petition than to give my whole heart and soul to find out that I was ineligible. And so, you know, it was like, navigating that territory. And, you know, in some of this stuff was, like, like I said, you know, some of it was born of ignorance, in my own minds, creating, you know, ideology for myself, in the gaps where I didn't have present parents are guidance.

And, and some of it was evidence of the way that I, I've been brought up and so, and that was long time coming/ And I spent my life like that/

Initially, my kids had been removed from my care, they were in Child Protective Services, they were on the adoption block, essentially the same week that I went to treatment/ And I was told, you know, the only way that I had a shot at getting my children back in my care is that I needed to go to treatment and do what was required/And so I entered into a under duress/

I had no relationship with Alcoholics Anonymous, as an institution,
but I had a relationship with institutions and systems/
And they were all penal/
they were treatment centers/
They were psych wards/
They were jails/
They were rehabilitation centers/
you know, to some degree, so they were all transactiona/
And I thought that Alcoholics Anonymous was connected to them in some form.

And so I believed that I was, I was under surveillance, really. And that like, you know, because of my ignorance, others thought, like, if I don't do this thing they'll know and I won't have access to the kids. Of course, we know much later that even in the name, it said, anonymous, but it's in a mistrust of systems is that like I don't believe that my probation officer told me, he wasn't going to arrest me when I came, and he did every time. So it was like those kinds of things. And, and so I began to come in. And one of the very first kind of attractors, for me, was the route the level of honesty that I got, I was the first time that I had ever experienced people talking about the horrors of what happens in my internal/like narration,/ and the things that I had done when I was loaded/ and the motivation and denial/ I never heard anybody talk about that, in my community.

When we failed as a community or a family, what we did is we never talked about it again.
I never heard any of the people, like honestly disclose that they had made mistakes and in the struggles that I traveled with, and those were, you know, they those were
that kind of vulnerability was a liability.

And so, you know, I, I think about the principles, you know, this idea around this admission of powerlessness/ and unmanageability/ and the absence of sanity that ensues as a result, you know, as we're talking, moving through the steps and then like, this design for living that asks you to explore maybe not relying on yourself but in inviting another power in you know/ and it's Make sure God I told you all the reasons why I wouldn't/

But one of the things that I heard in the rooms was group of drunks: good, orderly, direction.

And I couldn't lean into that. And I don't know why. Like when someone shares their story in a room as a woman who mistrust people and systems and all those things, and how to deeply grooved tracks for that kind of disbelief, that I could sit in a room for an hour and listen to people tell stories like mine, their insides on their outsides, and I believed every word they said, and, you know, in principle, you know, that level of honesty, what it evoked in me was a sense of hope, which of course, is, you know, one of the spiritual principles connected to the work.

And, you know, this idea around this third step, admission, and willingness to invite God and created faith. And, you know, Faith always just seemed like such a dangerous proposition/ And I remember somebody saying in the rooms pretty early on/

faith is the result of results/
And it was like that I have to employ the action/
And then as an experiment, and then with some objectivity/
watch what it produces/
And like, I am a person that came into a relationship with God/
intimacy with God/
a belief in the work and program of the educational variety/

Because while I got sober when I was young, I've been in program for close to 30 years. And I only have, you know, almost nine years sober. And so, you know, this idea, but faith came in that place. And you know, this piece where we talk about the wounds and the trials, in a four step action, like this deal, where we're talking about our resentments. But really, what we're being invited to do is this moral inventory of myself, and the only way that I can do that, you know, like, and I have morality rooted in these belief systems of the doctrine of my grandmother's faith. But when I looked at what Alcoholics Anonymous was asking me to do, it was asking me to employ courage and to tell the truth about, you know, inventory, discover this truth about the stock and trade and to be willing to be rid of unsalable goods promptly and without regret. That's what the book talks about. That's what the work talks about/ and courage, you know, is this idea has the mental or moral strength to withstand fear in the face of extreme difficulty.

