

Spring 2023

"We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Chains": Paving the Way to a New Horizon for Marginalized Youth

Soledad Aguilar-Colón
Bard College, sa2860@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Aguilar-Colón, Soledad, ""We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Chains": Paving the Way to a New Horizon for Marginalized Youth" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 170.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023/170

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

**“We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Chains”:
Paving the Way to a New Horizon for Marginalized Youth**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature and Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Soledad Aguilar-Colón

Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

May 2023



(Captured from right to left: Olivia, Guerdyna, Sammy, Moza, Soledad (me), Mia

This project is dedicated to Black and Brown LGBTQ+ babies, both with us and not. To those fighting to be seen, to be heard, to be celebrated and rejoiced. To those suffering in silence waiting for community. To those that continue to experience loss. To those in mourning. To my younger self.

Que bonito somos.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to the Sadie Nash community. Thank you Sammy, Olivia, Moza, Guerdyna, and Mia. I am forever grateful and forever changed by you all. Thank you for being you and for laughing and learning alongside me. Thank you to my incredible and charismatic work Tío and supervisor, Ariluz, to my forever teacher and co-facilitator, Yei. To Jess and Tené who fight for the continuity of this brilliant program. What a pleasure it is to witness the tender, love and care it took us to keep going.

Thank you to my beautiful Nashers. I have accessed a greater capacity to teach and love because of you all. A responsibility I hold with great pride.

To the Nasher alums, we were so magical.

Thank you to my village, both blood and chosen. No hay palabras para expresar todo el amor que tengo por mi familia. Mamí, Jessica, Mayel, my beating heart. Papí, Tamia, Amaraya and Penelope, mi alma. A todos mis abuelos y abuelas, gracias por el amor que me han dado y la sabiduría que me han transmitido.

To John and Sophia, what a feat it was to get this thesis to where it is today, none of which I would have believed possible without your honesty, encouragement, and world of knowledge. Thank you for investing and believing in my vision. One of the best parts of this process was getting to speak to you both and have the honor of learning from you during our Senior Project meetings. Thank you, truly.

And to my friends. My community. The people that hold me up and bring me an immense amount of joy and hope. To Amina Kai, Dakota, Sahar, Talaya, Sage, Naty, Deva, Cerina, Sydney, Ari, Majd, Chris and many more, thank you for the late night conversations, for your continuous genius and creativity, for keeping me going when it got hard. You inspire me. Your support, friendship, and love has transformed my life.

I hope you enjoy and see the pieces of you that have shaped and made new pathways and possibilities for this thesis.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Entering the Queer Multiverse.....	11
Chapter Overview.....	16
Chapter 1: “When We Win We Lose:” Undoing the Horizon.....	19
Untethering the Accountability Paradigm.....	21
The “Unrealized Dream” of Horizon Work.....	30
Mourning the “Unrealized Dream”	40
Chapter 2: Gritan por la noche.....	47
Interlude: Gritan por la noche.....	48
The Achings of Our Antepasados: Body Narratives.....	53
Centering Affect and Pleasure in Pedagogy.....	59
Chapter 3: Seeking Futurity.....	70
Interlude: After “Brown”	71
Minoritarian Excess.....	72
Love is the Ethic.....	75
Touching Horizon.....	85
Epilogue: For What May Come Next.....	88
References.....	90
Works Consulted.....	92

Introduction:

“Memory is a poet, not an historian”

- Marie Howe

IF you dig through the archives of Google photos, digging past 2020, past those terribly angst-y final years in high school to the second summer before your Sophomore year, you will find a couple videos. You may have forgotten their purpose, or why they were taken, but you pause in front of them anyway, wondering who those little girls are, so young and fresh-faced. You wonder what that feeling is in your chest, as you hold your hand to your heart, slowly remembering that summer and the people that changed your life. As you click on one of the videos you see a girl you remember eating lunch with at Popeyes holding a green paper sign that reads “ #I am a leader & I am BEAUTIFUL.” In the next video is another person with a sign that says “#I am a beautiful queen,” and you remember the feeling of making her laugh, how beautifully infectious it was. As you keep scrolling, a photo appears of an old friend, a friend you never thought would mean so much to you—two budding queer Latinas from Washington Heights—you two used to share headphones on the one train and listen to Frank Ocean and NAO belt about experiences you had only dreamt about. And there she was, holding a sign in the Union Square train station wearing green sunglasses that you had gotten from one of the outside street vendors and an anime T-shirt, her sign reading: “#I love me for me.” And as you keep scrolling, you finally land on a photo of yourself, barely recognizable, and yet there, a tiny image in a long line of over 2,000 photos. She too is young like the rest and oddly wearing a black and white dress that you know she wants to crawl out of, but also holding up a sign alongside all the others, her curly hair, however, full and long, and as you touch your now short curly bob and bangs that you’ve had since you were seventeen, you remember there was a day when you could never dream of being out in the world without your curtain of curls to shield behind. This girl on your phone screen, a less ripened version of you, has yet to form the bags under her eyes from pulling all nighters and her grays have yet to come in

from the emotional turbulence of the past few years: the Hurricane, the pandemic, the protests, the suicide, the harm, the assaults, the falling in love and out of it, the going to therapy. This girl is weightless and light on her feet, yours stomp around like an elephant.

It's funny to you, looking back now, the girls in those photos never knew how important they had become to you, how much they had made an impact, but there in the final photo stood all of them, a group of Black and Brown teenagers hurriedly posing on top of someone's brownstone stoop, laughing, full deep belly laughs. You remember the rich feeling of being fifteen and walking through the West Village, past the invading lululemon stores you could never afford, but you still laughed because you were all together, and you were fabulous.

You still remember that day, you had gotten your usual dollar pizza from the hole-in-the-wall on West Fourth, each too broke to go to the Starbucks next door as you were only given \$20 for the week, but a slice of pizza and an ice tea was enough to fill all of your stomachs and still have money left over. That day, you took your dollar pizzas and ice teas to Washington Square Park—NYU students, break dancers, and street artists were crowding the park, and so you all sat at the edge, listening to the saxophone and taking polaroids of each other in the grass already wanting to memorialize those moments you spent with each other by the end of week one . And as you dabbed at the greasy pizza and sipped from your iced-teas, you laid on the grass and held each other, your arms and legs entangled around each other, giggling about which Nashers you were secretly crushing on, not knowing that at the end you would say goodbye and go back to your respective lives. But at that time, you were family.

You cried to one another, held each other as you crumbled, no longer fearing being perceived in your pain, you learned to raise your voice and scream in support of each other. You learned that when

you held hands and marched down Grand Central chanting “Ashé” you held power, and at times you were asked to sit through uncomfortable conversations as you learned to call each other in. Nashers generally were coming from all over the city, from different boroughs and high schools, but for those six weeks the city had never felt more insular. For some, home was stifling, for others, schools were isolating, for all of you, society was oppressive. But here, you were taught to make space for the things that you were told to be ashamed of, for the questions you were taught to be silent about, for the anger you still harbored.

Six years from that day, you have become almost strangers to each other, only a few keeping in contact through social media. From time to time you see your old friend from the Heights, and on instagram you keep up with the relationships and accomplishments of those you use to run around lower Manhattan with, and you congratulate them, but for the most part you are distant, having gone your separate ways—maybe college, maybe work, either way, all navigating this new pandemic world and the continuous violence committed on marginalized communities. As you close your phone, you wonder how they’re all doing. That feeling in your chest, a rewarding sense of grief, a feeling that the love you all shared, remains and that somewhere on those brownstone steps in the West Village is the phantom of your voices, wafting with abandon in the air.



Entering the Queer Multiverse

Stepping into the main office of Sadie Nash is not like stepping into most workplaces. The usual dreary atmosphere of gray walls and lackluster desks have been replaced with bright purple wallpaper and colorful envelopes stapled across the hallway with the names of each of the Summer Institute Nashers of 2022. Some have painted the flags of their nationalities—Puerto Rican, Dominican, Haitian, Jamaican, the list continues—and others have an array of stars, suns, and hearts painted and color coded across. Each, however, a unique reflection of their personalities. The envelopes are one of many of Sadie Nash’s community building practices that are implemented by Deans and faculty to uplift and empower each other—we call them “warm and fuzzies,” in which each summer Nashers and staff are able to write notes to each other that show appreciation, love and care for their fellow Nashers and staff members.

In another way, I also like to think of this practice as a way of implementing each Nasher into the bones of Sadie Nash. Their identities, humor, and creativity hung one right next to the other, threading into a collective mural, a symbol of the community we encourage them to build, at least until the end of the summer when they take their respective envelopes home to keep and (hopefully) look back on.

As a Nasher alum myself, I still have my warm and fuzzies stored in the customized mason jars that we made during the summer program in 2016. I remember receiving notes from my friends and feeling excited and seen, but the notes from our Deans always meant the most. The Deans were our role models, they felt like our cool, older, twenty-something year old siblings that led free lives and they knew what sex was and had multiple partners, and tattoos they didn’t have to hide. They said phrases

like ethical non-monogamy and intersectional feminism, and went to protests to fight against racial capitalism. I was in awe of their lives, how self assured and fearlessly unapologetic they seemed. Now having returned to Sadie Nash as a twenty-something year old Dean, I have come to realize how terribly wrong I was—I am just as clueless as a twenty-one year old as I was at fifteen, maybe just about different things.

As I headed further into the office, I poked my head into the lounge room, where all of our Nashers convened in the morning and made my rounds of good mornings. Some were seated on the couch, braiding each other's hair and fixing their make-up, a couple of Nashers glanced back at me guiltily as they made coffee in the communal office kitchen while a group of five or six Nashers were playing in our main room talking and throwing a deflated volleyball they found around the office. The walls of the main room were crowded with posters from the workshops of the previous weeks. As I looked around the room, I saw posters from my own workshop on Pleasure Activism and Sexual Literacy, as well as the other Deans' workshops on Culture Shock, Body Positivity, and Cultural Appropriation. The large bookcase on the other end of the room was filled with books about Black girlhood, queer and trans identities, and building community. Walking into the neighboring facilitation room, the framed images of famous quotes from Assata Shakur and Audre Lorde are peppered across the room as well as the faces of previous Nashers with the words, "This is what a leader looks like" written below. Other quotes that I found around the room included "We defend our trans family," and "We don't watch our neighbors, we see them. Protect your communities," a quote that is in response to the hyper surveillance of Black and Brown communities, especially in urbanized neighborhoods.

As a Dean working in the space, but also as a researcher, the difference between the environment of the Sadie Nash office and their neighboring offices was stark. In our offices, the remnants of each person that once walked through these doors as well as those whose knowledge we were inspired by, are part of the backbone of this office, a passing down of the love and community care that continues to fuel the generations to come. In one room of the office, there's a painting, front and center, of a naked brown body with the head of a rhinoceros surrounded by twilight. During my time as a Dean, I was not particularly fazed by this painting, possibly speaking to my own homeliness with presentations of the nude body. However, I think of this image now, how strange it may seem to the outside eye for a youth development program to display a set of naked breasts, publicly. I think of what it says to the kids that come into this room for their workshops, how jarring, but also familiar it can become when constantly met with the painting of a nude Black body, that is not in a sexualized context, but rather a utopian and empowering position. When I say utopian, I am referencing the hybrid form of the human body with that of an animal, and a rhinoceros at that, which to me, signals a sense of strength and assertiveness. In my research, I puzzled over this painting—what message is Sadie Nash trying to send about what or who they advocate for by displaying this painting? I ask that you, readers and critical thinkers alike, ponder this question with me as I present the public and private artistic and political interventions that are exhibited throughout this specific community-based educational space to subvert normative—meaning white, heterosexual, and cis—representations of non-profit work spaces.

In the next three chapters, I attend to the tensions that this question unravels. The seeds of *We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Chains* began as a sentiment. A nostalgia that I had for a time in my life

that felt transformative. *What happened to my fellow Nashers? Where did we all end up?* Then from that seed came poems, scribbles of thoughts I had as I remembered the homeliness of that summer. A homeliness that was new, one I had never experienced before because it was chosen. My first brush with what queer kinship looks like. I didn't know at the time that it would shape the relationships and community that I sought after in the years to come. This is what I mean by transformative. These friendships *moved* me, and while they may not have lasted for as long, they remained significant. So much so, that they became the spark for my thesis. Around the time that I knew I was also going to be working at Sadie Nash as a Dean for the upcoming summer at their Manhattan site, I knew my responsibility to the program and to the Nashers came before my position as an ethnographer.¹ My fieldwork is constrained, scattered, and with pieces missing. To further explain this, I refer to "The Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography" by anthropologists Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe for my approach to the ethnographic methods that I modeled and I also implore for a more holistic and simultaneously, fragmentary engagement with the data that I have collected because it is not just data, and I am not solely a researcher within this community, but also a friend, a colleague, a mentor, and a poet and that is the way that the next three chapters will be presented; as fragmented, poetic, explorations of a collection of incomplete memories, scattered discussions, academic wonderings, and imperfect arguments. Inspired by those that coined the term for patchwork ethnography, I have my own resistance towards representing a thesis that does not include the messiness of which my own humanity falls under and as part of my argument, my proof is evident in

¹ The terms Dean and Nasher will be used throughout this ethnography as they are used officially in the program to refer to the positions of the program counselors (the Deans) and the high school-aged students that attend the program (the Nashers).

the contradictions and unknowingness that has pooled before me in the last year that I have been working on this. The narratives that are encountered throughout my thesis are meant to serve as disruptions to anthropological analysis that are only able to offer partial truths. The rest of my experience at Sadie Nash can only be translated through reflections of creative prose or poetry. I very much perceive this ethnography to be just that, an attempt at translating a sacred language, culture, and community to onlookers in hopes that you are able to parcel through, and for the 30 minutes it may take to read through, embrace our humanity.

