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Pittsburgh, *The Realist City*: Shit Talk’n, Storytell’n, Social Liv’n

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ABSTRACT

This article documents my lived experience as a participant observer in a writing/performance course that brought together returning citizens, police officers, community activists, university students and faculty. I am utilizing Hoffman’s (2004) “Living Stories” framework and Cutts’ (2016) expansion of Poetic Inquiry to present “*Ars Spirituality*” as the lens to frame the discussion of my storytelling and storiography experience. Curated by Duquesne University sociologist Norman Conti, with theoretical justification from C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman, the course was co-facilitated by award-winning actor/writer Roger Guenveur Smith and world-renowned writing coach and performer Susan Stein over Zoom video conferencing platform during the 2021 Spring Semester. Altogether, the course functioned as a dialogic space where individuals could transcend social status in order to know each other—and perhaps even themselves—through their stories.

INTRODUCTION

It all started with Rodney King. Well, actually it all started long before that, maybe back in Amsterdam when Etty Hillesum¹ opened her Holocaust diary, but probably even further back than that. Still, Rodney King was the first viral video before viral was viral and then there was that other virus; the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, but before that—back in 2017—Conti² was scrolling through his Netflix account, probably looking for something to show his students so he wouldn’t have to teach, when he found *Rodney King*.³ When he was very young, more than anything Conti wanted to be a cop, maybe an FBI agent if he got really

lucky, but Rodney King and the 1992 LA Uprising pushed him to be a police reformer instead of a police officer, so he pushed play.

The film begins with a recording of the 911 call, Father's Day 2012 and Rodney Glenn King has drowned in his swimming pool. The opening credits roll: Luna Ray Media, Buffalo 8, Spike Lee, 40 Acres and a Mule until "RODNEY KING" fills the screen. Spotlight on Roger Guenveur Smith—you know Smiley, from *Do the Right Thing*, Huey P. Newton from his multiple award-winning *A Huey P. Newton Story*, just to name a few.⁴ Roger is standing there in a black LA Dodgers jersey, black pants, and no shoes reciting the lyrics of Willie-D's "Rodney-K: Fuck Rodney King", before living out the personal and political, the self and the social of the events preceding and following the beating by and eventual acquittal of LAPD officers Koon, Powell, Wind, and Briseno.

Fifty minutes of social commentary offered through stunning humanity and Conti was hooked.⁵ He started showing the film in his classes, got more and more into it and even tried his hand at writing like Mr. Guenveur Smith performs.⁶ A year prior, Conti started taking police officers and recruits into prisons for courses with incarcerated citizens, so he ended up showing *Rodney King* at the Pittsburgh Police Academy as part of his work with the recruits.⁷ Two years later, a friend in the Los Angeles theater milieu told him that she actually knew Roger and he had performed as part of an ongoing reading series she produces honoring the work of John Edgar Wideman.⁸

Now, before Conti found a connection to Roger, he met Susan Stein. Ms. Stein had come to Pittsburgh to perform her one-woman play *Etty*⁹ as part of a Kristallnacht commemoration hosted by the Jewish Studies group at Duquesne University. However, beyond the campus world, Ms. Stein also likes to perform the play in prisons, actually, she calls it a prison play, so

the Jewish Studies folks asked Conti if he could arrange that. Conti already had a regular Friday meeting from 8:30 to 10:30 with the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice (EBTT) at SCI Pittsburgh (a.k.a State Correctional Institution Pittsburgh, a.k.a. Western Penitentiary, a.k.a. The Wall) so it was no problem. They just moved the meeting to the auditorium and invited the rest of the prison—staff and incarcerated citizens—to attend.

It just so happened that literary giant and Pittsburgh native John Edgar Wideman was in town to give a reading, so Conti invited him as well. He thought attending a play with his younger brother Robert Faruq Wideman, a founding member of the EBTT who was nearly forty years into a life sentence, would likely be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the elder Wideman. Unfortunately, because they were brothers, the brothers were not allowed to sit next to each other during the performance. They were still able to make a stand from their seats, each putting a foot in the aisle that separated them.

