

DOMINGUEZ, CRISTINA M. Ph.D. Staying in the Trying: Queer Kinship Solidarity as Liberation Praxis. (2022)

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Collective liberation isn't only something some of us are fighting or working for; it's also something some of us live for with/in and through our everyday relationships. Situated at the intersection of Kinship, Social Movement, and Social Justice Education research, this project focuses on how Black, Brown, and white anti-racist LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina are bringing into the here and now more just and liberatory worlds for all through taking up queer kinship solidarity as a liberation praxis. Engaging verbal and visual narratives from pairings and groups collected through focus groups, creative methods, and follow-up conversations, this project takes up an in-depth exploration of how these queer kin pairings and families are moving beyond binaries and inhabiting norms differently regarding kinship, alliance/solidarity and coalition relationships, and social justice education and action. An intimate analysis of the distinct, varied, and expansive ways participant pairings and groups are doing/living queer kinship solidarity with each other every day revealed a doing/living queer kinship solidarity through engaging and experiencing dynamic elements of trust, solidarity, care, and connection. Undergirding their engagement of and experience with these elements is a taking up of authenticity, curiosity, dignity, growth, and joy as relational value-practices. This project aims to open up and offer new possibilities for all of us committed to liberation and social justice in all of the spaces and relationships we are in.

*Keywords:* queer chosen family, kinship, relationality, solidarity, social justice, liberation

STAYING IN THE TRYING: QUEER KINSHIP SOLIDARITY  
AS LIBERATION PRAXIS

by

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## DEDICATION

*To queer kin and community everywhere—you make collective liberation happen in our lifetimes and beyond.*

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Liberation Work is Relational Work**

Liberation work is relational work—How we interact with each other, how we build with each other, how we engage with each other is the work of liberation, there is no separation—our liberation is tethered to each other’s liberation. – Concetta

For a long time, before I believed collective liberation would be a cascading moment, it was something I saw myself, always with others, running towards, chasing down, hunting even, with each campaign, each protest, each city hall meeting. Sometimes it felt just out of reach. More often than not, it felt so far off on the horizon I wondered if it even existed. And I know I am not alone in this. Parker, a participant in this project, said,

I appreciate having survived long enough to know that we might not see liberation in the exact ways and the exact moments that we imagined ... that it’s way more of a nonlinear process than I ever dreamt. It’s not a moment, this cascading moment, it’s not that.

I now, like many of the participants in this project, believe that liberation lives as much in the future as it does in the here and now, specifically, in our relationships. And so, I believe, as Concetta does, that liberation work is relational work. I don’t mean that our relationships are tools that get us “there” or closer to “there.” I mean that I see our relationships and how we are being with/in them as both the process and the goal (Bell, 2007). This isn’t to say that we should stop our campaigns, our protests, our meetings, or any of the “public” “recognized” social justice work we take up. It is to say that I think we need to pay attention to and really be intentional about what we are doing, not just in our “work” efforts toward social justice, but in our everyday beings and movings with each other. Yes, we need to be making ways for a different world together in our collectives, organizations, and institutions, at the action, in the meeting, in session, in class, *and* also in the hallway, on the car ride, at the store, on front porches, and in backyards, in living rooms and at the kitchen tables, and yes, in bed. I am arguing, as I have in

my other works (Dominguez, 2018, 2019), that how we are with each other every day is very important, if not the most important “work” of living for collective liberation.

I share Birdsong’s (2020) belief that we can (and are) building “a way of being in the world that honors and makes tangible our connections to one another, to nature, and to spirit” and that this is a “process of decolonization” where all of us have “something to shed, something to purge, so we can make room for the reclamation and reinvention of community and family” (p. 14). I hold this truth close to my heart and simultaneously hold adrienne maree brown’s (2017) wise call to action, “Our friendships and relationships are systems. Our communities are systems. Let’s practice upwards” (p. 60). And we practice upwards by first “going deeper” (p. 8), knowing that “the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships,” which can only be measured by “their depth” (p. 10). This project dwells in the depth that brown (2017) speaks of, as well as her call to honor that “small is good, small is all. (the large is a reflection of the small)” (p. 41). Birdsong (2020) and brown (2017) offer us many possibility models (Cox, 2021) of how we might take up living and working for collective liberation within our movement family and chosen family/kin relationships. And yet I know and think they likely would agree that we have many more possibilities and paths to learn from and take up together.