Chapter Overview

Much of the following theorizing that I tackle in this ethnography rests upon the groundwork of admired ethnographers of color such as Saidiya Hartman, Savannah Shange, Jose Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, and Jillian Hernandez, some of whom have foregrounded queer, African American, and Latin American studies and ultimately expanded the sphere of possibility for queer, ethnographers of color, such as myself. In the first chapter, I untangle Shange’s concept of the “progressive dystopia” as it complicates moments within Sadie Nash that demonstrate the “friction” (Tsing, 2011) in restorative justice praxis. As I tease out the complexities and challenges that the Sadie Nash Deans and staff face in our very quotidian everyday tasks, I purport that what lies at the core of our values and practices, and which distinguishes us from other community based educational spaces (Baldrige et al., 2017) is a shared politics for envisioning the horizon. Horizon work, as is many times offered as a “utopian” (I will explain in the following chapters why utopian is in quotations) framework to the work that political and social activists engage in, is also a theoretical approach that I argue establishes a productive affective experience of mourning that is otherwise excluded from other spaces that queer and trans, people of color inhabit.

As I move into chapter two, we see the concept of grief as it moves and shapes the interpersonal relationships within Sadie Nash. I introduce this chapter with a vignette that locates the grief that I am witnessing as an ethnographer and community member at Sadie Nash within the context of my own inextricable interwovenness with grief. As Shange writes beautifully in her acknowledgments for *Progressive Dystopia*, “writing is ancestor work,” (Shange, 2019, ix) and I tip my hat, gratefully, for such a poignant ode to what I have only attempted to achieve—a reckoning with the antepasados to trouble

regurgitated claims to an objectivized positionality as an ethnographer. My perspectives are riddled with the worldviews of all my homies, ancestors and chosen family alike. This chapter, in large part, engages with a form of illogic that aligns more directly with the anthropological modalities inspired from Indigenous and decolonial academics such as Audra Simpson who proposes “ethnographic refusals” to foreign observers of colonized and oppressed minoritarian groups that upset the trust and privacy of our communities. And while I do intentionally invite a form of inner circle interaction, there is a sense of refusal that I feel to not over explain, and instead let the narratives rest and breathe on their own. Some of this I may fail at wholeheartedly, as I too fall under the excited pressures to publicize our labor of love to the onlookers, and other moments, I go through many lengths to protect as I am wary of jeopardizing queer and trans survival strategies. Ergo, a combination of trial and error.

And lastly, in my third and final chapter, I invoke abolitionist and transformative justice discourses to engender a fresh perspective on the centrality of love as a praxis and methodology that Sadie Nash employs to prioritize the futurity of our Black and Brown, LGBTQ+ youth. This chapter, more than the last two, values the stakes of horizon work as we witness the affective and spatial progressions towards political resistance and radical community care. It is my hope that the sanctity of the Sadie Nash community be sustained within a critical lens that consistently discovers the endless possibilities of our humanity as we continuously stretch the boundaries of what we are capable of becoming.

This ethnography is an exploration of queer, Black and Brown survival, it is a capturing of queer Black and Brown joy, and family, and kinship, and community, and autonomy in the making. This ethnography is fleshy, and affective, and personal. It is a project of dream and world-making that

disrupts a cis-heteronormative and white dominated corporate world. Our survival can only happen in the attempt and failure. And the grief that's born from it. As queer poc siblings we have all known grief intimately. Felt it enter our homes, make a plate at the table, hover in our hallways as something to be afraid of instead of embrace. Grief is the uncle who passed away too young from aids, the unspoken tension at the dinner table when a home turns sterile, the desolate, boarded up, derelict building that once housed the laughter of queer youth, the street that has grown quiet in our absence, the fear of every cop car that patrols our neighborhoods. Our grief is our response to fill these spaces once again with every fiber of our being.

Grief is the body making love anew, stretching the fabrics of a world unimagined.

Chapter 1:

“When We Win We Lose:” Undoing the Horizon

[photographs]

Somewhere on a brown-stone stoop in Lower Manhattan,
where vegan ice cream shops and protein shakes have taken over the queering streets of West Fourth,
where NYU students are drunkenly stumbling out of college bars to dance in Washington Square Park.

Somewhere, before Starbucks left and dollar pizza ran out of business,
before the books and records street vendors were chased out indefinitely,
before, before, before...

YOU CAN HEAR US

Somewhere, underneath the sound of the sirens and late night clamor of restaurants closing and clubs
opening,
of drunken laughter echoing off old brick buildings,
reminiscent of early dutch immigration,
where brooklyn, queens, and uptown coalesce into a chant:

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win.”

YOU CAN HEAR US

Somewhere preserved under the trash and collected dust from construction,

YOU CAN HEAR US

reverberating throughout the elite halls;

“We must love and support one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

Asé.

- Nashers chanting in Grand Central, 2016 / Quote from Assata Shakur



Untethering the Accountability Paradigm

The silence in the room was thick. All five of us were struck with the heaviness of the zoom call we had just gotten off with the Newark site and our supervisor, Ariluz. Next to me, Moza clings to the armrest of her chair, her breathing becoming increasingly exasperated. I raise my head slightly and peer at the rest of my co-workers; Sammy, to the left of me, starts playing with the TD bank pen and clipboard she has in her hands. Her face creased with disappointment and frustration. To the right of me, Guerdyna, Mia, and Olivia sit with their heads slightly bowed, waiting for someone to speak up. At the moment, I am unsure what to say or what will come out if I begin to speak. Do I feel angry? Am I concerned? Am I disappointed? If so, at whom? The beige-yellow walls around us start to feel drab and sterile. Outside our building, although we face the brick walls of the other office buildings that are located next to us, I can still see the sky darkening as it begins to pour. I start to feel restless as I think of the possible train delays and bus malfunctions I will have to face once I leave, the clock already nearing 6:00 pm.

The tapping of my foot interrupts the silence and Moza looks up, her heaving slows down as she wipes away her tears. “Should we watch the video?” I ask, referencing the recording that another Sadie Nash staff member took from the Princeton-Blairstown trip in New Jersey, a trip that even months after the event has left the Deans, Site Leaders, and staff unsettled by what happened, and conflicted about what was the best way to handle it. I look around at their faces, Sammy nods her head and gets up to plug in her computer to the tv screen. Olivia speaks up now, “it felt like the Newark team was blaming us for the incident.” We all respond with nods and “yeahs,” the word “blame” hanging heavy over our heads. In my position as a youth worker and ethnographer, blame became a

point of contention as I often found myself unable to use language surrounding accountability work and restorative justice (derived and coined from abolitionists and restorative justice thinkers and practitioners such as Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Adrienne Maree Brown, the list continues) that does *not* name the binary constructions of “aggressor” and “victim” that reify a punitive framework. In my own efforts to conceptualize an understanding of who was at fault and who was victimized, I came to understand the intricate ways in which our language itself is limited to structures of policing and prisons that restrict our ability to fully flesh out the process of accountability. Even in spaces run and supported by folks of diverse and marginalized identities, I have witnessed similar narratives of the criminalization of Black and brown youth being reproduced.

As the researcher and participant, I found it unproductive and destructive to think within this framework as restorative justice and accountability (two different terms that pinpoint similar processes) often needs to exist outside of the binary that succinctly places harm on individuals rather than systems of power and oppression. When I applied to be a Dean in the Spring of 2021, I was immediately directed to the Sadie Nash website as a resource to better grasp the mission of the organization. One page in particular stands out as their philosophies and beliefs section of which includes a clear statement to “[model] anti-oppressive practices, behaviors and leadership styles,” to be “committed to challenging the internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological oppression,” and “constantly examining ourselves and acknowledging our own power, identity and privilege, and how that could affect our work.” During our group interviews for the Dean position, we were tasked with various possible scenarios that challenged us to think through how we would engage with

“anti-oppressive” and restorative approaches to harm and conflict. In this exercise, the humanity of our Nashers was asked to be prioritized and to evaluate our internal biases.

Once the summer arrived, accountability took the form of written agreements that the Deans and Site Leaders formulated at the beginning of our preparation for the start of the program. One of these agreements or guidelines that we wrote addressed a philosophy toward resolving conflict that asked Nashers to “take a second to honor your feelings as they are valid and approach the person / situation with respect and listen to their perspective (your Deans and SN staff members are also a great resource to mediate a situation if necessary). Sadie Nash recognizes that conflict is a part of being in community with others and can arise, but we ask that we respect each other and reach out for help from one of us as needed.” Initially, in the beginning stages of thesis writing, I set out to discover and answer what accountability means in Sadie Nash, and while I view accountability as a guiding principle that informs much of the pedagogical praxis (Freire, 2017) that we build our philosophies and values around, I have come to understand accountability as unfixed and adaptable.

This ended up looking like the following. During the program, I witnessed many moments of our Nashers being invited by their Deans to honor their bodies, communicate their needs, and to hold and lean on one another. Our mission to be accountable to one another was an every day practice, whether it meant asking each Nasher and Dean to take up a portion of the chores, or holding tough conversations with our Nashers when we noticed unequal dynamics or hurtful comments being used. When our Nashers needed breaks or rest, we provided them with a space to sleep. If it came to our attention that one of our Nashers was continuously not eating food during lunch, we bought groceries. We were trained to be preventative, to acknowledge harm before it happens. And this more

often than not left me feeling burnt out, frustrated, and unsure of myself as my own emotions would at times contradict our praxis. As a way to support each other, the Deans would debrief either during lunch or after work as we cleaned up the space. Our venting to each other allowed us to hold space for how tiresome and challenging it was to practice accountability with ourselves, with each other and with our students. Where was our blueprint for what to do when a Nasher gives you attitude and all you want to do is yell? How do we move forward with care rather than punishment when a Nasher makes an insensitive comment to their peer?

In Savannah Shange’s groundbreaking ethnographic research on the dual function of abolitionist work and anti-Blackness in schools in San Francisco, she reveals the continued carceral practices and anti-Black policy that is upheld even in spaces such as Robeson—the school that Shange conducts her fieldwork in—that state a commitment to combating racism and systemic oppression. In her book, *Progressive Dystopias: Abolition, Anti-Blackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*, Shange argues that the the “progressive dystopia” characterizes a common bind that “progressive institutions” of whom express a certain intentionality towards social justice work, also demonstrate that even in these spaces “[t]he marginalization of Black staff, students, and families at Robeson is an instantiation of how racialized carceral logic has stretched beyond literal confinement to shape the practice of social justice movements. The conjoining of punishment and progressivism is enabled by what Joy James describes as the “mainstreaming” of radicalism, exemplified by the ‘erasure of revolutionary politics and a rhetorical embrace of radicalism without material support for challenges to transform or abolish, rather than modify, state-corporate authority (1999:83)’” (136). For institutions and community-based educational spaces such as Sadie Nash the work of social justice still exists within the larger state power

that enforces a standard of “civility,” “carcerality” and “respectability politics” in order to operate a funded program, which begs the question, how does this impact Sadie Nash Deans, Site Leaders, and staff in our attempt to build a community that values and practices accountability? What unrealized challenges does this pose to our mission?

As I sit across from Moza’s zoom screen, her bright red hair and blue silk shirt complement the baby blue and pink freshly painted walls of her room. She painted them herself, she answered me proudly at the beginning of our zoom call. It strikes me now as I peer at her through the screen, that Moza has always stood out to me for her vibrant statement pieces, and during the summer program, her masks and lipsticks always intentionally matched the color set she chose to wear that day. Her bright colors and flowery headphones seem to mask her own quietness as she was often the most seemingly reserved in our group of Deans, opting to listen to her music over lunch and observe, rather than excitedly chime in like Mia, Sammy or myself who were often the conversation starters during our daily lunch hour. After the PBC trip, she also became increasingly more inward and distant. Her eyes water a little now as she sits back to think of the question I had just asked her during our interview: “has Sadie Nash ever disappointed you?” Then she looks down, her hands fiddling with an unseen object—cut off by the zoom screen—on her desk: “I felt very very let down by Sadie Nash,” her voice wavers, “I feel like their approach to everything that happened in New Jersey was kind of, um what’s the word, it was maybe somewhat kind of stand off-ish. I think in their attempt to be as delicate about it as possible, they kind of tiptoed around it too much rather than address it more head on, and-but-like addressing it not in that they should have had any punitive punishment, more like they should have had more frank conversations with us as staff members. I feel like the Nashers got a good

amount of those conversations...but I do hope, well I did hope, that they would have had those conversations with us as staff members.” Moza’s diction around Sadie Nash’s response to the PBC trip centers two dichotomizing terms; being “stand off-ish” and “punitive punishment” which she phrases as a binary scale for which to measure Sadie Nash’ ability to be accountable.

As Moza continues ruminating over the question, I take a second to circle down these two terms in my notes. From the prison industrial complex (PIC from here on out), to the education system, and even within our own homes, punishment, discipline, and isolation are so intimately ingrained in our everyday practices, institutions, structures, language, and mentality. I too—in my search for the utopian, “Safe space,” non-profit haven— am indoctrinated by the hamster-wheel rhetoric of discipline that has seeped in from the PIC and into our professional and interpersonal relationships with each other and with our students. Mariame Kaba, who spearheads much of the abolitionist and transformative justice pedagogy, writes “[o]ften people think of punishment as rooted within religion. Many forms of religion talk about punishment and vengeance that various gods wreak. There’s such a long history in terms of people’s thinking about punishment. Brett Story’s *Prison Land* makes the case that prisons, rather than coming from our desire for punishment, are actually instruments to punish. They create punishment. It’s an issue of directionality, whether it is our thoughts around punishment and vengeance drive the making of the prison or if it’s the other way around. The institutions create and reinforce punishment, in and of themselves” (Kaba et. al, 2021). We see this play out in Robeson, the school where Shange conducts her fieldwork, as the “progressive dystopia” starts to crumble and peel away at the underlying carceral framework that the school operates

within. Our mindsets are directed to respond through a lens of punishment and central to the reinforcement of punishment, is rooted in a desire for retribution.