The few hundred incarcerated citizens who attended the performance identified fully with the twenty-six-year-old Jewish woman from Amsterdam and had many queries for Susan in the question-and-answer period that served as a second act. What's more is, though, hard-boiled prison staff were coming up to Conti after the performance thanking him for bringing them the play. Honestly, up until that moment—at least to Conti—it seemed like these folks mostly considered him a nuisance and it wasn't like he had put a lot of actual effort into bringing *Etty* to the prison, but after he felt a bit more warmth from staff and correctional officers alike.

Later, based upon the reaction to her play, Ms. Stein was invited back by the prison administration to offer a writing workshop that was attended by all of the incarcerated members of the EBTT as well as Conti. Remembering her magic during the session, Conti invited her to host a writing group in May of 2020. The COVID-19 lockdown was in full swing, the prison had

closed years before, the EBTT had moved to the campus at Duquesne, Brother Faruq's life sentence had been commuted and he was reentering society. The incarcerated founders of the EBTT were locked in their cells most of their days, while the rest of the world was dealing with their own relative sense of confinement, so a group of returning citizens, faculty, students and family began writing together every Monday at 11 am. Ms. Stein would begin with a prompt, something like "that song", "table", "the door" or "a window". Participants wrote for three to five minutes and then shared their pieces aloud. As you might expect, this became an important moment of individual strength and vulnerability among a diverse group of people struggling with isolation and uncertainty that resulted in community. Conti described it as starting the day at the gym, a workout that helped participants find the strength to face whatever was coming next, break a sweat, let go of some of the stress that had accumulated since the last session.

In the Fall of 2020, Conti had the opportunity to host an online conversation with Mr. Guenveur Smith following a showing of *Rodney King*. Sergeant Colleen Bristow, who continually champions the Police Training Inside-Out program (PTI-O) within the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police was in attendance and the three of them engaged in the following exchange:

Conti: You wouldn't know this, but it was a very public case. Colleen is the survivor of a terrible act of violence in her career as a police officer. She's the one that takes me with her into the Police Academy and I always get her in trouble, so here she is.

Colleen: I just want to say thank you.

I wondered if you ever thought your work would be shown in a police academy? I wonder what your thoughts are on that?

Every time I've watched this and I've watched you multiple times now. It's still like I still have this ball in my throat right now. You know it gives me an anxiety, but it's

a good thing. I get it every single time, it causes so much self-reflection and it causes so much reflection within our training and what we're doing in Pittsburgh. So, I just want to thank you for that and I'm just curious to know how you feel about it being shown to police recruits and what your thoughts are on that?

Roger: How do I feel about it being played in an academy, well you know when Rodney King passed it was Father's Day, June 2012. The Chief of Police made a remark and said that Rodney King had changed the culture of policing in Los Angeles, which I thought was a very inappropriate comment. For one thing, there was no remark of condolence to Mr. King's family, in terms of his loss, and it also placed Rodney King in that strange inhuman position of being simply the symbol of something or the catalyst for something and I think the great challenge of my work is to rehumanize Rodney King who was seen as the butt of a joke, as a human piñata. The symbol of police brutality. The symbol of drunk driving if you will. So, if there is a process of rehumanization that your cadets in the academy can access then I'm certainly happy to share with them this this piece which I've shared with the entire world, but hopefully they will be able to see it with fresh eyes and hopefully it will illuminate the humanity that is on the street.

This is something that we seem to struggle with because the institutions in this country, in order to denigrate a certain demographic, to put Black people down, must first dehumanize Black people and this is a process that's been going on in this hemisphere since 1492, 1619, 1865, 1917, 1919. Name any year, you know this is part of the American process, the dehumanization of Black folks. So, if this can help in that very simple, but very crucial, very essential process then I'm certainly happy to make that contribution. So, thank you for pushing the play button.¹⁰

After this, with the pandemic raging on and Conti locked out of both the prison and the police academy, he asked Roger and Susan if they would be interested in doing a class with police, returning citizens and Leon Ford, a man shot and paralyzed at the age of nineteen by a Pittsburgh Police officer in a case that involved mistaken identity.¹¹ They agreed and Roger suggested calling the course Social Living. By January 2021, it was up and running, that's where I come in.