And so, you know, and then by getting with another person/

is that it allows me to employ integrity/
and that all of a sudden/
I become unified/
I'm not my secrets/
And then a soundness enters my life as a result of integrity/

And, you know, defects of character as by design is not/ you know/ this anomalous thing that happens in my life that makes me defective or different than other people/ It is actually that I have this sense of preservation that comes from my natural instincts, but because of the trauma or the alcohol, or the whatever, is that those things have been skewed to such a way that they are almost unserviceable is why I can employ them. And in situations where, like traumatic events are happening all the time, they cannot be sustained as a way of life. And so to be able to come into wholeness with self and be able to identify is that this thing that I'm using, which is my fear, to guide my life is to begin to right size myself with being able to say out loud where I'm at and get feedback and to, like, equalize so that I can come into this seven step idea with God, really, for the first time with some neutrality is that I am not driven under the lashes of desperation anymore.
And it is not shame driven.
And it is not an I'm not guided by fear,
because I've been around long enough at this point, to be able to bear witness to the miracle in somebody else's life.
And that it's like I'm coming to God not in crisis as a 911 call,
but as a petition,
to surrender not only the things that don't serve us, me,
but also the things that I have perceived as good to allow,
like the third step decision,
that victory over my difficulties bears witness to those I would be useful to is that and so,
you know, humility is connected to that work as a principle of love,
you know, and when we think about love,
you know, unselfish concern that freely accepts another and loyalty and seeks is good to hold dear.
You know, it is not sexual love.

I employ love not because you give me something,
but because I have the capacity to do so.
So I'm living currently, and not being beaten up by like, the procrastination of undone shit. And so and then, you know, and all of that stuff has been really contributed to, you know, our 12 Step principle, you know, which talks about after having had a spiritual awakening, as the result of the steps is that we try to carry this message of this work, this transformation of relations, identify, you know, identity, find kind of who and what we perceive that God is asking us to do, to

practice these principles, honesty, hope, faith, courage, integrity, willingness, and to practice in in all of my affairs, and when we're talking about, you know, so it's like, well, what does that mean?

What's all my affairs is that important demonstration. So this work happened in my home and the workplace, in traffic, you know, it's like, there's these places in life where I make this exception is that I can show up early, poorly, it's like, I show up poorly in traffic, because my typically because I have not managed my time on the front end. And so I don't have time to be kind or patient, or any of those things. And it's like, what does it look like for me to be of service to another human. And my, probably my favorite definition of that is like a helpful act, it is a contribution to the welfare of others, or useful labor that does not produce a tangible commodity, is that like to be useful, I have to have enough of myself out of the way so that my agenda doesn't get mixed up in my perception of how you receive it, or interrupt or disrupt my ability to deliver it, you know, from a place of intuition is that it requires space.

-Black Out-

(lights up on Sandra)

SANDRA: Hi, my name is Sandra–

JAMES: And she's a *real* alcoholic!

COLLECTIVE: (laughter, knee slaps)

Sandra's Monologue

I'm an alcoholic and I have a bit of a drug problem as well/ And I'm certainly honored to be in this space, and to be able to just kind of talk about what it was like for me/ and then what happened to bring me to my knees/ and what it's like today. And my recovery date is December 30th 1998/ which means I've been clean and sober for a little over 25 years/ which is an absolute miracle to me/ And just kind of thinking back about oh, God, just growing up, you know/ I wasn't as from what I can recall/ I didn't have like really huge physical, mental, emotional trauma.