When Kaba speaks of abolition, she pulls from the hypocrisy that unfolds during moments of police brutality, where activists that have labeled themselves as abolitionists then begin advocating for the police officer in question to be imprisoned. I admit that I too have felt the urge and the relief when one is acquitted, as it serves as a temporary release from the hurt. And yet, Kaba urges all practitioners of abolition work to confront our ego and redirect our desire for justice. For the Sadie Nash community, this is the goal. Walking through the Sadie Nash office alone was a spatial reminder of the values of the community; pictures of quotes such as “I don’t watch my neighbors, I see them. Together we make our communities safer” are already in direct resistance to the surveillance of Black and Brown communities. However, in this paper, I attempt to discover—what does it look like for Sadie Nash members to realize Kaba’s mission in our own community and put it into practice?



[resurfacings]

She fingers the wrinkled pink post-it.

I love you

she exhales,

her breaths sinking deeper

into the cavernous mason jar

filled with wrinkled pink and blue post its

that say

I love you

in various ways.

When she breathes in,

inhale,

she remembers

Brooklyn stoops and barbecue,

two girls lying next to one another

tumbling over breasts

as their hands reach in between flashes of the TV.

And as she

exhales,

remembering

sweltering summer heat

and SZA playing on repeat,

that was the summer,

of 2017

when they wore skinny jeans and ate coconut icy's,

rockin' to juju on that beat.

Mamá never knew that she was crushing
on the dyke from 148th street.
that she puffed her chest,
and swayed her hips,
just to tease the brooklyn girl
who said she could smell a gay from a mile away

Mentirosa

Those were city kids,
they're names now fading away,
remember homegirl Claudia
they'd say
the Dean with the girlfriend
who wasn't afraid.

I wanna be like that one day

Maybe, when we're in our twenty-somethings,
we'll look back
and say
we did it.
We aren't afraid.

The “Unrealized Dream” of Horizon Work

“When it comes to communities of color, we want so much to have these like safe, wonderful spaces with each other, but...it's still kind of a dream and it's very much an unrealized dream”

- Interlocutor (Moza)

“I've always been interested not in making youth of color visible to other people, but actually the opposite, how do you make the structures visible to young people of color so that they can [hold] the knowledge to disrupt it?” The screen from my computer is pitch black as I listen back to the zoom call with my Sociology Professor, Jomaira Salas Pujols, who also conducted her studies and facilitated at the Sadie Nash site in New Jersey a few years ago. Her own writing has brought attention to the importance of the Sadie Nash space in nurturing and cultivating the identities of Afro-Latinx Nashers in the program. When I read her article, “‘It’s About the Way I’m Treated’: Afro-Latina Black Identity Development in the Third Space” I felt a sense of pride for the Sadie Nash community, as I remembered feeling seen as a young 15 year old entering this “third space” where Black girls and mixed girls wore our natural hair, where we combed and braided during lunch and wrote poems about the power of our crowns for open mic. I remember having Deans that were Afro-latinx who facilitated workshops about Blackness in the Latinx community. Growing up, I had never met any other Peruvians, or South Americans that were Black and had often felt gaslighted when I would explain that my mother and grandfather had thick curly hair and brown skin. Many times people questioned me either out of denial that I have Black family members as my own hair is much finer and my skin is white, or out of confusion surrounding the conjoining of the two words: Peruvian and Black.

Professor Salas herself is Afro-Latina, and has spoken up in our classroom and in conferences about her

own mission to centralize Black girlhood for Black girls, which also feels reminiscent of what Sadie Nash has become; a third space, not liminal, but corporeal, for teenagers of marginalized identities to feel held and nurtured in their identities by people that reflect them.

There's a quote in the background of my Zoom call with Professor Salas that states, "Much to be done & undone," a statement that rings true in Professor Salas' own classrooms, the ask that we each as students and pupils of learning courageously step into the *undoing*. This is what I remember of Sadie Nash, the *undoing-ness* of it all. During the summer institute, our site leaders Olivia and Sammy, taught two core classes that have remained in Sadie Nash since I was a Nasher in 2017 and are key courses that are meant to engage the Nashers in this work of "undoing." In the summer of 2022, both Sammy and Olivia noted some outdated information in the predetermined curriculum that they were asked to facilitate. What was once considered radical material for my group of Nashers, is now falling flat with the newer group as they had grown up with a handful of queer and trans influencers that had normalized topics such as pronouns and sexual orientation. The accessibility to information and representation, arguably popularized through the rise of tik tok, instagram and youtube was not as widespread when I was a teenager.

One of the core classes that Olivia co-taught with my fellow Dean, Mia, was a *Power, Identity, and Privilege* workshop that urged Nashers to examine oppression and power both on an institutional and interpersonal level. My memory of this course may not be as accurate as the experience, but from what I can recollect, this workshop impacted my understanding of "selfhood" deeply. When I stepped into the classroom, which was held in an old room in the Eugene Lang New School building on 12th Street and 6th Ave, I and my fellow Nashers were challenged by our Mentor, Ze (also ze's pronouns) to

untangle ourselves from what we thought we knew about the social world. We were asked to leave our egos at the door. Ze made it very clear from the get-go that there would be no tolerance for knowing, as this space required us to be imaginative, to risk what felt familiar and expand our subjectivities. On our first day of the workshop, Ze placed post-it notes with different identifying labels such as “pansexual,” “gender-queer,” “demisexual,” which was the first time I had ever encountered these terms. This is what I mean by *undoing*. The knowledge of how expansive identity is and can be, was not readily accessible information to me in other educational spaces and the more I learned, the more I questioned. This space, which at the time I remember, felt exciting and terrifying, allowed me to explore various parts of my identity that beforehand I had understood as fixed. I owe much to my mentor Ze and the space Ze was intentional about creating. No other educational space had offered me the opportunity to build a language for who I was in the world and who I wanted to be.

As I think of this *undoing-ness*, and how this has shaped the practices of the Sadie Nash space, the term “ego” stands out in my notes from the interview with Professor Salas. She too has noted learning to leave her own ego behind when stepping into the Sadie Nash office: “the whole idea of not having a punitive space” she says, “had become really important to me, because I learned it at Sadie Nash. If someone is falling asleep maybe it's not because they're trying to be rude, maybe it's because they didn't sleep well the night before. You know, really removing the ego from the work, which is hard.” The example of a student falling asleep is one that is emblematic of the values that Sadie Nash Deans foster for their Nashers, and I have often also found myself in a similar situation of noticing students starting to fall asleep during my workshops or their attention span beginning to wander towards their phones. In my field notes, this predicament was written down various times over the

course of the Summer program as the other Deans and I held multiple conversations with each other and Ariluz. What came up for many of us were feelings of frustration, being disrespected, and disappointment in our Nashers for not being able to be fully present. It also made us feel unappreciated for all of the work that we put into our lessons. However, over the course of our discussions, we recognized how conflicted we felt as we too were once teenagers not so long ago and understood what it felt like to be exhausted in a classroom or to feel bored after over an hour of lecturing. This instance demonstrates the tensions that we navigated when it came to implementing accountability practices without knowing how or what this looks like. Ariluz was also adamant about having us understand that the way of Sadie Nash is not to penalize, but to provide understanding and communication from both parties. By the third week, each of us held a discussion in our workshops with our Nashers about having their phones out during workshops and we each emphasized the importance of communicating when they felt the desire to step outside and have some time to be on their phones or to take naps. This did not entirely achieve the desired effect that we had anticipated. While some of our Nashers learned to communicate when they wanted space to sit out, others took it upon themselves to either disappear into bathrooms or continue playing on their phones during our workshops.

As I relay to Professor Salas my own frustrations of engaging with youth work during the “tik tok” era, I convey my desire to uncover the “messiness” of accountability in our everyday lives as mentors and facilitators. “It’s hard” she acknowledges with a shudder, “ooof it’s hard,” and we both take a second to recognize the complexity of providing spaces for joy and empowerment for young people that are also facing different barriers and harms to their own selfhood. Where does this position

us as guiding figures in their lives? What is *our* responsibility? It's important to make sure that we are "calling in" and "stepping in," she replies. The language that Professor Salas draws from is steeped in abolitionist pedagogy. Often in accountability work, the phrases "calling in" versus "calling out" is utilized to describe how punitive practices and "canceling" approaches don't often hold the members that enact harm, responsible, but rather isolates and criminalizes them. To "call in" would mean to recognize the harm done and work through steps of admitting harm, conveying apologies, and taking the steps to have "changed behavior" as one of my interlocutors noted when asked what accountability work *should* include. For Professor Salas—who also stated during our interview her own interest in abolition and transformative justice—this is the conundrum that many Deans and staff members face; when to step in and disrupt moments of harm while also lovingly "calling in" those who committed the harm. This practice is meant to be the opposite of punishment, which Mariame Kaba describes as the practice of love and care. It is meant to be tender and nurturing for all of those who are involved. There's a balance, however, that Professor Salas emphasizes on the power that we as the adults and mentor figures have in their lives; "learning a responsibility as the adults in the room, the people who facilitate, the people who hold a different kind of power. We talk a lot about creating a democratic and open and liberatory space, but it is important to note that the people facilitating hold a different kind of power." In other words, we are the line between reproducing the PIC in our practices or modeling alternative modes of community care and accountability for our Nashers.

This responsibility is therefore neither easy nor clear-cut, and in our attempt to practice accountability there remain unresolved feelings of disappointment and distrust. These feelings from my interlocutors, while they may appear to be a counterproductive result of accountability, I see as

crucial to what many practitioners of social justice have coined as “horizon work.” This was inspired by Adriana Petryna who examines the overt doom of our climate crisis as it rubs against the hope of change from climate activists. There is, in any type of project or organization that’s geared towards achieving a “social justice” agenda, a friction that many of us contend with as the duality of double consciousness, which will always stand as a reminder of the dangers that we face as marginalized people in doing this work, while also continuing to work against the grain in the name of a “horizon.” The correlation of horizon work to my fieldwork at Sadie Nash was inspired by my discussion with Moza, who is also navigating her own conflicted feelings that balance both the “unrealized dream” of Sadie Nash as well as the inevitable harm that every participating person(s) will play in the attempt to achieve this dream.

One word I wanted to use earlier, but wasn’t sure if it was like 100% how I felt—in the moment it was how I felt—was kinda like the illusion, like it was an illusion of a safe space and you’re kind of like in a neuro dimension where it’s like it’s all good, all rainbows and roses, but then the mirrors break and you’re kind of like ‘aw shit.’

Moza’s description of the Sadie Nash illusion feeling like “rainbows and roses” not only references a common saying, but also feels indirectly reminiscent of the “queer haven” that Sadie Nash has socially made a name for itself. In fact, many nonprofits are jokingly known to be a net that attracts fresh out of college queers who are seeking a job to do social justice work. This is what made Sadie Nash so special as a teenager. It was the first space where the folks who were teaching me about Black and Brown queer history also had a stake in the issues that we were discussing. This summer was no different as the demographics of the office very much reflected a diversity of ethnicities, races, sexual orientation, and genders. Sadie Nash is the pinnacle of Shange’s “progressive dystopia,” as it remains

and makes itself publicly known to be a space for marginalized communities. This in itself is not just a site for social justice, but is also meant as a strategy towards building safe spaces for queer and trans communities of color. In the case of Ariluz, their introduction to the non-profit network began with their idealization of non-profit organizations as a proclaimed social justice space: “When I was younger, I would always tell everyone—after I realized that my basketball dream wasn’t gonna work out— I was like I’m gonna go to college, imma go to law school, start my own non-profit. You know that was the dream. And then two things happened: 1) I actually started working at a non-profit and 2) I also did a fellowship with the institute for nonprofit practice in 2020.” Ariluz, who has as a running joke between us, labeled themselves as my queer *tio*, a Spanish term for uncle that recognizes and affirms their non-binary gender identity within a language that does not acknowledge gender nonconformity. They are someone who over the summer program became a mentor figure to me and took me in as their fellow queer, boricua, libra niece/sibling.² As we continued our interview, Ariluz details the knowledge that they learned through their experiences with various non-profit organizations:

A lot of people throw around the term non-profit industrial complex. I like to refer to different nonprofits as conglomerate nonprofits because there are a lot of nonprofits that exist as the central office and a lot of individual chapters that exist in cities. I feel like working at a nonprofit can be really disappointing because I think for many of us, especially for people like us, for people my age, millennials, you know I think for a lot of us we grew up with this idea that nonprofits as a whole are really the place for humanitarians and activists and advocates to

² It’s crucial to note that zodiac signs and affectionate familial terms such as “tio” or “sibling” are terms that I, as a fellow Latinx queer identifying person, have observed queer and trans community members use to cultivate relationships with each other, partly as a historical survival strategy that stems from many queer people having to make chosen families—a history that inspired much of the familial language in ballroom culture— and is also utilized as a practice that sparks queer joy and kinship. Even when identifying other queer folks, we may say that the person is “fam,” suggesting that they are part of the queer family. The use of astrology has also been adopted within queer culture to build community and express a selfhood that privileges deepening a connection with our bodies and healing, something that is often denied to queer and trans folks of color through hegemonic heteronormative and transphobic societal language, culture, and institutions.

be. And I do think there are smaller nonprofits that really serve those goals, but the actual nonprofit structure as registering as a 501C3, I think sometimes gives people the notion that they are always working on behalf of the people, right, that funding is always going to the people, and that they're inherently anti-racist, or, about it, just doing all that work and that's just not true (laughs), you know what I mean. It's just not true.

I note their laughter within our conversations because it signals both a self-identified frustration towards falling under this illusion as well as an unsurprised guffaw towards the institutions that Ariluz previously worked at and the disappointment that followed from unfulfilled promises made to marginalized communities. This unfortunately is a reality that many of us have had to reconcile with—that at the end of the day, these spaces exist as an unachievable utopia. A cynicism I've heard from many of my interlocutors. For Ariluz, the issue with nonprofits lies in the economic dependence that many non-profits fall under such as having to rely on grants and philanthropists that may not “align with your values.” In this way, there may exist a dissonance between what the non-profit promotes as their goals, but are limited in their ability to put these values into practice.