METHODS

Before I get into it and explore my own learning as a participant, observer and witness, I will frame my situatedness and then lay a foundation for how I understand the intersection of social living, storytelling and exploratory writing. I offer this context first in order to provide the reader with my situatedness as the author of this work. I identify as Black woman adult educationist with Afrocentrism roots who views phenomena through a Black Activist Mothering lens informed by Africana Womanism. These identities and frameworks provide the foundation to “conduct the work of locating one’s cultural knowledge and intellect and then snatching one’s centeredness from marginalization” when I am seeking to be in conversation with normative intellectual texts (Sakho, 2021, p.).

My desire as the storiographer (Hoffman, 2004) of this work is similar to what Morrison desired of her work, “to urge the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data” (1984, p. 387). I seek to engage the reader, in fact, to call the reader to respond to my writing experience in this group, to find their situatedness. Morrison is speaking to my reliance on proverbs and seeking the guidance of my Elders and Ancestors as the practical, the experiential, and tacit knowledge that are the cornerstones of all my knowing and the root of my sense-making tools. Who am I? What am I? How did I learn that? How does my

situatedness inform how I understand the role of the Afrocentric storiographer involved in a writing seminar about social living inclusive of police officers, mostly white; formerly incarcerated men, all Black; community activists; students, and academics, mostly white?

Black women's spirituality is creative, emotional, innate, and political. It shows up and out in the ways Black women research, create, and write. Black women's spirituality is always present as a personal identity and is the foundation of political movements as it is the nexus of advocacy and activism (Cutts, 2020, p. 914).

I am utilizing Hoffman's (2004) "Living Stories" framework and Cutts' (2020) expansion of Poetic Inquiry to deploy "*Ars Spirituality*" as the lens to frame the discussion of my storytelling and storiography experience. Both frameworks are undergirded by intuitive knowing and writing in community with others. By exploring social living of self and the self in relationship with others, an intuitive appreciation transpires where "[w]e are asking [,] who we are, how we come to be who we are, and reflecting on the meaning of our experiences – how they are incorporated into our identity" (Welsh, 2016, p. 68) across different social locations within a collaborative storytelling and storywriting experience.

Living Stories as Researcher/Storiographer

Hoffman's original Living Stories framework consisted of storytellers who write stories and then create artifact(s) that others explore and provide reflective responses. The storiographer serves as researcher/observer and facilitates the storying process (Hoffman, 2004). As she explained it:

Living Stories is a collaborative and creative way of engaging in meaningful personal storytelling that expresses the teller's story from a place of authenticity,

creates connections through sharing the story with others, and thereby creates opportunities for transformation (Hoffman, 2004, p 381).

In partnership with the storyteller(s), the storiographer conducts inquiry around these data.

The first phase of this process consists of interpretive inquiry cycles between the storyteller and the storiographer. The researcher/storiographer as the center stone of authentic participation is vested in examining self, the various identities in play while engaging in the content and context of both the theory and the practice of storytelling. The researcher/storiographer is locating the self in the many cultural and political dimensions of power or social locations. From the learning that unfolds during processes of critical self-reflection, the researcher/storiographer can actively situate themselves within the practice of storytelling. This process for the researcher/storiographer brings to bear a social living truth, who and what we are is not to be easily dissected; nor, set aside from how we engage the work becomes evident. “Taken from a relational and transpersonal perspective, the Living Stories style of personal storytelling is explored and developed in response to the need for connection expressed in the culture-at-large and to create opportunities for transformation. What makes storytelling elicit compassionate connection?” (Hoffman, 2004, 379).

Driven by Hoffman’s still relevant research question as a Black woman educationist who views phenomena through a Black Activist Mothering lens, I am at all times and in ways identifying how I am socially sorted by race first, then gender and always social perspectives of being Black and a Black woman are marginalized. I have discussed how this process of preparing the garret space begins then of being female and then ways of seeking justice in our society.