But just maybe trauma that I kind of created on my own/I kind of was journaling on, on this experience, just coming up as a young person/ going to school where it was mixed/it lets you know/ it was very diverse/ And going to class, and I remember early on the teacher mispronouncing my name/ and all of the children kind of laughing because she really/ like

slammed it really bad. And I think some trauma began for me there where I just felt ashamed of just my name

I was really just small bones/ and just a thin girl/ and got teased a lot about,/you know, oh/ the lady with the skinny legs... I know she's cute, but she's so skinny/ And then having, you know, light trauma around my self esteem/ And then you know, the other piece on that, too, is coming up. And they used to separate us into classes like you would be in phase one/ phase two/ phase three/ phase four/ phase one, you were like, probably considered a target, because that's what they it was way back then/kids are cruel. phase two/ you were somewhat, you know, you, you just didn't apply yourself. phase three, you kind of applied yourself, it's kind of like ABCD, you know, D is phase four/ you were a really pretty gifted student. And I'm not really sure how this happened. But I had a few classes where if I was in phase three/I was so comfortable. But I was in a lot of phase four classes as well, the kids were extremely intelligent. And that's where a lot of my real insecurity started. Because I would maybe raise my hand to answer a question or be called on to answer a question. And I would have some basic answer, which could be correct. But a kid would come behind me and they would expand on it. And it was, so they articulate this message so beautifully. And, and I all of a sudden start feeling ashamed/Like now I started feeling like I wasn't smart enough and didn't want to be called on anymore/ Didn't want to raise my hand. And I share that because that experience carried me throughout my life. As a matter of fact, it still happens to me, every now and again today, in a meeting, like I'm sharing, somebody else shares are so articulate, I was a supervisor, same thing being supervisor meetings, and some other supervisor would expand and have vision. And I couldn't do that. And I started wanting to be invisible/ And it's only recently when I got the opportunity to write about that and really take a look at well, you know.

So what happened for me when I was about 15 years old. I was with some folks that we were on a camping trip and they were smoking marijuana. I wasn't interested in changing the way I felt in that sense that I needed drugs or anything like that. But they blew weed in my base marijuana in, oh my gosh, they were laughing I was laughing with them. And all of a sudden I felt a part of a fast forward to a few years later, I thought I was gonna go off and go to college and all of that

stuff. But I kind of got caught up in with those folks, you know/ smoking/ the marijuana, and all of that stuff/ and then moving into snorting heroin. And oh my gosh, it gave me this competence that I just absolutely couldn't believe. And so as a result of getting involved in heavier drugs, and alcohol, I hit a bottom that I absolutely couldn't believe. Not just not just not just physical bottom, you know, financial bottom, but just a spiritual bottom, I actually died spiritually.

And I just remember thinking that, you know, I had gone to Cherry Hall before, because my job had noticed that, you know, I had a bit of a problem/ I'd gotten this wonderful job/ And they noticed that I had had a bit of a problem/ you know, alcohol was coming out of my pores/ because I was drinking late into the night, and then, you know, showering and getting maybe an hour or twos rest and coming to work, and alcohol was coming out of my pores, and I would be tired./ And so they asked me, you know, if I had a problem, and in that moment/ I said, Yes, that I thought I felt like maybe I did have a problem. And I went to treatment/ And I gotta tell you that for some reason, I kind of thought, like, I don't think that I want to even go to Cherry Hall for whatever reason, you know, I didn't think that Jerry Hall was really the place for me. And, or just even being around people in my community, I think maybe some embarrassment and shame or whatever/ But I, it was close by where I was living/ And so I would go/ and I didn't want to share my, my my story, I didn't want to share what I had been doing. As a result of drinking and using drugs, I had done some very shameful things. And I didn't want to share that I didn't want those folks to judge me, you know, my peers, so to speak, to judge me/

But what happened for me is that I felt something when I was there/ I felt for that hour and a half/ that I would be in that meeting, if I stayed the whole hour and a half/ I didn't have to use and I listened to their stories. And I kind of thought, you know, they, you know, didn't really do some of the things that I did, they're not really, you know, like, I've done this, I've done that they're not really sharing that, you know, I was very judgmental. So I wasn't really hearing any similarities, or any of that stuff/

But what happened for me was I got the opportunity to just leave and die spiritually/
I just went back out there and was drinking
using drugs real heavily/

And remember, was the feeling that I felt when I went into that/
in all/
there was another place that I went to as well that a lot of people of color frequented
called the 1504.