Coincidentally, Shange also pinpoints this phenomenon that “conjoin[s]..puniton and progressivism” as “enabled by what Joy James describes as the ‘mainstreaming’ of radicalism, exemplified by the ‘erasure of revolutionary politics and a rhetorical embrace of radicalism without material support for challenges to transform or abolish, rather than modify, state-corporate authority (1999:83)’” (2019, 136). In this chapter, I want to integrate “friction” as popularized by Anna Tsing (2011) and drawn upon by Shange to examine how “[f]riction inflects historical trajectories, en-abling, excluding, and particularizing.’ If friction is produced in the awkward encounter across differences that ‘refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine,’ it also impedes the smooth

operation of progressive politics (Tsing 2005, 6)” (Shange, 2019, 62). In this way, I assert a lens upon which to view the following dynamic that unravels between the Sadie Nash Deans and staff members as we collectively process and respond to the aftermath of the PBC trip and further flesh out the *messiness* that ensues.



[feelings]

i held you and you held me.

and when we entered this place,

of red walls and glass windows,

we entered a land untouched,

unsullied - not Manhattan

but the river that runs underneath.

when we entered this land,

we knew that time was precious,

that our bodies had harbored years of longing,

waiting to disrupt the silence,

a hungering so vicious,

that our hands rumbled,

and the red walls and glass windows

once appearing sturdy

tumbled effortlessly

to the ground.

maybe they still whisper about us,

the rowdy

the broken

the big-hipped—bellies too thick—natural hair un-slicked—nalgonas whining—anime

loving—dancehall craving—can't catch this—quick mouthed—insult breeding—titty

loving—city born—

intergalactic freaks

after all,

we touched mercury

and lived to see it fall.

(for the queer siblings that raised me, *thank you*)

Mourning the “Unrealized Dream”

As I dive deeper into the impact that this incident had on all of us, I also seek to frustrate first-glance narratives of harm. This incident cannot and should not be isolated from the systems and institutions of oppression that reproduce racism, xenophobia and trauma amongst all of us that work in the Sadie Nash office and while there is much to say about what led to the two Nashers—who were two of many components that played into the escalation of this incident—I will be focusing on the emotions that were brought up for the Deans, Site Leaders, and staff members as we were challenged to tackle and uphold a praxis of accountability and restorative justice. Simultaneously, I aim to untangle both terms from their buzz word meanings and engage accountability work in the reality of what this looked like and how it unfolded.

As an ethnographer, it is important to address the inevitable disruptions that took place in my research. I often find that vulnerable moments between ethnographers and their interlocutors end up being documented for the sake of the research rather than honored and given the proper respect to allow participants to express themselves in private. In my case, I found that my position as an ethnographer and as their fellow coworker was unique in that I have built personal relationships with those that I am also actively observing. This type of relationship may seem to pose some challenges to the standard of objectivity that has been upheld as the barometer for ethical research, and has even forced me to confront my own ethical dilemmas for how to proceed in ways that honor both my relationship to my interlocutors as a researcher and as a coworker.

One of the first instances where I was faced with this question of ethical research was during our Princeton-Blairstown trip debrief with Ariluz and the Newark Site. At this moment, I made the

decision to not record or write down field notes so that I could fully engage with my fellow coworkers and staff members. Through this exercise, I came to understand that to be an ethnographer did not necessarily mean that I needed to leave behind my own moral compass, nor pretend that my full participation is not fieldwork on its own, but rather that I could move away from viewing interlocutors as points of study and instead see them as co-producing knowledge to which they themselves are agents in my research. In this way, the trust, intimacy, and vulnerability that is being shared between interlocutors can remain sacred and respected. The consequences of this choice, however, have meant that my recollection of past events and conversations that occurred during this meeting is fragmented. There are gaps in my memories of what was shared, and in what order. For the sake of my thesis, I urge my audience and readership to embrace revisited memories and gaps in knowledge. More often than not, objectivism is defined by the ability to provide information that is neutral and universal, for this must entail that something that is objective, must also be true. This is not the social world of Sadie Nash, and for these purposes I ask that we begin to understand truth as a multilayered machine that relies on various parts to come together in order to function. This, like truth, remains a whole with moving parts.

Here, I draw from Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* in which she implores her readers to “metaphorically [emphasize] vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates. We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to

name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1988, 582). Haraway is clear in her argument: objectivity leaves out marginalized experiences. Our situatedness matters! In the instance of the Sadie Nash community, the positions for which myself and my interlocutors intersect is situated within BIPOC, queer, trans and decolonial theories (McClaurin, 2001). In this community—my community—a multiplicity of truths and contradictions is the groundwork for what accountability and restorative justice is predicated on. During my time at Sadie Nash, I have come to find that this question of truth *should* be rattled and even unsettled as we emerge into a community that uplifts the existence of evolving identities, experiences, and social relationships.

However, let us come back to the moment of watching the altercation between the New Jersey and Manhattan sites. The sound of one of our Nashers yelling was heard from the tv screen as the familiar faces of “our kids” as I affectionately called them all summer, materialized on the screen. Conflicted feelings arose in me as I watched the video. One of our Manhattan Nashers is seen arguing with another Nasher from the Newark site, their voices growing increasingly angry. One of the words that could be heard from the video was the word “ghetto,” a word that for many of us who come from urban neighborhoods of mainly low-income and working class families, who are Black or Latinx, have often heard to describe our class realities; the way that we dress; our hair; our accessories; our style of walk; the accents that we speak with or our use of African American vernacular. It’s a word to signal who is less than, and in this video, is used by one of our Nashers against the other. As I watched one of my Nashers become increasingly agitated and more physical, I felt devastated—a feeling shared by my

colleagues—that our Nashers were internalizing and weaponizing the same oppressive rhetoric that they have spoken out against in our workshops, to put one another down. And as I continued to watch I felt a sense of grief, a feeling that I could not place until returning to this incident months later during my interview with Moza in the following September. This grief consumed the office and hung heavy in the days to come. Having asked my interlocutors of their reflection of this time period, the responses have varied from each of the staff members, Deans and Site Leaders that experienced it. For Olivia, the underlying issue of colorism that had taken place during the argument was not one that she could personally relate to as a light-skinned Korean woman, a sentiment that I also shared as a light skinned Latinx woman, but one that we witnessed Mia, Guerdyna, and Sammy, three Black women, all process and discuss. How do the Nashers view their Deans if this is how they treat their Black peers?

Therein lies the grief.

Then the video ends, and Moza begins heaving again, “they broke my headphones, the little shits,” she cries, referring to her signature black and floral beats that she would walk into the office with every morning, broken from the physical altercation that she attempted to break up. I felt the urge to laugh at the labeling of the Nashers as “little shits,” as we would often call them tenderly with each other, but quickly stopped myself as I read the room. It dawned on me as Moza’s heaves erupted into deep, sorrowful sobs, that this occurrence, and how it was handled, had caused harm, and as it was unraveling before us, the usual questions of who to blame and who should be victimized was left unclear and more complex than we were prepared for. Her sobs filled up the room as the rest of us grew quiet, either out of uncertainty for how to comfort her or from an understanding that Moza needed time and space to process. The next morning, Moza was granted a self care day off. Those of us

who had not experienced the trip, happily took over for her responsibilities as we encouraged her to prioritize her mental health. The next day, the aftermath of the trip unfolded; Site leaders, Sammy and Olivia, were no longer available to tend to their regular duties as they were tasked to hold one-on-one sessions with each of the Nashers who were involved with the incident on the trip and challenged them to think through their participation in the escalation of the event. Because of this, our regular schedule for the day was interrupted and each of us, including the Nashers, were asked to adapt to these new changes.

During our lunch break, the other Deans and I would often discuss at length how we wished to proceed as we felt it important to hold a discussion with all of our Nashers to create a fuller picture of what happened. One of the challenges that came up for Olivia and Sammy as they held one-on-one discussions with the Nashers involved, was having to break from the carceral and punitive mentality that only considers the victim and the perpetrator. As someone who has also committed herself to being an abolitionist, I, too admit to feeling frustrated when we couldn't find a clear villain, and the more that I listened to their stories, the more I had to fight my own preconceived notions that would pigeonhole the Nashers based on who we thought was more aggressive. The internal discussions between the Deans were beginning to co-opt identifying language such as "loud" and "reactive." Terms that connote an "excessiveness" (Hernandez, 2020) that is particularly coded in racialized and classist assumptions.

Throughout this process, there was also the presence of our supervisors and directors who we turned to for guidance as we felt conflicted by the steps of accountability that they had laid out for us. While the intention of the supervisors were always directed towards practicing restorative justice and

accountability, the one-on-one check ins carried out a practice of separation that is still based on the carceral practice of separating the individual who has misbehaved from the others. In other words, punishment by social death. Here is where I tease out the friction that exists between the intentions of the program versus the impact. Both in our approach (as I too was complicit) and in the way we carried it out, had operated under an individualistic mindset, rather than focusing on the collective as a whole. In the values of Sadie Nash, derived from Kaba, Gilmore, and Brown, when one member of our community harms another, we must each examine our own roles and support one another in acknowledging impact. The repercussions of the check-ins were felt most heavily by the Nashers that were singled out as all of the Deans noted later on their disheartened engagement in the program afterwards, despite Sammy and Olivias' efforts to reassure the Nashers that they were not being punished.

This is where the truth becomes muddled as it is not in my interest to discount the experiences of the Nashers nor the staff members. I hold both, in very restorative justice praxis, as subjective truths rather than uphold one truth over the other. From my separate conversations and reflections with both the Nashers and the Deans and Site Leaders, both were experiencing disappointment in those they saw as their mentors and guides to bring a sense of support. For some of the Nashers, this resulted in a loss of trust towards the values of the organization, and for Moza, her experience of feeling understaffed and ill-equipped to deal with the confrontation that occurred between the two Nashers, brought feelings of grief as she grappled with a loss of safety and idealization of the Sadie Nash community as a protected and safe space for young girls and gender-expansive youth of color. When Shange writes, "who loses when 'we' win?" (2019, 3), she not only complicates what it means for institutions to "win"

in racial equity, but she also introduces winning *as* losing, an approach that disrupts binary narratives and attends to the nuances of working with youth and actively practicing abolition work in a space that remains deeply entangled within the same powers we try to work against. Ultimately, Sadie Nash has empowered many young queer and trans folks of color through their summer institute, and yet there remains a tension between what is preached and how it is practiced. It is possible that in the attempt to achieve the horizon of “safety” and “accountability” we must contend with landing in the in-between, in the failure, and in the grief that comes with it.

Chapter 2:

Gritan por la noche

(To the reader),

We speak of grief, as if it exists as a singular emotion. As if we experience grief rather than become it. As if grief doesn't sing, it doesn't dance, it doesn't live on in the buildings you once knew, or the people you loved. We speak of grief as if it doesn't move mountains.

When I was 8, I learned of the word melancholy. To be melancholic; a feeling of pensive sadness, says the dictionary. My abuela described me as such. La nena que siempre tiene pensamientos. I was fascinated with this description of myself. Melancholic. It made me feel mature and mysterious. As a kid, I found sadness everywhere, in the graphic novels I read, or the indie films I watched. It was in the dip of the green couch that my father slept on that molded perfectly to his crouched back, it was in the for sale signs that started popping up on my block, or even the congregation of people that partied in the funeral home across the street. The sadness was everywhere, but I was never afraid. In fact, I followed it, ducking through dirty alleyways polluted with Arizona bottles and used condoms. I followed it on the 1 train, saw it appear in the glazed eyes of the people that looked past the homeless, or on the bx7, inside the carritos that the señora's took to get their groceries from the Fine Fare to get their weekly not-quite-ripe avocados. As I got older, I saw it in the overpriced coffees and in the leftover rubble of the library on Dyckman. I saw it in the police cars parked outside middle schools in Harlem and the graffiti spray painted on the 191st train tunnel. I saw it on the icee carts (I always ordered half coconut, half mango) or the blocked off CVS on 145th where I had to ring for customer service just to get deodorant. I never had to search for this melancholy, because it pervaded everywhere I went, following me and me following it. A reciprocal relationship.

One day, in the summer of 2015, I walked past a glass building near the High Line, bopping to the Strokes, my favorite rock band since High School (yes, Caribbean girls can like rock music too), and as I glanced at the shiny glass, imagining the entire building crashing under rising waters, I caught the reflection of my shadow walking behind me on the concrete, and I saw it. The melancholy I've been told of since I was a little girl, a melancholy that my abuela saw in me, that she too carried in her, filling up the marrow of her bones. When I was born, they told my mother that I was big boned. Much too heavy for a baby of my size. They say it's because Puerto Ricans eat too much chicken. So they made me pescatarian. I drank fish oil to fill up my brain and only ate vegetables and pasta with butter. But still, my heavy bones remained, and as I grew into my skin, I learned to accommodate the heaviness of my walk, swaying my hips a little more to distribute weight and shuffling my feet so as not to get called elephant feet. When I turned 13, I had a growth spurt. My bones stretching and expanding the more that I slept, a slow ache spreading from my ankles to my back, an ache that I was unable to get rid of, so I put pillows in between my legs and tossed and turned, hoping that eventually I would tire myself out. But sleep never came, and instead I lay awake most nights, accruing pensamiento after pensamiento. I soon developed a bad habit of late night snacking, the hunger in my stomach rumbling for something to feed my growing bones. At first, I tried to ignore it as I feared my mother ever finding out that I was sneaking nutella at 3 am. I played music, watched youtube videos on my phone, read inappropriate wattpad stories about harry styles, but eventually the aching spread to my belly and into a burning sensation in my throat. That night, I walked in darkness to my kitchen, shuffling quietly to not wake my mother and grandmother, only to find the light from my kitchen peaking around the corner. And as I rounded the corner to catch the perpetrator, I saw my mother in the cabinets sneaking

spoonfuls of Nesquik powder. Afraid that she would still yell at me, I hurried up the stairs to my room, the image of my mother with chocolate powder around her mouth bubbled in the pit of my stomach until I was laughing so hard I had to clutch my stomach from the pain. I eventually tired myself out so much so that I fell into a deep sleep, unsure when my laughing stopped and my dreams began.