ARS SPIRITUALITY AS STORYTELLING INQUIRY

Cutts (2004) took up the work of decentering Poetic Inquiry by expanding it to include *Ars Spirituality*. This takes a critical stance and makes room for my cultural centeredness to capture experiences, identities and ideology during this writing seminar. *Ars Spirituality* frames writing as a spiritual practice and process to interrogate one's writing especially the writing of Black women. Cutts describes the use of *Ars Spirituality* as a mechanism of inquiry, a reflexive imperative, where one can actionize introspection by examining the self and the various roles in play while in the role of storyteller and storiographer. Cutts discovers - while troubling - a gap in the theoretical framing of the research or as indicated in the title of their work, in the craft and criteria of Faulkner (2007) and others who have written about Poetic Inquiry. Most importantly, the notion of spirituality was hidden if not completely missing from Poetic Inquiry.

Cutts' discovery revealed a liminal space for Black women who are working with arts-based research methods where the ideas are specifically driven by spirituality and that deep knowing of intuition is absent in the research world. The feelings and other ways of seeing must never be disjointed from the practice of inquiry especially for Black women and others who have been marginalized. Cutts was left wondering and seeking to make sense of how best to incorporate the natural rhythm of feelings and intuition into the practice of poetic inquiry.

Because there was no discussion of researcher poets "feeling with" the poems they write or utilizing poetic inquiry because writing poetry "feels right," I wondered how to explore and articulate a natural or spiritual commitment to poetry that was not explained by either *ars poetica* or *ars criteria*. To begin this exploration, I asked two main questions:

1. What does it mean for poetry to "feel right" in communication, expression, and research?

2. How does spirituality undergird poetry as a feeling and connection beyond art and science?

The tenets of *ars spirituality* are “critical necessity, (re)membering as a radical act, and embracing the consciousness of spirituality” (Cutts, 2020 p. 914). Cutts suggests we employ these tenets to trouble what it means to “feel right” while observing and participating in writing as a spiritual practice and second, to discover in what ways does the Black woman researcher’s spirituality undergird her poetic musing? *Ars Spirituality* serves as a contingency approach to the current practice of poetic inquiry. Cutts is very clear that to practice and to investigate poetry are spiritual acts. In fact, troubling one’s feelings, intuition and the energy of emotions are direct inquiry pathways alongside the craft and criteria of poetic inquiry. These three: the craft, the criteria, and the spiritual ways of interpretive knowing are in a symbiotic relationship when engaging in the storytelling, the writing and the observing reflexively of the experience embedded in expressive communication.

In arguing for *ars spirituality* as critical reflection in ABR [Arts-based Research] and poetic inquiry, I view writing (and reading) poetry as a spiritual experience—no matter whether the poetry is “traditional,” song lyrics, or the words of research participants. These contentions suggest that the feeling of poetry (and other types of emotive writing) cannot be taught. (Cutts, 2020, p. 911).

Noddings and Shore (1984) describe taking up an intuitive practice in the field of education that has both internal and external attributes for learning that move “in both directions” (p. 45). They advise educators as the center of the learning and the learner to develop and practice a process of moving in two directions: move closer to the phenomenon to gain deep, richer and thick descriptions of the learning, and also move toward the learner to gain insight into the

individual learner's own sense of intuitiveness around the learning. Similarly, Cutts describes the emotive moving back and forth of connectedness when writing,

“I interpret this intuition, right feeling, or innate connection to writing as a channeling of spirituality. I understand being drawn to writing poetry as a form of “spiritual musing” that facilitates the way I embrace memory, community, nature, and interconnectedness as I explore and make sense of the world...” (Cutts, 2020, p. 910).

Interestingly, I discuss moving from center out across and back again as Veil Walking (Sakho, 2017, 2021) and I see Cutts' tenet of “(re)membering as a radical act in alignment” as embracing what I experienced in the role of storiographer with the social living seminar. It is the Sankofan approach to storytelling utilizing veil walking. When we “veil walk we are carrying messages and possibilities back and forth between individuals and histories” (Sakho, 2017, p. 13). I enacted a Sankofan approach as an Afrocentric storiographer during each session “to demonstrate that I am educated in the Eurocentric system; yet, I am not of this system” (Sakho, 2021). I found my storytelling becoming energy in motion, navigating between veils – the Eurocentric ways of making sense of social living and Afrocentric ways – transporting knowledge from the margins to the center until my social dislocation and marginal living becomes my located and centered (Gray, Sakho, 2021) back again to the margins – veil walking. Cutts' utilizes Theil, 2001, as cited in Faulkner's (2007) work around the use of storytelling to elicit the atmosphere for living storytelling in order to deepen the pragmatics of storytelling in such a way that, “stories and poems come in search of you” (Cutts, 2020, p. 911). During each session of the social lives seminar, shit talk'n, tell'n lies, waxing living stories and proverb wielding indeed came looking for me because I truly believe that, “[s]torytelling is a