Over the past 6 years, in becoming more awake to the ways that I and the people I am in relationship with are “practicing futures together, practicing justice together, living into new stories” (brown, 2017, p. 9), I began moving toward this project, one that engages in a deep noticing of the power of the “small” and not so small ways that Black, Brown, and anti-racist white queer and trans social justice workers in North Carolina are engaging in relational liberation praxis through queer kinship solidarity. For this project, I conducted 15 in-depth, conversational focus groups that engaged verbal and visual narrative/storytelling with 14 participants in 5 relational configurations consisting of three queer kin pairings and two queer



kin groups. The pages to come share what I witnessed at work and working in their everyday living for liberation with each other.

My analysis of the narratives, experiences, and real-time practices shared with me through this project are all informed by and in relationship with the understandings and analysis of the folks in this project who have lived and are living them. The conceptual and auto-ethnographic writing that I weave throughout this project also comes from my learning with participant kin pairs and groups as well as my other queer kin and community, past and present. Just as we never do this work alone, I never wrote this work alone. My hope is that in learning with folks in this project, those of us committed to living for social justice and collective liberation will be inspired, fortified, opened up, and moved in new ways; invited to explore the (queer) possibilities for living for liberation with others present before us in all of our relationships and in all the spaces that we move in with/in and through them. Because of the folks in this project, what we are living with each other and others, I, now more than ever, believe that while we might not see much of what collective liberation can be in our lifetimes, there is also much of it here for us if we keep staying in the trying with each other.

### **Rationale**

In her Ted Talk titled “In What Ways Does Privilege Determine How ‘Lucky’ We Are?” longtime community activist and diversity and inclusion specialist Amy Hunter (2019) discusses the significance of the cognitive dissonance at play in mainstream culture. She talks about the ways in which we, and by we, she means those of us with more privilege and access, because of class, race, or citizenship status, for example, have been socialized to sometimes justify inhumane treatment, to rationalize unfair systems. This typically involves blaming people for their “misfortunes,” reducing system-level oppression to individual “bad choices” in a way that both allows us to remain happy about our (privileged) situation (and feel entitled to it) and keeps us from looking at the structural nuances that have allowed these differences in “circumstance”

to occur. According to Hunter (2019), this cognitive dissonance permeates in individualistic cultures, like that of the United States, in ways it would not in more collectivist cultures.

Luci n Demaris and Cedar Landsman of Relational Uprising, an organization devoted to teaching a radical relational perspective on change work, also talk about how the culture of individualism keeps us from wanting to be in solidarity with one another. Demaris and Landsman argue that in a culture of individualism, we tend to judge and isolate people, especially if we don't understand what's happening to them. According to Demaris, in a culture of individualism and competition, we rely heavily on suspicion, we lead with suspicion, and our culture uses suspicion as a weapon of oppression (Werning, 2018). This calls to mind Oliviero's (2016) work on the racialized and gendered politics of protection in "stand your ground laws," where she uses the case of Trayvon Martin to reveal what she calls the unevenness of vulnerability or "how vulnerability is mapped onto some spaces and bodies and dismissed in others" (p. 2). Consider who—and what bodies—get automatically suspected and who and what bodies are trusted and protected, usually at the expense of "other" bodies.

Hunter argues that the solution to this cognitive dissonance—the first step to addressing structural inequity and oppression, is fictive kinship. She states, "if we were close, if we really cared for one another as kin, we would fight for each other, and we would fight to dismantle the systems that keep people oppressed" (Raz, 2019, 5:24). For Demaris and Landsman, working against the use of suspicion as a weapon of oppression also involves considering how we foster our relational connections. They assert that this involves digging deep into being relational and interpersonal with others, coming to a place where you fully, mutually take each other in, each other's concerns, perspectives, and gifts; working together to cohere a "collective story of us" (Werning, 2018, 9:40).

Like Hunter (2019) and Demaris, I believe that relational work is critical to co-creating a different, more socially just world for all. To quote Delpit (2006), "The answers, I believe, lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and

how we are connected to and disconnected from one another” (p. xxv). *And* of utmost importance is *the how* of how we come to these understandings and *the how* we do something about/with them to create and live with/in relational connection and/or kinships for a more socially just world. Without critically engaging our understandings and practices of being and moving with/in relations with others, we may unconsciously take up relations of solidarity that, at best, limit the kinds of liberatory worlds we can co-create with one another and, at worst, reify the very unjust and violent relational dynamics and structures we seek to disrupt and dismantle.

### **Kinship as Construct, Contract, and Collection**

Naming created or chosen kinship as fictive in and of itself reifies biological, legal, or given relations/family/kinship networks as real and chosen or created relations/family/kinship networks as pretend, as fictional or fake. All forms of relations are constructed, and before they are constructed, they are imagined. But to distinguish certain forms of kinship as “real”—and other forms of kinship as “fictive” (Weston, 1995, p. 88)—makes invisible the ways in which all kinship is fictive in that all relationships and relational configurations are constructed. Certain forms of kinship are only thought of as more real because of the ways in which they, as a social structure, are validated and supported by other social structures. And these forms of kinship are only validated and supported by other social structures because they serve as a vehicle through which the systems of oppression behind them are reified and reproduced.