The next night, I tried again, the aching still throbbing in my calves and lower back. This time, I checked for a light first and after making sure that the coast was clear, I scurried into the kitchen, my mouth salivating at the thought of nutella and pretzels. And yet! Lo and behold, there in the darkness of the dining room was a shadow. A tiny shadow sitting quietly at the table. As I got closer the light from a phone lit up and my abuela's hazel eyes stared back at me as she calmly sipped her coffee. Nena, ¿por qué estás despierta a esta hora? My legs froze as I stared back at the brightness of her phone screen, distracting myself with the facebook game that my grandmother was last playing. Online jeopardy. No puedo dormir, Ita, I said. Her eyes softened at the plea in my voice. Bueno, I made café if you want some, it 's on the stove, pero ten cuidado, no te quemes. Her accent elongates the sound of "stove," the o sounding more like a hard u. I could see the "melancholy" there too, in the uncomfortable way that English sits on my grandmother's tongue, like the sound of a fork scraping against a plate. It was even in the coffee that she makes from a sock, in the familiar nutty smell that reminds me of heat stricken summers spent in the Bronx on my grandmother's plastic couch and the sound of the coffee brewing served with fresh hot sorullitos that still bubbled from the hot-oil in the pan. My grandmother used to sneak me drops of coffee when I was little, the hot coffee dripping from the finger that she stuck in my mouth. That's how she loved us. Sharing the things she remembered from Puerto Rico, the things that she still loves that don't remind her of the dysfunction or the poverty or the men.

A veces, nena, te gritan en la noche, she'd warn me. Who does? I'd ask, but my answer never came. And for a long time I never understood. Maybe it was the ghosts that came to visit her in her sleep. Ghosts like my tío Charlie come back from the dead to tell her that her hair looks crooked or la doña who lived in the apartment before her and had died a violent death at the hands of her marido. This, however, nagged me, as I knew ghosts were not enough to shake my grandmother and keep her up at night. She talked to these ghosts, made them offerings, and then sent them on their way. That was the way of the santeros. They don't fear the dead. All of this santería was lost once it came down to me. I know to palo santo a room when I first move in (although I often forget) and to crack open a coconut to trap bad spirits that like to linger in the house, but I never actually practiced. I don't believe in ghosts or spirits and the altar in my house, filled with pictures of my tío Charlie and I from when I was two, only brings a sadness of having grown up without him. I have a hard time honoring the dead. My mother says it's because I've been gringo-fied. However, as I grew older, I soon was confronted with the generational curses that seemed to plague the women in my family; the callus hands from the hours my abuela spent scrubbing floors, the bad lower back and weakened knees from shuttling coffee beans from the finca. At first, I blamed the ancestors for leaving traces of their pain, a roadmap encoded in the structure of our bones reminding me that my body was not meant to be here. I loathed the hours I couldn't sleep, growing more and more into the awkwardness of my skin.

Then one night, as I lay awake, listening to the growl of my heater, I heard a mouth-curdling scream coming from my abuela's bedroom. As I rushed into her room, my mother mumbling closely behind me, I heard my abuela groan por favor no to an imagined attacker as she thrashed in her sleep. When she finally awoke from her nightmare, sitting up on the side of her bed and putting her head in

her hands she let out a deep sigh of relief. Ay mama, she said, he almost had me. Her hand clenching the loose fabric of her pajama shirt near her chest. I wondered if this is what she meant. If this was who was yelling at her all along; not the ghosts, but the voices of men from her past that she couldn't get rid of. I never saw the ghosts, but I wondered if I too felt those men. If they were what was growing in between my knees and stretching out my shins. I felt them in my bed when I tossed and turned, craving for something sweet to quiet the growing hunger in my sockets. I heard them in the hum of my radiator and I felt them in the fear that seized the pit of my stomach for split second silences when all the machines in the house stopped working to recharge. After I helped my grandmother stand up from her bed, I knew that my mother wasn't going to send me back to sleep as she walked over to the coffee pot to make us a cup of bustelo with warm milk and cinnamon. As all three of us sat at the kitchen table, I remembered that my mother has also known persistent aches since I was born, her wrists swollen with arthritis as she poured the coffee.

Eventually, we each stopped pretending that the other was not awake, shuffling into the kitchen in the early hours of the morning, grabbing snacks just to fill the aching that pounded in our bones. And while we never spoke of those few hours of darkness, when we soon accompanied one another at the kitchen table, sipping hot coffee silently next to each other. Nor did we mention the glazed eyes, or the late night reruns of *Suits*, or the stories we shared (my favorites always including my tío Charlie). In those early hours before the sun rose and the aching seemed to grasp more heavily to our bones, digging into our hours of sleep, the nighttime felt like a reprieve. A secret between us three.

The Achings of Our Antepasados: Body Narratives³

“with debris of lives / stacked high”

- Akilah Oliver

I open this chapter with a narrative exploration of grief because anthropological, academic writing often causes ruptures to our bodies, livelihoods, and affective experiences to an extent that leaves us unrecognizable to the self. It separates our fleshiness⁴ from what is written on the page. Here, I draw from Akilah Oliver’s poetry collection, *the she said dialogues: flesh memory*, as a framework to interrogate the ethnographic as a positioning of the observer and the observed. Oliver’s collection centralizes the bodily presence of historical trauma and violence that the body has accumulated over time, an accumulation of “debris” that the oppressed, the racialized, the marginalized, the silenced, the gendered body hosts in the present. In this way, Oliver argues that we are never divorced—neither oppressed or oppressor—from the impact of violence and it shapes our contemporary collective and individual identities. In this chapter, I seek to investigate the ways that these “flesh memories” permeate the lens in which I approach this ethnography.

To understand my own positionality as an ethnographer, I first have to understand myself as a subject within the ethnography as well. This chapter, as a result, also strives to disrupt the voyeuristic lens through which marginalized interlocutors are viewed. In my analysis, I am inspired by the filmmaker and ethnographer Trinh t. Minh-ha, who coined the term “resemblage” as an “anti-ethnography” to combat the “objectification and exoticization of otherness which mark the

³ A term derived from Jillian Hernandez in *Aesthetics of Excess*

⁴ Inspired by Oliver’s phrase, “flesh narratives” which appears in *the she said dialogues: flesh memory*

ethnographic and colonial projects alike” (Balsom, 2001). Minh-ha’s “anti-ethnography” intervenes these epistemological narratives that reify the colonial gaze and offers an ethnographic lens where disjuncture directs the audience to a subjective and personalized perspective . As I dive deeper into the functionality of grief and affect in youth education and restorative justice work, I invite and encourage disruptions to academic language that further a colonial understanding of affective explorations that can only truly be understood through the expression of the body.

For this, I draw from a variety of queer and trans anthropologists of color who use other mediums to push against the grain of the “exoticised” ethnographic position and instead intentionally carve spaces within ethnography for our voices to be heard and honored. One of the very first encounters that I had with an alternative platform that was used to rethink ethnography was given to me by a fellow anthropology student who is equally as excited and on a similar search for anthropologists of color who are transgressing conventional modalities of ethnography. In one of our many extensive, thought-provoking conversations, he suggested I read the *Ethno-Graphic: Policing the City* by Didier Fassin who reports on his time spent shadowing an anti-crime police unit in France. Fassin’s ethno-graphic was brutal to read as it challenges the reader to resist the distance that academic texts often reproduce between the subject of study and the reader. However, in this text, the reader is urged to confront the discomfort that comes with visually engaging with the violence on the page. While this arguably still provides a privileged distance for an audience who may never have been faced with police brutality, it does the work of presenting who Fassin has been speaking with throughout his research without fetishizing or othering their presence within the ethnography. The graphic novel also addresses a key issue that I have been wrestling with for a while: accessibility. How often are

ethnographies meant to reach communities outside of academic spaces as they regenerate familiar jargon and terminology that is really only used within the institution? And yet, I write this ethnography for my Sadie Nash community, for my family, and for LGBTQ+⁵ youth of color, which begs the question; how can I make this ethnography accessible and engaging to the audience that I intend to reach?

An example of how I tackle this question, is through my own utilization of magical realism within my story that has been essential to the many ways that grief has shown up in my community and in my own body. Magical realism, as a literary genre, has a history of vocalizing the connection to the spiritual realm and portrays an alternative vehicle to convey “collective trauma.” In a journal article, conducted by researcher Eszter Enikő Mohácsi, she finds that “language is also of central importance both in magical realism and trauma narratives: in the former, it has to be matter-of-fact, even while describing unbelievable events, while in the latter it has to represent the fracture caused by the traumatic event and has to try to speak the unspeakable. As for the spatial-temporal frames of the novels, they all bear resemblance to each other due to the nature of traumatic memory they try to reconstruct, and they also exhibit the characteristics of magical realist narratives in the sense that they disrupt our ideas of time and space. Also, the existence of a coherent identity is oftentimes questioned in magical realist texts, and particularly in these three novels both individual and collective identity are problematized due to the traumatic experience of the individuals and the communities depicted” (2016, 7). While I do not label these narratives as “trauma narratives,” many of the key elements that Mohácsi points to, such as the problematization of spatial and temporal awareness within magical

⁵ I use LGBTQ+ and queer interchangeably in this ethnography.

realism and the depictions of the individual and collective identity within these narratives, operates as a useful lens to view my own approach of understanding the tension, friction, and ultimately, grief that the Sadie Nash community has faced in doing this kind of “horizon” work. I also argue that magical realism and other forms of creative and poetic narration is imperative to engaging with care and respect to the trauma that does come up in this work both from the staff members and the Nashers who are each entering these spaces with the expectation that trauma is not feared, but faced collectively as a community that is in responsibility to one another.

Furthermore, the mundane, quotidian tasks that I portray in my short story demonstrates what queer Anthropologist, Pavithra Prasad, theorizes in their journal article, “In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief” as an extension of Oliver’s “flesh memories” but for queer kinship circles and the ways that loss, heartbreak, and grief are represented in the body. For instance, Prasad describes this experience of “[g]rieving with family” as

littered with mundane movements. You reach for the coffee in the same way, you drop your clothes into the growing pile in the bathtub the same way, you pick up used tissues from the same nooks. But in between these motions grows a heaviness, not a burden, but an ache. Another kind of emotional routine emerges in caring for your chosen family, settling in the cracks between intention and motion. It transforms your daily tasks into rituals of mourning...Its webs reach out from both our bodies, entangling and knotting us together as my loved one sinks into refuge—and I sink with them. Our movements carry on, as we expand to contain the growing gossamer of a shared grief. My loved one is tender and I grow tender with them, as our routines continue expanding the spaces where aching lives (2020, 114).

Prasad distinguishes an important aspect of queer grief, which as a term on its own, immediately categorizes the grieving of queer folks as different, but that I instead would reframe as a distinction made not due to a person being queer but to a grief that is produced within the infrastructure of living

in a straight-dominated and oppressive society. One of the distinctions that Prasad makes in her article is the bodily expression of grief, the “ache” that we see come up as a representation of built tension, trauma, or “debris”(in reference to Oliver). The uncanny resemblance between Prasad’s witnessing of an ache within her queer interlocutors and how grief has manifested itself in my own body foregrounds the theoretical framework that I implement in this ethnography to capture the interpersonal relationships that develop between Nashers and staff, and how grief presents itself within these relationships.

Another aspect that Prasad points out is the intentionality of “community care” that in my time at Sadie Nash is so deeply embedded in the bones of the Sadie Nash values and practices that I also assert as in many ways a recycling of the grief that members and staff of Sadie Nash feel personally and collectively. In other words, I see grief here as being a driving force that motivates much of the work that we do as well as the fishing line that encourages participants to sustain their relationship with the Sadie Nash community. However, having said this, grief has, as many things, a nuanced purpose or simply, an existence, as an actant within the community. It can simultaneously motivate, reunite, and expose tensions, traumas, and conflicts that remain unresolved as a result of the impact that grief has on the body. It is both damaging and productive, and ultimately does not take away from the joy, victory, and healing that is experienced within Sadie Nash.

Another anthropologist that troubles ethnography and expands on Trinh m. Minh-ha’s anti-ethnography is Anthropologist and American Indian studies professor, Audra Simpson, who posits the concept of the “ethnographic refusal” to place Indigenous subjectivities as “sovereign voices” and positionalities rather than analysis. A large part of this text that Simpson grapples with is access

and whether over-explanation only invites a gaze of otherness and fetishization from non-Indigenous audiences. Simpson declares that as a result of her findings, “the people I interviewed do *know* the different forms of recognition that are at play, the simultaneities of consciousness that are in work in any colonial encounter (including those with me) in the exercising of rights – and that knowledge translates into the ‘feeling side’ of recognition, one that is not juridical, is home-grown, and dignified by local history and knowledge. What is theoretically generative about these refusals? They *account* for the history detailed above; they tell us something about the way we cradle or embed our representations and notions of sovereignty and nationhood; and they critique and move us away from statist forms of recognition. In listening and shutting off the tape recorder, in situating each subject within their own shifting historical context of the present, these refusals speak volumes, because they tell us when to stop. Whether or not we wish to share that is a matter of ethnography that can both *refuse* and also take up *refusal* in generative ways” (78). After reading Fassin, Minh-Ha, and Simpson’s approaches to subvert the ethnographic lens, I am left contending with the imperfectness and contradictions that exist within my own study and positionality. The task to decolonize anthropological practices is in tandem with what I recognize throughout this ethnography as the infinite struggle of engaging with “horizon work” in that there is no finish line, but instead a rather continuous search and fight to evolve how we love, care, and sustain our commitments to our communities.