transpersonal journey, attuning us to our spiritual essence and realization of our transpersonal nature” (Hoffman, 2004, p. 385).

TALKING OUT & CALLING IN THE SPIRIT

What follows is a storytelling exploration of my experience in a writing group comprised of formerly incarcerated men, community activists, retired and currently serving police officers, students and academics curated by Conti and facilitated by Guenveur Smith and Stein. Our group met over 10 weeks for at least one hour guided by either a writing prompt or a “kick your piece” with the goal of each participant observing and witnessing others storytelling and building off of their work in a “living stories style of personal storytelling” (Hoffman, 2004, p. 379) rooted in historical occurrences and timelines in Pittsburgh that rippled out to national and international issues.

2/5/21 – My first writing

The List

Mother

Healer

Educationist

Wombwoman

Instigator for the Ancestors

Analyzer

We were asked as a prompt style directive to create a list about who we are following a reading of a participant's writing that felt like a list. I then chose two from the list – *Mother and Instigator for the African Ancestors* to formulate the following piece. The above writing exercise represents a poetic pondering and frames for those whom I write and live for and how I chose the lens through which to view all phenomena (Cutts 2020). It felt like by the end of our experience, we were all either writing for our biological or other women as mothers and speaking peace and rest to our own Ancestors. We all discovered our beginning, meaning the sociocultural influence of our adult development resided with very important women both living and those who had transitioned. For some it was the neighborhood other mother, for some it was a sister and for others it was the aunties; however, this act of mothering is the first principle of ars spirituality to indicate your own critical necessity. Naming my need to write as an instigator of my African Ancestors and as a Black mother is to (re)member as putting back together my personal, collective and institutionalized memories. The critical act of naming and the conscious act of (re)membering - the second principle of ars spirituality is described by Cutts as “[m]erging writing as a necessity with the power of (re)membering to write is to write - or create - dangerously” (Cutts, p. 914).

On Assignment

I end up landing in the most unusual places like Portland, OR, or Pittsburgh, PA, or Las Vegas, NV, and folks always ask me, “how’d you end up there”

While the location was unusual, the answer became typical...

job, school, opportunities...

Now however, I know why and reply,

I am on assignment to do what has not yet been revealed...

The surface reason – job, school, opportunities – is the veil

I am in the liminal space awaiting instructions about my assignment

often not what I would choose willingly...

Note: I have learned not to be disobedient, tho

*An assignment that is typically uncomfortable that causes me to be the outsider,
the instigator always about justice, always about children and mothers, always
about healing the Great Mother.*

Always about...

...learning to veil walk to embrace and re-member African-centered
consciousness and both learn the Eurocentric views. The caution learned was to
pass through the veil whole, intact, not leaving any parts of the African “self” in
the void. To remain in the void of the veil without being anchored to the
historicity of the communal African self would result in the split psyche – the
sterilizing of the Soul (Sakho, 2021)

2/15/21 – The Veil

The Veil is an Ancient Being full of wit and wisdom and is not here for fuckery

*Floating to the Veil anticipating a magical encounter I arrive at the liminal space,
A threshold like the one in the row house on Newton Street in DC, where I grew
up every summer. The door is grand solid wood framed etched glass and the door
knob is magical brass with a lace curtain.*

*I turn the knob and I am here I have entered the threshold the floor has the same
antique small square tiles and that brass umbrella stand...hmmm, interesting*

*(I reach for the door knob and the blind flies up...you know the one on the metal
roller and if you don't pull just right, it will fly up with a loud sound and you
might not be able to get it down again)*

I am a bit startled...

Where is...