TallBear’s (2018b) works on settler sex and the family speak to this. In discussing critical polyamory in a podcast, she refers to what Morgenson (2011) termed settler sexuality as the way that the state, science, and academic disciplines and religion in the nation states of the United States and Canada—have sort of promoted sexuality, marriage, and private property, all these as a bundle and central to the development of the nation state. (3:13)

She argues that “growing the white population through biologically reproductive heterosexual marriage—in addition to encouraging immigration from some places and not others” and

“reducing the numbers of Indigenous peoples and freeing up their land for settlement through elimination in the form of forced conversions to whiteness” were crucial to these nation-building projects (TallBear, 2018a, pp. 145–147). This involved, in part, the church and the state evangelizing monogamous heterosexual<sup>1</sup> marriage and the nuclear family, lording them over Indigenous people “as an aspirational model” (TallBear, 2018a, p. 147). Assimilating Indigenous people into this model allowed for collectively held Indigenous land to be broken up and divided into “privately held allotments controlled by men as heads-of-household,” with the surplus being transferred to the state and mostly European or Euro-American settlers (TallBear, 2018a, pp. 147–148). Therefore, the institutions of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family were constructed in such a way to help solidify “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2010, p. 15) through “building a nation upon Indigenous genocide” and marking “other marginalized relations as deviant” (TallBear, 2018a, p. 152).

The history TallBear illuminates makes clear how relational configurations, particularly those of family and community in our society, become about loyalty to and reproduction of the dominant group’s norms, securing their position of power in the social world. Relations between people and between people and the land under this model are uneven, exploitative, transactional ones where people compete to acquire and secure the “best” possessions in order to pass them down loyal, productive, and good “familial” citizen lines, if they can, to secure a good place for them and theirs in society.

Furthermore, if we follow TallBear’s (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) linking of citizenship (of Euro-settler men) to marriage (to women) and property rights (owning unceded Indigenous land as private property bought by them from the state), then citizenship and relations among citizens or the act of *relating to*, is often in reference to these relations, occurring

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<sup>1</sup> TallBear (2018a) explains that homosexual gets defined by the state and its health authorities and psychologists ahead of heterosexual as a way to discourage and pathologize relations that would not lead to the white population growing in certain ways. This was one of the ways that they created settler sexuality, through the construction of sexual norms that were bound up with the state and private property in ways that supported nation building.

between/among members of the dominant group. In all other relations, relationships between citizens and non-citizens, relationships are framed as a thing to be had, used, moved, or disposed of (a wife, land, non-citizens). Through this model of relationships as things to be had, citizens acquire and maintain their status and the status of their citizen descendants by using or taking from (an)other (TallBear, 2019a). These ways of relating to and having relations ensure that an individual and their citizen successors will be marked as “good” and “productive” and thus will be “successful” and “prosperous” because they adhere to a narrow set of ideas and norms put forth by the dominant power structure. Engaging in and repeating these neoliberal logics, ways of relating “that are most abundant among those in power” (Braithwaite, 2017, p. 438), results in a reproduction of the dominant power structure, keeping it in place.

In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2000) discusses how children legally are the property of their parents. And this notion of ownership is not limited to children’s legal status. If we think about our language, if we think about policies and practices in our schools, our workplaces, etc., we understand that families are not only defined in limited terms but framed as who belongs to whom. Think of which people you can, if you can, ask off of work to mourn, to care for, etc. It is people who we are biologically related to, people who we have legally adopted or have legally adopted us, people who we are in the custody of or have custody of, and people who we are married to; these are the people who are considered, by most institutions, our family. Family becomes about claiming who are “your own,” identifying who belongs to you and to whom you belong.

Some folks might argue that the mainstream, national notions, and practices of “good family” have come a long way from these horrific and oppressive histories and ideologies. But I echo Birdsong’s (2020) argument that while “little room” has been made to include “same-sex partners who conform to a heteronormative standard, Black people who can live up to a white standard of respectability, and women who do paid labor in addition to the unpaid labor they already shoulder,” the American Dream model of the “good family” continues to be “an insular,

nuclear family comprising a legally married man and woman raising biological children” (p. 3). At the very least the standard of the good family touted in our society is one that is “is self-sufficient—and as such, functions as an independent unit” or, as Birdsong (2020) adeptly argues, “toxic individualism, but in the family form” (p. 3). We’ve only come further in the sense that there is now a concerted cultural effort to include (assimilate) more and more groups and communities into the dominant cultures’ possessive and oppressive familial narratives and scripts.