Centering Affect and Pleasure in Pedagogy

“Abolition is life in rehearsal”

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore

(to the reader)

Much of what you will encounter in this ethnography will be strange to you. There will be logic and theory that you can contend with. This may be the part that you are used to; wrestling with what's already there. But then there will be the parts of the narrative that seem ungraspable, and to you they might actually be. It is presented to you in a highly illogical way, it takes the form of prose and poetry, and it leaves you uneasy and unsure of where to put your footing. I ask that you allow yourself the opportunity to develop a praxis for falling. It's the most humbling act a reader can and should do.



Part of my research for my thesis is heavily embedded in queer theory, praxis, and discourse. I find it not only crucial to the space and community of Sadie Nash, but also to my own understanding of my lens as a queer ethnographer, which has in this instance, had an impact on how I related to my interlocutors. I do want to be careful in that I am not suggesting that a queer ethnographer also inherently assumes a queer lens, for many this may not have influenced any part of their perspective. But for me, queerness is vital to the alternative methodologies, praxis', and structures that inform the foundation and community of Sadie Nash. My queerness is therefore a useful insight that gave way to a deeper understanding and connection to my peers and my Nashers. In many of the first conversations that I had with the other Deans and staff members, I found myself on the lookout for the common

queer⁶ identifiers, usually being: the astrologist, the crafty artist, or the kpop aficionado, all of which I easily found in Ariluz, Olivia, and Sammy (in that order). All jokes aside however, as someone who identifies as queer/pansexual/gay, the quest for other queers is actually quite serious. Sometimes you can tell by the undercut shave, or the rolled up sleeves (all of which are possible markers of an even more complex relationship between queerness and gender/expression that are not mutually exclusive, but for the purposes of this ethnography I choose to not discuss further). Sometimes it's as easy as a rainbow pin on a backpack or their love for Kehlani (all true examples), but more often than not, many were just simply open about their identities from the beginning, and while not all of the Deans or staff members are queer or of color, our identities, as for once being the dominant group in the space, was also a marker of kinship. Kinship, not as the equivalent, however, to community-making. These two terms are in fact separate from one another, but have often been used in queer discourse as interchangeable. When I refer to kinship, however, I am not speaking to the relational dynamic within a family of origin, but rather the social bonds that unite various people to be in a group together. For Prasad, queer kinship demonstrates the bond of a chosen family connected through the affective and bodily experiences of grief. Therefore, community is forged through our commitment to one another.

During my fieldwork, the question of what defines the Sadie Nash community stuck with me throughout. And at first, I pushed back—as if this community could be defined! And yet, as I have spent many years with Sadie Nash, both as a teenager and a young adult, and I have seen the ways in which this community has expanded and changed as well as remained very much the same, there is an

⁶ I use queer here as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community

unmarked quality that I have witnessed that brings this specific group of people in community with one another.

On the surface, there are many shared traits between the folks that seek out non-profit organizations such as Sadie Nash. As discussed in Chapter 1, our marginalized identities, our general values and politics for social justice, and overall interest in working with youth are all contributing factors in what defines the Sadie Nash community, but this is an oversimplification and generalization of myself and my interlocutors. It is also a description of what makes us chosen kin; the reflection we have in one another to affirm what is important to us. This, I would argue, is in large part at the center of the work that Sadie Nash does. Here I want to make clear the distinction between kinship and community by drawing on Sarah Ahmed's article "Queer Feelings" in which she observes the role of pleasure in queer spaces; "[p]leasure involves not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space, but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging. Spaces are claimed through enjoyment, an enjoyment that is returned by being witnessed by others. Recalling my argument in the first section of this chapter, the display of queer pleasure may generate discomfort in spaces that remain premised on the 'pleasures' of heterosexuality. For queers, to display pleasure through what we do with our bodies is to make the comforts of heterosexuality less comfortable" (2014, 164). In other words, the practice of pleasure in spaces where the majority of the target population is working-class, Black and Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth is also a space in which kinship is built around being witnessed in our pleasure and enjoyment.

Evidently, I assert that at the core of our values at Sadie Nash is a praxis of pleasure. During the day, many of our workshops included singing, dancing, writing, joking, playing games, painting, or

running around Bryant Park. I remember holding check-ins with my students during my workshops to see what they were enjoying and what needed tweaking. Sometimes this meant integrating their interests into my curriculum and getting creative or simply switching environments to enjoy the outdoors. The presence of our joy, however, seemed to come into direct conflict with the dominating offices that neighbored our program headquarters. After a scheduled talent show in which our students displayed various singing, dancing, and poetry skills, we allowed the students to have authorized “free time” to sit and talk with their peers. However, this free time did not come without rules as we shared a small space with the other offices on the same floor, so there was a precedent set of no running around the hallways, no shouting, and no roaming the other building floors. And for the most part, the Nashers listened. Eventually, a small group decided to play hide and seek, ultimately disturbing the nearby offices. As we were short staffed that day, we were unaware that some of the kids had decided to run around until a tall, older, white man knocked on our door searching for the head of our office.

Sammy, Mia, and I responded as our supervisors were also not in the office that day. As he expressed his complaints of the Nashers making too much noise, he also made a point to ask what our program had planned for the day. As Sammy informed him that they were having scheduled free time, he interrupted and suggested to us that we do not give the students free time as he considered it unprofessional and a waste of time. In this instance, I became aware of two things: his blatant disregard for us (three women of color) as authority figures in the program and the threat that our Nashers enjoyment posed to the functioning of the surrounding offices. This made me indescribably furious, so furious that when I left the building to walk to the 1 train, I cried. Audre Lorde’s famous keynote

address at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, comes to mind as I attempt to verbalize the feeling of powerlessness and humiliation that I felt afterwards. Lorde expresses this well: "[w]omen of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives" (2007). In my tears of rage, I called my mother and she reminded me that this would only be one of many other instances. The only control I had was to move forward. In hindsight, I do offer an addition to my mother's advice that echoes Lorde's speech: there is power in my rage, a rage that while unable to be vocalized to the white employee, has ultimately freed me. A reminder that I deserve to be here.

It is also important to note that this white employee, who I will refer to as Chad from here on out, rarely addressed Sammy or Mia directly and only made eye contact with me throughout the conversation. As Sammy, Mia, and I vented afterwards, it was clear that out of the three of us, he preferred to speak to someone who was of a lighter skin tone. After Chad was convinced he could leave (but not without threatening to complain to the building managers first—very Karen, or more so Chad of him), Sammy, Mia, and I sat down with our students, who had witnessed our interaction with him, and held a conversation about how to handle interactions where someone of a supposed higher position imposes their own racist and sexist biases. I assured them that we, both the Nashers and their

staff, deserved to be in these spaces just as much as Chad and to continue engaging in our regular program activities with joy and dignity.

Nonetheless, this was not the only moment that we would encounter pushback in this office building. The limited space within the office building consistently pushed us to negotiate parts of our programming and accommodate the larger office culture. At times we would also receive complaints from the building managers that there were too many of our students waiting for the elevators and they were labeled as “rowdy,” “rude,” and “loud.” I argue that these instances demonstrate how larger groups of youth, and more specifically, youth of color experience a policing and hyper awareness of their behavior and bodies as our students noticed how they were being approached with labels and accusations compared to the adult office employees that would often crowd the elevators. This hyperawareness of our Nashers further problematizes their existence within “professional environments” and distinguishes a larger gaze that adultifies teenagers of color.

This anecdote intrigues me the most as it brings me to José Esteban Muñoz’ article on “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” which articulates a collective affective experience that positions us as extending further than just kin, but also as in community with one another through a collective feeling of existing outside of the norm. Muñoz chronicles this “depressed state” (not a synonym for grief, but is a cousin to grief), as “brown feelings” to which he interprets as “what Spillers describes as the ‘making of one’s subjectness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness’ (2003, 400). Brown feelings are not individualized affective particularity; they more nearly express this ‘displaceable attentiveness,’ which is to say a larger collective mapping of self and other. Aesthetic practices enable these mapping protocols.

In my current research project, I am interested in all sorts of antinormative feelings that correspond to minoritarian becoming. In some cases aesthetic practices and performances offer a particular theoretical lens to understand the ways in which different circuits of belonging connect, which is to say that recognition flickers between minoritarian subjects” (2006, 679). I want to focus on Muñoz’ point about a “minoritarian becoming” that he reads as a process of first recognizing difference within oneself in relation to others and then becoming a minority by recognizing that difference within a collective. Following his argument, Muñoz is establishing that the “minoritarian subject” does not develop from the individual, but rather through the mapping of one’s selfhood within a larger collective desire to belong. While Muñoz is arguing towards “antinormative feelings,” I want to stray away from denormalizing the feelings of my interlocutors or describing them as outside of a certain spectrum of societal norm, but I do think it’s important to identify where in my work I have witnessed this minoritarian becoming that he points to and how this (1) impacts community-making and (2) how it has simultaneously been productive to building community as well as complicating our relationships with each other.

I’ve witnessed this sense of minoritarian recognition and affect during my time at Sadie Nash both in my position as a Nasher and as a Dean. I’ll give an example. In my second week at Sadie Nash, I led a workshop on sexual health, which was (not) surprisingly very popular amongst the Nashers. At first I had intended to create a fun, play writing exercise where the Nashers could explore their questions about sexuality through art (inspired by the Netflix television show, *Sex Education*). One of the most memorable moments of my time as a Nasher in 2017 was having the open space to ask my Dean’s questions about sex and sexuality within a community of other queer and trans identified

people who were intentionally centering queer and trans sexual health that was also pleasure focused rather than preventative. In my interview to be a Dean, I spoke about the impact that this had on my relationship to my sexuality as a young queer woman of color and how I wanted to do the same for the newer generations coming in.

When I stepped into the workshop room—a small, lowly lit space with various materials from different organizations that we shared the space with—I asked the Nashers in my group about their experience with sexual education either at home or in their schools, assuming that they would have had some exposure at this point to a (hopefully) positive and more progressive sexual education curriculum. To my surprise, all of my students who ranged from ages 14-18 had never had a sex ed class. To ensure that the Nashers felt comfortable asking questions we cut up pieces of paper and each Nasher took turns writing a question and putting it into a makeshift hat (really a cardboard box I had put together at the last minute). The activity encouraged them, more than anything, to be curious and to ask questions they were normally afraid to ask. This workshop then became an even larger series where I was able to break down discussions of pleasure, relationships, and LGBTQ+ sexual wellness into sub categorical workshops. Many of these workshops were also based on books that I had wished were available to me as a teenager such as *Pleasure Activism* by Adrienne Maree Brown and the *Ethical Slut* and very quickly, I noticed the physical intimacies of my Nashers as they moved closer to one another, opened up more about their own experiences, and even felt comfortable asking me direct questions about my thoughts and experiences. With my own experiences as a teenager yearning for a queer elder, a queer blueprint weighing heavily on my mind, I answered their questions. I wanted to

provide a space where they could see a mentor that not only holds a certain amount of knowledge, but that can also relate to the topics and questions that we were addressing.

After I wrapped up the first workshop, one of my Nashers, a 17 year old of Ecuadorian descent from Queens who had shown a particular fondness towards me from the beginning of the program and who has usually participated in my workshops, had grown quiet and inward. My instinct was that something during our workshop had either upset or triggered an emotion for her. When I asked how she was doing and if she needed a minute to process alone or to talk with our health professionals, she asked shyly if I could find a quiet space outside to talk with her. Our office spaces are limited to only a few rooms within the building so we set up camp in the hallway while the other Nashers transitioned into their other workshops.⁷

The Nasher who spoke with me then disclosed information of dealing with a trauma that had affected her physically and emotionally, and was struggling to reconcile with the aftermath of such a traumatic event and breach of trust. As she spoke with me, she revealed that her reasons for choosing to entrust me with this information were because she had sensed that I had also experienced a similar trauma. When I asked her to explain more, she stated that she just knew from the way that I carried myself. *It was as if you were carrying excess weight*, she said. My *excess weight*, although a possible misconstruing of just my own exhaustion with constantly producing “intellectual property,” as Olivia once put it, and facilitating a large group of high schoolers, I postulate that this “weight” or “heaviness” that my Nasher witnessed in myself as being a shared bodily experience also demonstrates a larger

⁷ The rest of what happened will be told without any identifying information or specificities since my ethnography purposefully does not focus on my Nashers and neither their personal information nor identities have I received permission to disclose in this thesis. Thus, I will remain anonymous and relatively vague for the intentions of what I am arguing.

recognition of an emotional and mental state—in other words— the “depressive position” that Muñoz proposes.

For the past couple of years, this “heaviness,” from a trauma I carried since my senior year in high school, has dug a space for itself so deep in my bones that I have only been able to articulate it as an *aching*. I should state that I am not a psychologist or mental health professional and thus would not know the first thing about how to define trauma, especially as it is experienced differently from person to person. Nor am I asserting that this *aching* is the trauma, but rather a manifestation of the aftermath that has formed itself into something recognizable, and even more curiously, universal. Muñoz characterizes this state as “a tolerance of the loss and guilt that underlies the subject’s sense of self—which is to say that it does not avoid or wish away loss and guilt. It is a position in which the subject negotiates reality, resisting the instinct to fall into the delusional realm of the paranoid schizoid.” While Muñoz is pushing towards an understanding of the “depressed” condition as “minoritarian chains of recognition” that engages “the necessary project of being attentive to the self in an effort to know the other” (687), I urge for a more comprehensive analysis of the affect and comportment of (and I am expanding his thesis to include all marginalized identities—queer, trans, people of color, lower-income, etc) marginalized peoples, one in which our depressive positions are not made singular or as outside of normative affect protocol, but rather as a need and desire for repair, belonging and community.