*There she is wearing that good wig, the one that is a part of the Black woman's
super suit it goes with the white dress, the white gloves and the warm pie and for
a moment, I see the row of Black women Usher Board members coming, doing the
two step a sign that the "doors of the church are open"*

Hey, who your people?

I am thinking now, I got this

*Grandly and in cadence with the Usher Board, I begin the naming of my
Ancestors... I start with my Grandmother, Minnie Blanche Williams, I announce
on beat and I continue naming until I get to my Great Grandmother's granny,*

I stand proudly

The Veil, fixes her wig and then, sucks her teeth

Wait, I think, what did I get wrong

Who are you?!?

she speaks with a reverb?

Ok, now I really got this, she wanted me to start with myself first... my Wakanda

Moment

I am, Jacqueline LaVer...

That shade slams down, a sign pops up...

It reads,

“Come back when you know the name given to you by God!”

My experience in the social living seminar allowed me to explore how the veil “operates at the personal or intrapsychic and at the institutional or structural level of social interaction” (Winant, 2004, p. 1). at each session of the writing seminar and the exploration of social living I gain more depth around the veil and what it could be for Black women. The Du Boisian double consciousness explained the psyche of Black folks as spilt, a type of perpetual duality social living in America. Cutts discovered by researching the works of Cynthia Dillard and Audre Lorde, Black women who live on both sides of the veil and who frequented the passing through process while writing are indeed enacting the Du Boisian metaphorical gift, that of second sight, the hidden or less explored metaphor of Du Bois’ double consciousness (Sakho, 2017, 2021). In

the latter work on the veil, Black women are typically enacting communal housework (2021) looking more at Howard Winant (2004) and James Perkinson (2005) who investigate and expand on the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness and the metaphor of the veil to be more intuitive and empowering versus oppressive.

Winant and Perkinson have me looking more at the gathering of Ruby Dee, Sonia Sanchez and Alice Walker coming together to discuss the greatness of Zora Neale Hurston to move away from the perpetual mantle of living two lives and always measuring my worth and achievement by the standards of white supremacy/patriarchy. Ruby Dee is speaking in this circle of powerful literaries, Alice Walker and Sonia Sanchez about Zora Neal Hurston's work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Kamille, 2012). Ruby Dee shared, "she [Zora] brings us to essences, brings us to the beginning, she brings us to the reasons for being here that we have not considered" that our African ancestors were brought to the Americas to demonstrate the nature of the human character (Kamille, 2012).

Ruby Dee uncovered a hidden authority of the veil for Black folks particularly for me as Black woman, Afrocentric scholar-practitioner and that is, to be a steward of critical ontological shifts in transformation. The hidden authority is the capacity to demonstrate how to elicit compassion while relegated to the margins and liminal spaces of society and systems and while there, to shine a light on. Our African Ancestors performed this miracle daily under the conditions of a "social death" through the Du Boisian gift of second sight. I write about this gift exercised by Black women to see into the veil spaces to Veil Walk by going between privileged and oppressed spaces othered, marginalized enacting feats of resurrection from the social death of enslavement generations beyond. It is only natural then that Black women incorporate the ars of spirituality when writing, reading or acting out poetic experiences. By the end of the writing

course my Ancestors as a cacophony of opinions and words were telling me to investigate this experience in the liminal space and do so with a deep rooted understanding that the Black woman is enough.

This way of practicing mothering for black women unfolds as an interconnected process of storylistening, storytelling and storywriting practices as emancipatory work, to get free! In other words, in my words...

We move back and forth between the margins and privileged (center) spaces, I often hideout in liminal spaces sometimes with my “plus one” to gather intelligence on the ways in which the oppressive forces are at play and I stand in the gap, as acts of resistance and transformation (Sakho, 2017, 3).

The Black Woman is Enough Ointment started back in 2016, during a social living writing process facilitated by the coeditor of this volume, Leon Ford. It was the beginning of defining my need to get free from the Eurocentric binds of academic writing. It was an announcement to change the definition of the dues, it was the calling forth of my good, great Ancestors and Ancestresses to assist with transforming the liminal spaces into garret spaces. To my surprise, I interpreted this freeing process within another participants’ musings.