And you know, it's really interesting for me, in the very beginning, when I was talking about I didn't really want to go to Cherry Hall/ I didn't want my peers to hear my story and all of that. i What happened for me is when I came back, I was going to lots of different meetings, I thought that I didn't really want to be around Cherry Hall and 1504 people of color./ And so I was going out to these other meetings to weigh out where people didn't look like me/ And what happened for me when I really got serious/ and died spiritually/ I just needed a solution. It was the most It was the craziest thing/ that it was there at Cherry Hall where the folks loved on me/ And this time I didn't hear any separation, any differences/

What I heard was, these folks have found a solution.
And when I would hear their stories now I did I heard the desperation.
I heard the struggle,
self esteem issues.
I heard the poverty that they experienced and now they were doing something different.
I loved the look of them.
They shared about how they maybe didn't bathe
or they didn't brush their teeth.
That wasn't important.
It was just about the next drink,
And I absolutely identified with that
I identified with the love
I identified with the rawness of their shares,
and the feeling of love.

I identified with this spiritual connection,
like they weren't trying to force,

maybe going to church on me,
they were just talking about the love of somebody
of a higher power actually,
somebody just other than me
and I could connect to that in the very beginning.
And so when I was able to connect with that,
and listen to them share with me that the only thing I needed to do to keep this deal
was to just pay it back,
just do just what was being done for me,
to somebody coming behind me.
And so all I needed to do was share my own truth,
how I had been a woman of the streets,
I had been a thief,
how I had been not a good mother,
how I had been to jail,
how I had been to prison.
And I gotta tell you,
I would go to meetings all over the place.

And I'd go to meetings out in the north end, and the East Side, people didn't look like me, it was a lot calmer, like, you know, maybe they just had just a drinking problem and, and no money problems, no, you know, self esteem, real issues that they talked about, or any of that stuff/ And I couldn't really relate/ But when I could come over to meetings in my community, it was just the craziest thing that I could relate, and that I could share just the lowest things that I felt like I had done, and somebody would say, Me too. And that right there alone was so freeing for me, that I just wanted to be able to do more, I wasn't being judged by telling my own personal secret truth. I wasn't being judged. But not only that, I was being patted and applauded for just being honest.

And so I you know, I think what happened for me was, it started helping me begin to build my own self worth my own self esteem, I started being able to be grateful, actually, like extremely

grateful to a higher power. In the very beginning. Like I said, I wasn't listening for God/ God, But what happened for me is, I started understanding that the higher power just couldn't be me. It just had to be somebody other than me, I had been leaning into my own path, what I thought was intelligence, but not intelligence, but just to my own understanding. And when I just let go and start asking people for help, and started listening to people opening up and listening for solutions that they had found it the it was really, for me, it was God working through them, to me, and I got the opportunity to understand and they talk about you come, you come to the you come to believe.

And those folks helped me do that, helped me come to believe that maybe a higher power is working for me. And I believe that the purpose of the 12 steps is to align my will with God's will. And they taught me all of that. He taught me to go ahead and start working these steps. The reason why I would do that is to learn something about me to get outside of myself, learn something about me my personal demons, and why I had them and then how they were affecting me.

You know, today in my life, no matter what was going on that stuff about me, the teacher mispronouncing my name, about me being in these different classes, where the kids are so smart, and all that stuff happened 60 years ago, like how in the heck would I carry all of that let it influence my behavior today for all of these years. So these folks just helped me so much. Like identify with, with myself with my true self, my true identity of who I am and be proud of who I am and be pleased because if my higher power is, you know, lift me back pulled me back from the gates of insanity in depth and gave me this life beyond my wildest dreams, then I must be valuable. So I don't know You know, I've got the opportunity, again, to just keep learning more and more and more about myself, you know, I need to say that, that that my, the base of my, my foundation with my people of color that helped me so much, I probably could have gotten, you know, clean, sober and in recovery anywhere, because the recovery speaks the language of the heart.