I am not suggesting that Muñoz is arguing against this, but rather I want to push his argument further. Referring back to the example with my Nasher, I became aware of her desire to be seen and recognized in her emotions and experiences by someone who she can also identify herself with. One

factor that she mentioned was important for her in coming to me was knowing that I would also understand the particularity of her trauma being invalidated within her experience of also coming from a Latin American descended household. And she was right. We both had experienced an invalidation or even erasure of our experiences from family members who had brushed these experiences off as either being our fault or had minimized their impact. I cannot speak to the reasons why this occurred for us both nor is this meant to homogenize or generalize the experiences of Latine/a/o youth in the U.S to having dismissive parents. This is not the case for everyone nor should it be seen as intrinsic to our ethnic and cultural identities. But there is a hope in knowing that maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't be alone in her experiences.

And in that hope, there is a plea for a different future.

Chapter 3:

Seeking Futurity

After “Brown”⁸

IF you *really* want to know, I am not Brown. Maybe a tan-palm color on a sweltering July afternoon and a caramel-olive undertone when put against a blinding white background. But to my cousin Jose, I’m Titi’s pasty kid she had with that white ‘rican. An off-white that sticks out in the family photos, but would fit right in in any given telenovela. An inside out coco. On the days that I look more like my mother, you can see our smiles stretching out the bridge of our noses, a carbon copy of her features printed out with white ink. On the days that I look like my father, I can see our elongated chins and the bitten grooves in my tongue. On some days, my full lips shrink and tighten to imitate my father’s angered expressions. I am my father’s childhood rage and my mother’s projected joy. On a rare day, I see neither. Only a reflection back in the mirror of what I’ve begun to leave behind. And just there, hidden behind a flicker of light in the reflection, is a blurred, shapeless, thing I can’t make out. It pains me to look at it head on, but if I glance now and then, I can see it getting closer. Something new, something unseen, breaking dusk.



⁸A nod to Daphne Palasi Andreades’ novel, *Brown Girls*

Minoritarian Excess

A question I've often asked myself while thinking about this chapter, is the why. Why this community? And why am I so invested in our *feelings*? What are our feelings producing in these moments of community/world-making? In my field notes and interviews, affect has an underlying consistent presence throughout and the more that I sieve through, interrogate, drudge out of the woodwork the more questions I am met with. While I have been arguing towards a horizonless approach to community building and abolitionist work, I myself struggle with the possibility that I may come to an end without a neatly tied answer to offer. I have also had an urge as the ethnographer to stray away from the affective, to not bring too much attention to it until my own advisors encouraged me to jump in a little deeper than I would have liked. Is it *feelings* that I find illogical? Irrational? Unacademic? Or my own observations of such feelings? Most likely, there's truth to both. I have been battling with my own uncertainties towards an exploration of affective experiences and observations, and yet, as one of my advisors pointed out, my writing is drenched in affective diction. It may not also be a coincidence that the more I allow myself to uncover these emotions and their possible larger implications, the more queer, Black and Latinx theory I encounter from ethnographers who are also troubled with what our minoritarian affective experiences mean in our communities and how they produce instances of "minoritarian belonging" and identity through collective feelings of failure, anger, grief, joy, and hope.

Muñoz marks this as "affective excess." More specifically, he focuses on the creative work that is produced by queer artists and what he witnesses emerging from one poet's poem as "an observation of the affective realm of the present. Yet there is an excess that the poet also conveys, a type of affective

excess that presents the enabling force of a forward-dawning futurity that is queerness.” Now, I am unclear as to the connotation behind his use of excess and whether it’s meant to be considered within the same lens that Jillian Hernandez, author of *Aesthetic of Excess*, brings attention to in her book to identify the challenges, stereotypes, and boundaries that women of color are placed under as they negotiate public and domestic spaces where our accessories and style of dress are governed or even repositioned and repurposed positively within our community as a form of self-expression. The *excess* discussed in Hernandez’s book signals a hypervisibility as well as an invisibility that work in tandem to deny women of color, queer and straight, from normative dress codes and ultimately “perceive *excess* as a negative” (2020, 11) but Hernandez asserts otherwise:

beyond indicating a hegemonic trope or normative gaze that mediates sociocultural value, sexual-aesthetic excess also signifies instances in which Black and Latina bodies, both in the flesh and in representation, present styles that agitate the visual field and expose the malleability of social norms through their conspicuous embodiments (Fleetwood 2011). Embodied performances and creative practices that mobilize aesthetic excess embrace ostentatious styling, hyper femininities and hyper masculinities, raunch, grotesquerie, camp, voluptuousness, glitter, pink, and gold (13).

Therefore, when I read Muñoz’ marking of “affective excess” I can not help, but hear Hernandez’s utilization of excess aesthetics, although they are interacted with differently in each text. It is possible that Muñoz is speaking towards an excess of affect that exists outside of the present and is for that reason, excessive, because it doesn’t currently exist, but rather is a suspended or even anticipated possibility. Where Muñoz and Hernandez coalesce is through the lens of queerness that they both draw from to claim not only what exists outside of what is considered normative, but also as a “potential of queer politics [that] can be ‘located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a

space where transformational political work can begin' (Cohen 2013, 75)" (Hernandez, 2020, 12).

Excess is thus queer in theory as it articulates an existence outside of, such as Muñoz's — "minoritarian belonging" and "depressed position" — that demonstrate what develops out of a marginalization and also an existence rooted in potential.

It is precisely this "affective excess" that I propose is the beating heart of the Sadie Nash community. As we (youth educators, facilitators, etc) navigate the task of providing an educational space for our own future generations, Sadie Nash has uniquely positioned itself as a space founded upon possibility. As if the work is done in the reach towards an imagined future rather than solely in what exists currently. In part, I argue that this is due to the demographic of students that we mainly serve and in the understanding that the current society that exists for our students today does not promise their safety, their health, or their happiness.

Love is the Ethic

After “Brown Girls”

We were located on 137th in City College, where warmed overripe fruit lay under blue plastic tarps and old Caribbean men set folding tables at the rise of the Bodega’s metal gates, playing dominoes to nostalgic boleros. This was Harlem. If you asked us then, it was our epicenter. Chinese takeout on Friday’s and a cool piragua with parcha and limon syrup dripping off the sides. The sizzle and hiss of the fire hydrant bubbling up to the surface as young Black and Brown faces jumped in and out of the water. Las doñitas sitting out front in plastic lawn chairs, their fresh blowouts hidden under fishnets to protect from the beads of sweat they fanned away. We used to have group hangouts at Riverside after our summer program as we twerked carelessly and mixed cheap rum into our coco icees. We were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, and vibrating with rhythm. Sometimes we would flirt with the boys hanging out by the corner store, and sometimes we eyed each other. Brushing away questions during “fuck, marry, kill” as we secretly swooned for the girls and non-binary cuties that rolled up their sleeves and wore low buns just to show off their undercuts. Back then, we thought secrets were our superpower as we cringed at the butchita lesbians that hung out at the local barbershops. *How could she be so forward like that?* Back home, that was forbidden. The cautionary tale we heard as kids. Girls like her were the boogeyman that prowled the streets, that one cousin’s roommate who sleeps in the same bed, the tomboy who thinks she’s a man. Una sin vergüenza. But there, in Harlem, where the morning smell of jerk chicken and fresh tostones collided into one big sensory perreo, where home was not those voices in our heads, but the familiar sounds of dembow and Afrobeat, and the City College classrooms that became a playground for baby queer flirtation 101 (i.e memorized kehlani lyrics and youtube videos).

That summer, a dent was made. A dent, that with condensation and bad plumbing, split into a crack, wide enough to let our secrets spill through.

I like to remember us this way, as we entered a state of eclosion—the hatching before the bloom.



During the summer program, I was paired to co-lead a workshop with a faculty member, who I can also now call a dear friend of mine, Yeidaly (referred to as Yei) every Tuesday and Thursday. Our first day of training, two weeks before the summer program began, a group of youth educators were gathered in a circle with pieces of chart paper plastered across the room that had different tools, such as a hammer or stepladder, written on the top. The instructions were as follows; walk towards the tool that best describes our facilitation styles. From what I can remember, I gravitated towards the crate, which when asked, I explained that I strongly believed that my role as a facilitator is to provide the structure to uplift my students. Then, Ariluz, who was leading the training, asked which tool of facilitation we wanted to grow more in. I said hammer, as I often shy away from putting my foot down or having hard boundaries with my students. Yei stated the same.

That day I met Yei formally for the first time. It was towards the end of our training that the Deans finally met the faculty members we were to help teach the elective courses for the rest of the summer. As I reflect upon the experience now, I can remember being nervous and quite intimidated by them. Yei is 27, Dominican, from Massachusetts with very obvious Scorpio placements (one of the first facts that I learned about her as well). As we awkwardly stumbled through our introductions, Yei asked if I knew the book, *All About Love* by bell hooks, which I had in fact not only heard of, but devoured

in my quest to understand my own absence of romantic love a couple of years back. However, having recently come out of an incredibly difficult and tumultuous relationship of two years, this book carried a different meaning and Yei was planning to teach a workshop that was centered around it. I immediately recoiled, it had only been two days since I left my relationship, and love was something that I still winced at, a fear I had expressed to Yei and that they had, with a sigh of relief, exclaimed that they too were struggling with their love life. We both took a breath. Maybe we didn't have to be experts in our relationships in order to hold space for our students. Yei actually urged me to lean into my discomfort and uncertainty, and to not hide my humanness from our students. They need to see that we too do not have all the answers. Otherwise, we would be projecting a false narrative.

As we prepared for our first workshop, Yei encouraged me to take more of a front seat as a co-facilitator rather than as an assistant to her, which I had subconsciously placed myself with the understanding that I was less knowledgeable. Yei vehemently disagreed. And while she had prepared an already thought out curriculum, she asked for a lot of my feedback and we ended up revising the curriculum together. At our first workshop, we were buzzing with a mix of excitement and nervousness as it was Yei's first time really getting to know the Nashers and my first time teaching a workshop. At the beginning of the workshop, we set our intentions and community guidelines for the space, a common beginning exercise that Sadie Nash uses to engage Nashers in co-creating the space that they want to be in as well as to reference back to and hold our Nashers accountable to if we notice Nashers disrespecting the community agreements. Then, in that small room on the third floor that had only a crack of a window facing yet another office building, we asked students to write definitions across the room on different pieces of chart paper and create their own definition of what love means

to them beginning with the quote, “Love is as love does. Love is...” and we collected their responses to show them at the end of the program so they could reflect on their growth and what they had learned. The Nashers seemed excited to talk about love, and more specifically, they were excited to talk about their experiences with love, to ask questions and share their dreams and hopes for how they wanted love to exist in their lives. Yei and I knew that this space was important, especially as we both agreed that there aren’t many spaces where we are taught about how to practice healthy love in our lives. We were also aware of how pervasive unhealthy forms of loving people in our communities manifest from the internalization of societal oppression and marginalization. We knew that our workshop would not be enough to disrupt and heal the narratives and wounds our Nashers might be facing, but we hoped.

Blank Worksheet⁹

Name:

Pronouns:

Love is...

In my friendships, I value...

In my romantic relationships, I value...

In my familial relationships, I value...

Strengths I hold:

Places I want to grow:

I feel loved when...

⁹Above is an actual sample of a worksheet we created, inspired by bell hooks, as part of their final project for the elective class which was to make their own love manuals.

I love myself by...

I love others by...

Things I need to feel supported in my relationships...

My definition of love has shifted by...

Worksheet

Name: Soledad

Pronouns: she/her

Love is...

*the joy I feel in watching you grow into a future
where I can witness
a grander reunion
of all versions of you reaching towards
steeper heights*

In my friendships, I value...

*the ways that you've kept me fed, even when i've offered you nothing,
but the presence of my bata and bonnet
festering in bed*

In my romantic relationships, I value...

*softness
arriving so tenderly
it feels like a breeze*

In my familial relationships, I value...

*salsa music on still Sunday mornings,
and sorullitos frying on the stove,
a crowded apartment
with tv dinners
and a new brand of sage*

*to expunge the bullshit
wafting in the air*

Strengths I hold:
*this shitty ass pen
and the half full half empty
Barnes and Noble notebooks
I keep telling myself
that I'll finish on an angstier day*

Places I want to grow:
*where don't I?
maybe come back to me
when I've returned from my quest
to better myself
and build shame a new name*

I feel loved when...
*tenderness is familiar
and without a price tag
hidden under the collar*

I love myself by...
*crying when I want to
sleeping on my belly
instead of crouched on my sides
or dare I say
letting NO slip off my tongue
with ease*

I love others by...
*putting my own ego aside
and setting sexy boundaries
to allow my loved ones
to witness
a human with limitations*

Things I need to feel supported in my relationships...

giggles at my corniest jokes

a curious ear

and a clumsy hand to stumble with

My definition of love has shifted by...

seeking inward

for the joy

I've stored over the years

The introductory quote that we commenced our first elective class with, “love is as love does,” captures an ethic and politics of the Sadie Nash community that underlines and defines the foundation that our community is driven by. Love, in this space, is a happening, a movement towards and thus a consistent practice rather than a feeling. Interestingly enough, while I have witnessed the impact of feelings as a productive framework to contextualize how a community is built and operated under, love is the ethic that sustains a reciprocal drive to keep this community alive.