One officer spoke of her Aunt throughout our writing experiences and by the end of the event, her Aunt had become a high Irish Ancestor for her, I sensed. I could hear through her evocative and emotive expressions an ontological unfolding and the question of whether or not her Aunt was enough. Anecdotally, this particular experience I found demonstrative of what I have argued in my previous writing that this way of Black activist mothering and communal housework is not only to be experienced/practiced by Black women or Black people, no. It is a

set of practices and systems of knowing that all can utilize in the inquiry into the human condition. Very similar to what Ruby Dee resurrected through Zora Neale Hurston's work above, a scurrying process to see the human condition across time in order to bring healing to social interactions toward the much needed ontological shift.

4/30/21

The Black Woman is Enough Magical Ointment

2 parts "Fuck you pay me" the brand that comes with fermented, "run me my Great Grandma's granny's check

2 parts Loud with a pinch voice and silence

3 parts Usher Board white gloves, white dress & 2 step

2 parts Resilience (the one that runs parallel to trauma)

*Equal parts of *each*

**Use your feelings, intuition to measure*

Sapphire – wards off becoming stifled in comfort

Jezebel – brings to the surface contradictions and dichotomies

Double Dutch – to invoke timing and synchronicity

Hottentot – so you never forget whose you are

SOCIAL LIVING STORY TELLING

Okay, but how is all this writing and performing a sociology course? Well for Conti, it goes back to a couple of sociologists he names as ancestors, C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman. Mills is best known for *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), a book whose title comes from his notion of recognizing the intersection of history and biography, the self and society. Even among those of us who are less familiar with the concept, it is not difficult to understand that capturing this nexus is what is at the core of both art spirituality and meaningful social inquiry, or as Mills puts it, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (1959, 3).

Mills goes on to pat himself and his perspicacious colleagues on the back with a discussion of what they understand that “ordinary” others don’t. For instance, he writes:

[P]eople do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary people do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of people they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them (1959, 4).

I mean maybe, but still, at least in the Spring of 2021, most people were becoming pretty highly attuned to how history and social institutions were impacting their lives. Most folks could not avoid embracing the “quality of mind” necessary for understanding how structural inequalities

were killing so many of us every day. Really, this sensitivity might be—at least partially—the result of the impact that Mills had on sociology, general academic life, and by extension the world. However, from his perspective, people are trapped in a world that was moving too quickly for them to really get their feet under themselves or find an orientation for making sense of their lives; a world where nothing makes sense and folks are trapped in moral stasis. Then, “in defense of selfhood - they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private individuals” (Mills 1959, 5), *unless things get so bad that they have no choice to come together*.

Then there’s Goffman and his dramaturgical perspective, painting social life as a stage. His model of life as theater is all about masks (veils), calculated versions of self that folks perform with the cynical expectation of showing others what will best serve themselves in an encounter. For Goffman (1959), our various self-interests make it almost impossible to express our own authentic selves or experience others. However, some of us have masks that others see as discrediting the self that we are attempting to present. Often, we end up dehumanized by those with the power to impose their definition of the situation on those of us with disruptive masks that we can’t keep hidden. Then again, one group’s mark of shame is another’s badge of honor. Notions of right and wrong, just and unjust are always dependent upon who is doing the judging and social juries are complicated. So who is stigmatized, when and where? Black men returning to society after decades in prison? Police officers in the wake of the George Floyd’s murder, during the trial of his killer? Both? Either?

At this point, when you bring these literal “others” (i.e., supposed: cops and robbers; good guys and bad guys; oppressors and the oppressed; heroes and villains) the fault lines created by Mills’ earthquakes of change are easily observed and false dichotomies of deviant and normal are diminished, if not eliminated. We used the Zoom platform’s multiple electronic boxes

to carve out spaces for dialogue that came together to form a single stage for face-to-face interaction. In these—as in all—relations, the self is shaped through interactions where individuals are replicating what is distinctive among their colleagues while also differentiating themselves (Blumer 1969). Certainly, in the moment and hopefully beyond, these exchanges transformed supposed adversaries into co-conspirators. Specifically, it was a sociality where individuals moved beyond stigma/counter-stigma, literally taking the role of “other” in an ongoing dialogue. For these police officers, returning citizens and activists it became a scene where they could, at least temporarily, *see, speak, listen, hear* and *behave* in ways that challenge the conventional race narrative and establish space for maintaining aspects of their authentic selves (Scott, 1990).