But I'm so grateful that I got connected with Cherry Hall, the 1504 Club, the Serenity Hall, those places where there were a lot of people that look like me, that are, you know, our community has

been gentrified. And it's those meetings are really diverse now, and they're leaning more towards people that are *not* of color. I mean, those meetings in the Central Area, that Cherry Hall, 1504 is no longer here, and the serenity Hall. It's there really integrated/ really with people who are not of color/ And I missed that/ it'd be nice to to, again/have a centralized place that people of color can actually come and experience what I got the opportunity to experience, when I first came to the rooms/ with people who looked just like me/ with people who have the experiences that I had, when I was coming up.

So you know, it's just different, it's a little different. And it takes a little getting used to that when I'm in my home group meeting, which used to be really pretty much it was diverse, but pretty much people of color/we could relate like our souls could connect/because we could be free to talk about/ you know/any prejudice that we were experiencing any hole back that we're experiencing/any illiteracy that we experienced/ especially financial literacy/ we weren't really taught that/because we weren't able to have all of that/ when we get to talk about that, we get to pass on what we've learned from each other, I mean from others. As a result of being in this in this deal, for a while and growing, we get the opportunity to share that with with folks who are coming in who are grown, who didn't have that experience.

And so, because we understand it, I can't necessarily go to a meeting in Bellevue, and share about how I don't know anything about buying a house/ I don't know anything about investments, and, and that kind of thing/And so once we learn that, you know, we get that information, we get the opportunity to bring it back to our community/ and not have a person feel ashamed because they don't know that we teach them and then they get the hang up can be a teaching in retur/ So I don't know, I've learned a lot since I've been in recovery, and so, so, so grateful for my beginning, and so, so grateful for the people who came before me, and then have guided me to where I'm at today. So I hope that I hope that makes sense, and I just thank you again and again for allowing me to just share my story.

ACT III: OTHERWISE

GRIOT: (Still narrating cautionary moments)**:** Black trans person, age 40+
ALONDRA: (Protagonist)**:** Puerto Rican, so, Black, early 30's
SISTERS IN SOBRIETY: 5 Black Women, 2 Trans/Non-Binary Bois, 1 Latinae woman, early 20's-late 30's

SETTING: Alondra's House in North Oakland. The living room is decorated mid-century modern, plants everywhere. There air smells of curry cooking and incense burning. There are eight members of SIS sitting in a circle facing inward. Some are sitting on the couch, some on the floor. The members are in a relaxed position, with the Indigenous Twelve Step book next to Alondra.

-black out-

GRIOT: Sings (comedically):

One night I dreamed I was in slavery,
'Bout 1850 was the time
Sorrow was the only sign,
Nothing around to ease my mind
Out of the night there came
A lady leading a distant pilgrim band
"First mate!" she yelled, pointing her hand
"Make room on board for this young man."
And she said
Come on up, mm-mm, I got a lifeline
Come on up to this train of mine
Come on up, mm-mm, I got a lifeline
Come on up to this train of mine
She said her name was Harriet Tubman
And she drove for the Underground Railroad–[278]

(lights up on Alondra who is pouring tea in a mug)

[278] Holly Near & Ronnie Gilbert. "Harriet Tubman", Genius. https://genius.com/Holly-near-and-ronnie-gilbert-harriet-tubman-lyrics

ALONDRA: (playful agitation) Are you seriously singing freedom songs written by white women?

GRIOT: (coaxing) got something better?

(lights up the living room space where the lounging sisters in sobriety animate through Kendrick Lamar *Alright*)

SISTERS IN SOBRIETY:

Alls my life, I has to fight, nigga (the Latinae person does not say this word)

Alls my life, I—

Hard times like, "Yah!"