In this chapter, I investigate various moments during my time at Sadie Nash as both a Nasher and a Dean, drawing from an interspersed collection of memories, fieldnotes, poems, and interviews that dialogue with unsettled spatialities built on a framework of possibility that model queer and abolitionist practices. To clarify, when I say unsettled, I do not mean synonymous with disturbed, but rather unsettled as in, in motion, or even interrupted spatialities that desire unsettlement as an intentional refusal of heteronormative, white, cis, wealthy educational structures. For example, in an interview conducted with the (recently announced) previous Director of Programs at Sadie Nash,

Jessica Fei, I noticed a general sentiment for a sort of structured uprootedness to the traditional classroom environment:

I feel like [this work] is a lifelong worthy endeavor to just keep getting into questions of like what it means and looks like to love humanity, to love liberation, to love justice and to be able to do that with this lever of education in our hands and I know just from my own experiences as an educator that I have felt my most joyful thriving self when I've been in a classroom setting whether it's like a set of bean bags circled around each other. Like a classroom can look like that, a classroom is us having a picnic together in a park or a classroom is us sitting in really hard chairs in a circle in a classroom on a Saturday. A classroom can look like anything. What it is to me is a space of possibility and a space where people can really bring all of their ideas and their wisdom to dialogue with one another and to experiment with ways of existing with one another that can feel good that can feel like it touches upon our ideals on how we want to experience being next to another human being and listening and speaking and moving. And so I think like I just feel endlessly fascinated by what can it mean and look like to practice love.

Jess (as we all called her) articulates a feeling of joy in generating spaces that expand outside of conventional spatialities so that the space can also reflect an intention of experimentation that she argues is crucial to the values of Sadie Nash. Another way to approach this is to also recontextualize this educational space as one that prioritizes movement rather than fixed limitations for what education should look like, and thus embodying a queer, and dare I say, utopian, modality that draws from various authors such as Adrienne Maree Brown and Mia Mingus who see imagination as a preservation of Black and Brown, queer and trans futurities. I invoke the use of the utopian, not as it's used in its otherworldly meaning, but rather as a horizon, an unseeable and unknowable future for which we reach towards.

Both abolitionist proponents and authors, Adrienne Maree Brown and Mia Mingus, discuss their views on transformative justice and abolition with Walidah Imarisha, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in an article for *Transform Harm* about the impact of Octavia Butler's science fiction novels on abolitionist discourse. Mia Mingus characterizes the relationship between science fiction and transformative justice work to be

...about creativity and imagination. It is about not going with the status quo systems response and, instead, inventing new ways of being. It is about creating what you need with what you have. There are no blueprints or manuals for transformative justice because each incident, individual, and community will have different needs—necessarily so. I always say that this is one of TJ's greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses because we live in a society where people like to be told what to do; they like to 'look up' to someone; they feel more comfortable with the well trodden path and a 'boss' or an 'expert' with all the answers. Much of my transformative justice work has been about resisting this kind of culture and instead encouraging people to trust themselves and their instincts.

While, I would argue that Mingus has provided some form of structure to what abolition can look like, Jess makes it clear that Sadie Nash embraces the “not yet here,” (Muñoz, 2019) approach, the trial and error of it all, as a logic for which to move forward. In accordance with Mingus, Brown encourages abolitionist practitioners to lean into the unimaginable as well: “our work is to make the unimaginable feel tangible, become a longing. I have worked with organizers for years and we've found the edges of what we are building. In science fiction and visionary fiction it feels like we give ourselves permission to move beyond that edge...beyond that edge we find solutions and more problems, which is also important to me in transformative justice—that it isn't utopian” (Imarisha et al., 2017). Therefore, the utopian, for both Mingus and Broth, is only the vehicle that has allowed us to imagine beyond social barriers, the real work, which Sadie Nash is an example of, is to ground the unimaginable as the journey rather than a faraway destination.

On our last day teaching the “Let's Talk About Love, Baby” workshop, Yei and I asked our Nashers to put together their love manuals as a collage around our main workshop room. We wanted

to not only showcase how far they had come in our workshop and all that they learned, but to also provide a gallery walk of all the ways that their own narratives of love connect to one another. Yei and I allowed the Nashers to this assignment together as we both scurried to the hallway to write them individualized notes of appreciation and farewells in their copies of *All About Love* that we gave them at the end of the program. When we came back, there was a range of colorful paper, some taped, and others threaded together with the words “Love is...” on each. I saw glitter and stars, doodles of friends hugging, and aliens eating around a table. I saw Black girls hugging each other and the words “together we can fly” glued together on construction paper. And at the end of their collage was a piece of chart paper with the question, “what does love mean to you,” which they put up to invite their peers from the second elective to participate in expressing various forms of love. As I hugged each one of my Nashers goodbye, I grew emotional looking at how filled our space had become. A stamp that they were there.

Touching Horizon

[Fieldnotes entry, August 2nd, 2022]

List of lunch discussion topics: Bad salads, growing up, mayonnaise remedies, current love life/exes, Taylor Swift, white feminism.

Every day, around 12:30 pm, Sammy, Olivia, Guerdyna, Mia, Moza and I all sit down around a black rectangular table in one of our workshop rooms and eat lunch together. Sometimes we are quiet. Enjoying the stillness that our lunch hour provides us. Other days, we are chatterboxes' engrossed in the drama of our Nashers, wondering who said what to whom. And most days, we are storytellers, problem solvers, and available ears as we trade stories from our upbringings and our college years. Our stories weave together all of our unknowns and into a quilt of shared joys, interests, and vulnerabilities as the people I work alongside—once strangers—begin to materialize into friends.



My question to Jess falls silently as she looks away from the screen and ponders her response. *In what areas do you think Sadie Nash can grow in?* I wait patiently on the other side of the zoom call as Jess's eyes search for an answer. Finally, she takes a breath; "There's a lot of room for growth in Sadie Nash around how we approach care and accountability with a transformative justice framework...I think we have to bring all of our courageous muscles and our abolitionist thinking into the mix and how we deal with conflict in a way that is about deepening connection, deepening understanding, refusing marginalization and exclusion and trusting that we have the ability to restore and to heal through any kind of conflict, and I think that's a trust that's gonna take time build." When Jess refers back to Sadie Nash, she encapsulates the responsibility of Sadie Nash within a collective and

collaborative, “we,” almost instinctively. Not dissimilar to Muñoz’ “invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence” (2019). At the time of our interview, I did not notice that both the phrasing of the question that I posed to Jess and her response render a collective action and response, a dependence even, that the outcome of the program also rests on a collaborative effort to build upon. The sentiment has also felt reminiscent of Prasad, who I have brought up in Chapter two, and Muñoz’ frameworks of a “queer horizon” that Prasad also situated within a sense of “queer failure.” She argues that “[i]n those spaces the loss also feels like a **queer failure**, not the spectacular or wry kind that Jack Halberstam spotlights, but the kind that is painful and humiliating. The kind that doesn’t turn on the lights after dark. Despite José Muñoz’s reminder that we are only ever perpetually approaching queerness, we mourn the death of a queer possibility, a practice of relationality that broke. We talk about what makes these ‘failures,’ and we see, of course, that it is a contract with a ravenous cis heteronormativity that renders any practice of radical queerness dangerous to us” (2020, 117). In Prasad’s claim, she responds to Muñoz’ postulation of the “queer citizen-subject” of which is born from the “‘dead citizenship’ of heterosexuality” in order to “sacrifice..the present for a fantasmatic future”(2019) Congruently, Prasad places grief at the forefront of this process, a process that refuses and rejects the” toxicity” and “impoverishment” that those that feel a minoritarian belonging are subjected to, and views failure (and the grief that comes with it) as a necessary emotion to which those in a minoritarian belonging can mourn and ultimately liberate ourselves from the “contract” that we have with our present social and economic conditions.

I end with Prasad because I am compelled by her argument to lean into the sensation of failure.

In the passage below, Prasad beautifully encapsulates the burgeoning of queer family born from grief and failure;

[f]ailure only reveals itself in the excruciating details of the loss, e.g., paperwork, bills, wills—‘happy objects’ that promised the good life. We both joke seriously about being failed queers. I ask if there is any other way to be queer than to fail over and over. As I do. My own experience with a family model in which grief transforms every member, heightens my capacity to share pain, as it had so many times before in my life. Memories of old routines, of needles, catheters, wheelchairs, stretchers, come crawling back, competing with my queer kin for my strength. I shrivel even as I should remain strong, and in the depths of my own failure to adequately support them, my loved one, my sibling, my queer family, dives down to be with me. We sit together in the growing dusk, holding both our sorrows between us, and wait for some light to break (2019).

As I see it, Sadie Nash, of whom encompasses the outcast, the excess, the minoritarian: the queer, the trans, the immigrant, the melanated, the colonized, the working-class must mourn the loss of the institutions, people, and beliefs that we once held dearly so we can reconcile with a new future. One in which our survivability is ensured, our joy held sacred, and our children and communities are thriving towards a more sustainable future for marginalized people.

On a more personal note, time and time again, I have returned to Sadie Nash. And time and time again, I leave a more fearless individual. Fearless because I have known discomfort, shied away, and come back again. I have known deep sadness, I have despaired and sat in hopelessness from seeing another loved one suffer. And I have been held through it all. But mostly, I have become more fearless because I’ve known imperfect humans, flawed humans with a great capacity for loving even when the horizon feels far away.

Epilogue: For What May Come Next

And now, I am writing from a less anthropological standpoint, but from a rooted consciousness of my own that is queer, ancestrally queer as well as freakishly, galactically, ragefully, and revolutionarily queer. I write to my queer, trans, Black and Brown community. I write to my Sadie Nash family. Let us fail. Let us fail, and fall, and crumble, and stumble our way through with the wobbly legs of a newborn. *We have nothing to lose but our chains.*

Ashé



(Captured from top right to bottom left: Mia, Soledad, Ariluz, Guerdyna, Sammy, Olivia at the final Sadie Nash celebration)

References

- Ahmed, Sara. "Queer Feelings." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed., 156. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ahmed-Intro_Ch-7.pdf.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction*. [Edition unavailable]. 2011. Reprint, Princeton University Press, 2011.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/735308/friction-an-ethnography-of-global-connection-pdf>.
- Esteban Muñoz, José. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675–88.
- Muñoz, José Esteban, Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong'o, and Ann Pellegrini. *Cruising Utopia*, 10th Anniversary Edition. [Edition unavailable]. 2019. Reprint, NYU Press, 2019.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/954557/cruising-utopia-10th-anniversary-edition-the-then-and-there-of-queer-futurity-pdf>.
- Fassin, Didier and Frédéric Debomy. *Policing the City: An Ethno-Graphic*. OTHER PRESS, 2022.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Classics, 2017.
- Günel, Gökçe, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, June 9.
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>
- Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and The Privilege of Partial Perspective*. No.3. Vol. Vol. 14. *Feminist Studies*, 1988.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>.
- Hernandez Jillian. 2020. *Aesthetics of Excess : The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. Durham: Duke University Press.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2627908>.

- Imarisha, W., adrienne maree brown, Gumbs, A. P., Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L., & Mingus, M. (2017, April 20). The Fictions And Futures Of Transformative Justice. *Transform Harm*.
- Kaba, Mariame. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket books, 2021.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1996959/we-do-this-til-we-free-us-abolitionist-organizing-and-transforming-justice-pdf>.
- Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Crossing Press, 2007.
- McClaurin, Irma. *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*. Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Mohácsi, Eszter Enikő. “At the Intersection of Magical Realism and Trauma Narratives: Hwang Sok-Yong’s *The Guest*.” *Journal of Korean Culture*, 2016.
- Oliver, Akilah. *The She Said Dialogues: Flesh Memory*. Boulder: Smokeproof, 1999.
- Prasad, Pavithra. “In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief.” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 7, no. 1 (2020): 113–19.
- Salas Pujols, Jomaira. “‘It’s About the Way I’m Treated’: Afro-Latina Black Identity Development in the Third Space.” *Youth & Society* 54, no. 4 (December 17, 2020): 593–610.
- Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopias: Abolition, AntiBlackness + Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press Books, 2019.
- Simpson, Audra. “Ethnographic Refusal.” *Junctures* 9 (December 2007): 67–80.

Works Consulted

- Andreades, Daphne Palasi. *Brown Girls: A Novel*. United States: Random House Publishing Group, 2022.
- Anzaldúa Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands : The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Ahmann, Chloe. "Accountable Talk: 'Real' Conversations in Baltimore City Schools" Volume 48, no. Issue 1 (January 24, 2017): Pages 77-97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12184>.
- Allen, Jafari Sinclair and Ryan Cecil Jobson. "The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties." *Current Anthropology* 57 (2016): 129 - 148.
- Asad, Talal. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Ithaca Press: London, 1973.
- Balsom, E. (2001, November 19). "There is No Such Thing as Documentary": An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Frieze*, (199).
- Banaji, Shakuntala. "The Significance of Ethnography in Youth Participation Research: Active Citizenship in the UK after the Brexit Vote." *Masaryk University*, 2018. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/91586/1/Banaji_The-significance-of-ethnography.pdf.
- Brown, Tashal. "'To Be Our Best Selves': Critical Dialogue with Girls of Color about Their Experiences in a Social Justice Leadership Program." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, September 13, 2021.
- Cammarota, Julio. "The Gendered and Racialized Pathways of Latina and Latino Youth: Different Struggles, Different Resistances in the Urban Context." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* Volume 35, no. Issue 1 (January 8, 2008): Pages 53-74. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2004.35.1.53>.
- Castillo-Garsow, Melissa. *Manteca! : An Anthology of Afro-Latin@ Poets*. 1st ed. Arte Publico Press, 2017. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=5314689>.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

J. Baldrige, Carlos Medina, and A.Reeves, Biana, Juan, and Marlo. "Toward a New Understanding of Community-Based Education: The Role of Community-Based Educational Spaces in Disrupting Inequality for Minoritized Youth." *American Educational Research Association*, *Disrupting Inequality Through Education Research*, 41, no. Review of Research in Education (March 2017): 381-402 (22 pages).

Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. University of Texas Press, 2012. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/735989>.

Rios, Victor. *Punished*. [Edition unavailable]. 2011. Reprint, NYU Press, 2011.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/719409/punished-policing-the-lives-of-black-and-latino-boys-pdf>.

Sloan, Kris. "High-Stakes Accountability, Minority Youth, and Ethnography: Assessing the Multiple Effects." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* Volume 38, no. Issue 1 (January 8, 2008): Pages 24-41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2007.38.1.24>.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.