The Social Living course promoted normalized interactions and the suspension of oppositional identities during particularly uncertain times. The basic human need to distance the self from organizational identity claims and stigma was channeled into a locus of positive social exchange. In these moments, the self is reconciled with the other, and stigma is negated within the dialogic space offered through the program. Common stereotypes are inverted through structured face-to-face interaction, or as Goffman (1963) explains:

When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another’s immediate presence, especially when they there attempt to sustain a joint conversational encounter, there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides (p. 13).

In Social Living, stigmatized statuses take on a formal function as part of the course, in which participants exercise their power through their pieces in a dialogic space. Moreover, folks on all sides of the law transform into fellow resisters of the dominant ideologies that drive both the

justice system and dehumanization more generally. In the process, we help each other change our lives and our practice.

CONCLUSION

Cutts discusses ars spirituality as a critical component of poetic inquiry and is expanding poetic inquiry beyond the craft and criteria as qualitative methodology. Cutts is arguing that ars spirituality facilitates a praxis, a knowing and doing. Specifically, the principles of ars spirituality open a pathway for the “reflexive practice” to be included in the methodology of poetic inquiry. Cutts found by investigating philosophical canons, that Audre Lorde and Cynthia Dillard both “promoted poetry and other forms of exploratory writing to heal, revolutionize, and enact liberation” (Cutts,) beyond the craft and criteria of what constitutes. Alongside the craft and criteria of poetic inquiry into social lives there must be returning back to history, a naming, and spiritual discovery.

This is not far off from Mills’ claim in discussing the often ahistorical pondering of the normative society when investigating social lives and it is also in alignment with Conti’s vision to expand the work of the EBTT beyond the training and educative actions of Inside-Out modeling. His curation of the writing course included the healing of the historical adversarial positions of police and criminality; Black and white. Further, the use of poetic and/or exploratory writing demonstrate that history and social lives cannot be disjointed if we are to tell the whole story. It appears that Mills is in agreement with Cutts, that the whole story is inclusive of a multiplicity of truths that are individual, relational, and social and is always entangled with personal, cultural and social histories.

Similarly, Hoffman (2004) discusses “participatory knowing” through the necessary ingredients to practice the work of (re)membering history to individually lived experiences. To

be participatory in conjuring a shared knowing Hoffman found key components. Emotional narrating which is not like the factual telling of stories, no, it is more about the “emotional tone and depth of the storytelling” and less about dates and times (p. 392). I hear Hoffman (2004) advising that to get to Mills’ evolution of the ordinary others requires the courage to engage in a practice of “participatory knowing” and, to do so, we must be open to receive the emotional tone and depth of writing - again to write this way is to write dangerously as Cutts argues. Hoffman, like Cutts, is convinced that there exists a spiritual component to poetic inquiry. Hoffman describes a reconciliation process of the storyteller that involves balancing their “internal life and external life” (p. 392) through the “emotions, thoughts and attitudes” in struggle with chosen and forced upon identities, and “physical appearance and surroundings” (p. 392).

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¹ Hillesum, Ety. 1996. *Ety Hillesum: A Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbok*. New York: Picador.

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³ Lee, S. (Director). *Rodney King*. Luna Ray Media.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5JxrzBwa7w>

⁵ Serendipitously, for this piece, we are viewing the notion of social commentary as poetic inquiry. Being a practice/method of Arts-based Research using poetry, rhythm and poetry (RAP), evocative expressions and other forms of expressive communication to make sense of social interactions and the phenomenon thereof (Denzin, 1997).

⁶ See Conti (2018) and his piece “East Pittsburgh” in this issue.

⁷ See Conti, Burston, Wozniak and Frantz (2019).

⁸ See <https://wordtheatre.org>

⁹ <http://www.ettyplay.org>

¹⁰ See the full discussion at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQtVzCMN9-o>

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2020/05/leon-ford/611671/>