Bad trips like, "Yah!"

Nazareth I'm fucked up, homie, you fucked up

But if God got us, then we gon' be alright[279]

(Sisters In Sobriety continue to sing lightly but still energetic and animate as Alondra starts speaking directly to the audience)

ALONDRA:

If you came here without purpose, suppose you made a wrong turn to meet an end-dead, you'd never know us, otherwise. Only if you'd approach the succulent stained porch from weathered pots and perch your ears to the entry door, you'd finally hear the laughter belly-born. We meet here, in what reads as just another North Oakland block, where the Black babies run the concrete worn, buzzing of syncopated hymns and songs of youth–rendered the possibility of such existence. When the meeting commences—unofficial, ours, *otherwise*, we light sage to cleanse the living room space of my home, invite only. The Sisters in Sobriety, regular Tuesday night meeting. At the intersections of the out-there un-recovered, and not quite AA approved, for we know "outside issues" fester on the inside and cannot be relegated to the unspoken.

We take three minutes, then unapologetically speak over-time; for we un-Judeo-Christian time.

[279] Kendrick Lamar. "Alright", Genius. https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-alright-lyrics

We crosstalk; gumbo ya ya—snapping, grunting, affirming, ooh yessing and me too-ing, otherwise.

We create kinship, exclusively Black and Brown— we know our recovery relies on this.

A consciousness raising circle/
all-sober/
all-siblings/
and if you had not come over here with purpose, you'd never know us.
If you've seen us at an official meeting, perhaps mixed meetings where the white folk gatekeep any utterance of race—*an issue of the outside* they say,
you may have mistook us for "fellows amongst fellows"
not ever knowing we were scouting out our own,
not ever knowing the kinds of desperation that lead us to such place,
not ever knowing we are maroons,
not ever knowing we were hidden, right in front of your face.

(The singing of Kendrick Lamar, mashes up with Harriet Tubman–a reclamation of our song, a reclamation of our history, a reclamation of our sacred space. Alondra pulls out a set of drums and plays while the other members passionately sing about their lifeline, and how we will indeed, be alright.)

-Intermission-

Discussion

The testimonies presented in this performance ethnography highlight a few salient themes: the relationship between childhood trauma, self-esteem, and insecurity; the relationship between addiction and social disconnection, and the role of relationality in fostering healing. From the three acts, the personal testimonies are centered in discussions around the ways systems of power exacerbate the difficulties of navigating addiction, such as Alondra's story expounding on the criticality of the maroon space of Sisters in Sobriety, and Sandra expressing the ways historic Black spaces, over time, are becoming infiltrated by white bodies–making the process of healing with community more difficult due to the disruption of reprieve spaces. This performance ethnography also highlights the elements of reprieve spaces that are supportive,

otherwise: such as Coro, Sandra, and Aminta finding home at Cherry Hall, and the joy conjured within the Sisters in Sobriety, evident by the collective singing and comfortability of being able to exist in the interstices. Afrocentric healing principles elucidated from this piece emphasize the importance of community, communion with nature such as water, rites of passage such as naming how long one has committed to the journey, connection to other Black people, and storytelling. When stories such as the ones shared here are given the opportunity to be shared with others, it allows for a culturally relevant one to address the challenges and joys of navigating through addiction–the pleasures and the pains.

7 *Conclusion*

In *Rethinking Recovery: Reconciliation and Searching for Our Mother*, I have endeavored to challenge and redefine conventional understandings of addiction and recovery, deployed by Alcoholics Anonymous, Addiction Studies, Critical Addiction Studies, and the Recovery Movement, by centering the experiences of Black folk in various communities and contexts. Drawing from a diverse array of theoretical frameworks and research methodologies, such as Black Feminism, Performance Ethnography, and Afrocentric approaches to addressing addiction, this dissertation has critically examined the intersections of addiction, race, and recovery from the 20th Century-present day. By delving into the historical narratives of recovery and critiquing the ways in which dominant institutions like Alcoholics Anonymous frame addiction, I have aimed to highlight the systemic issues of racism and social neglect that underpin addiction. I have argued that recovery is not merely about overcoming substance use but involves a broader process of reconciling with various losses, including social connections, spatial connections, time, and pleasure. By analyzing poetry, oral archives, and addiction testimonies from Black recovery spaces, I demonstrate how addiction can be understood as symptomatic of trauma and historical injustices. Moreover, I emphasize the importance of reconciliation in allowing Black and Indigenous communities to discover joy, healing, and relationality amidst loss, challenging the narrative that *recovery ends at overcoming addiction.*

Overall, *Rethinking Recovery* offers a transformative perspective on addiction and recovery that foregrounds Black experiences, resilience, and agency and the stakes of the work I have put forth reflect a need for the ongoing production of addiction scholarship that centers such experiences. Applying a Black queer feminist lens to the current state of addiction and

recovery discourse is urgent as recovery projects around addiction continue to negatively impact Black communities, particularly, Black girls and Black youth. In the article, "A Treatment-To-Prison-Pipeline? Scoping Review and Multimethod Examination of Legal Consequences of Residential Treatment Among Adolescents" clinical and community psychologist Shabnam Javdani, McKenzie Berezin, and Keisha April discusses how in light of the the failure of prisons to rehabilitate, youth have been encouraged to join residential treatment centers to address addiction. In this qualitative study, studies showed that the Black girls were disproportionately subjected to surveillance, problematic power dynamics with staff, and exposed to physical restraint.[280] The recovery project, which was providing an alternative to incarceration for drug use through rehabilitation centers in the United States, failed Black girls and made them systems involved. [281] There must be scholars in addiction advocating for abolition, and resources for Black folk that do not just pipeline us to prisons but offer the support and resources needed in order to heal–these methods that I have argued are creative, spiritual, and rooted in African Diasporic practice. In addition to this, treatment programs continue to bolster the work of AA, who continue to depict colorblind behavior, such as the deployment of its theme "One World, One AA, One Language, One Heart" utilized for the 2016 World Service Meeting, an international meeting for members of Alcoholics Anonymous, whose purpose is to respond to the varying needs of A.A. members worldwide.[282] The collective reported that the

[280] Keisha April, McKenzie Berezin, and Shabnam Javdani, "A Treatment-To-Prison-Pipeline? Scoping Review and Multimethod Examination of Legal Consequences of Residential Treatment Among Adolescents." *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* 52 (3). England: Routledge: 376–95.

[281] April, Berezin, and Javdani, "A Treatment-To-Prison-Pipeline."

[282] Anonymous, Alcoholics. "One World, One AA, One Language, One Heart". In *24th World Service Meeting 2016*. New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service Inc, 2017.

Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, the main text, has been translated into sixty-nine languages, with fifteen languages pending, including a spoken word form in the language of the First Nations Navajo–effectively all the same stories of white men just coded in different languages.

The future directions of this work are concerned with the preservation of Black life, and while much of this project has been focused on systems, there is much more to be learned about the interiority of Black queer and trans lives navigating substance addiction that is deeply personal and intimate. This dissertation gives an analytical framework of understanding addiction from the margins: heavily influenced and mediated by oppressive systems, and yet still there's room for more story. Further research questions include: How has compulsive substance use impacted the lives of Black women, queer and trans folk, from their perspectives? What are the health concerns that have emerged due to substance-related coping strategies? What are the ways substance use has contributed to Black death? What are the proper methods of sharing such stories that centers the storyteller?

These questions I take up because through my ongoing process of reconciliation, substance-free, I have known countless community members passing away from health related issues, and stories of how substance use contributed to other forms of loss–loss of jobs, loss of families, loss of communities. These stories must be properly situated within larger systems, and yet, offer insight on the interiority of such experiences rather than relegating them to statistics or untold altogether.

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