As Ahmed (2015) reminds us, “these narratives or scripts, of course, do not exist ‘out there’ to legislate the political actions of states. They also shape bodies and lives ...” (p. 145). She argues that “norms surface as the surfaces of bodies; norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are ‘impressed upon’ by the world” (p. 145). According to Ahmed (2015), “regulative norms function” through what she terms “repetitive strain injuries (RSIs)” (p. 145). She explains that

... through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action in so far as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action. (p. 145)

Therefore, this framework of relations as having or belonging extends beyond both the realm of law and institutional policies and practices *and* our everyday understandings and practices of family. As a teacher, I actively try not to call the students who are in the classes I teach “my” students, and yet, even as a liberatory queer feminist pedagogue, I still struggle with this. It is easy to invoke people and relations as things we “have” or things that belong to us; for example, we often say that people are ours: “my comrade,” “my teacher,” or we say things like: “I have a (friend, classmate, colleague) who ...”

And so, if we understand expanding kinship and relationships to co-create and live in different worlds merely as an act that only involves being more inclusive of *the who* involved and not an act of disrupting both *the who* and *the how* of how we engage in the world relationally, we

will likely remain oriented toward being in the world with others in the same direction. In other words, configurations of “fictive kinship” or relational connections that repeat and replicate mainstream ways of relating as having or possessing others will likely, unconsciously, and therefore unintentionally, reify the current social world and power structures we seek to disrupt and destroy.

### **Relationality Beyond Having and Belonging**

TallBear (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) encourages us to think with complexity and to focus on webs of relation and being in relation rather than the kinds of static categories that we usually invoke. She emphasizes that those categories are usually about “having” (a partner, a friend, a lover, a parent, a brother, etc.) or “belonging to” each other in fragmented, individualistic, static ways instead of being with or with/in relations in more dynamic interdependent ways. Similarly, Bettez (2011b) offers a conceptualization of relational connectedness that is “interconnected, porously bordered, shifting” in her definition of critical communities, communities that “through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critical thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege” (p. 10). In her discussion of other definitions of community, she, like TallBear (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b), also encourages us to think differently about community and belonging. Bettez (2011b) states that the concept of belonging within the context of community is not unpacked enough and that within many definitions of belonging are notions of ownership, citing part of Block’s (2008) definition of belonging “(2) to be an owner” (p. 9). For Bettez (2011b), if community is truly “about being a part of something bigger than yourself” (p. 9), it should not include this “individualistic concept of belonging” (p. 15).

So how might<sup>2</sup> we take up the making of “fictive” kinship, chosen family, and solidarity relations in ways that don’t replicate these notions of being “productive citizens,” in ways that don’t frame relations as possessions to be acquired and structures that bring individual comfort? How might we co-create families, friendships, and communities that don’t position belonging as owning and perpetuate sameness and assimilation to the norms of the dominant culture?

### **Research Questions**

These questions above, alongside my desire to learn more about the “future facing” (Birdsong, 2020, p. 13) liberatory praxis in which LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina are engaging through queer kinship solidarity led me to form the following research questions which guided this project:

1. How are LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South engaging with doing/living queer kinship solidarity relationships?
2. What might queer kinship solidarity relationships entail that is particularly unique due to the queerness of them?
3. How do queer kinship solidarity relationships inform, sustain, and expand the social justice work done by those in kinship with/in and through the relation as well as “outside” of it?

### **Project Overview**

This project explores queer kinship solidarity relationships among LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina. I use the term social justice worker to include people who take up social justice work in ways including, but not limited to, organizing (through organizations, both nonprofit and grassroots), teaching and education (in higher education, K-12, or community spaces), creating and sharing political art (visual art, music, etc.), and providing counseling,

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<sup>2</sup> I use might instead of do because post-qual inquiry is interested in things in the making not things already made (St. Pierre, 2018). Such inquiry looks “for the conditions under which something new, as yet unthought, arises” (Rajchman, 2000, as cited in St. Pierre, 2018, p. 17).



caretaking, healing, and support for frontline movement organizers, activists, and members of marginalized communities.

Eight of the 14 participants were people I consider to be queer kin/community to me. I have come to be in relationships with these potential participants through queer community as well as local and statewide grassroots social justice movement organizing that I've been a part of in North Carolina since 2013. As I will discuss more in the methodology chapter, in terms of recruitment, I utilized "friendship" or, in this case, queer kinship pyramiding, reaching out to individuals who I consider to be queer chosen family/kin to me and inviting them to participate with folks whom they considered queer chosen family/kin to them. The only exception to this was the one non-romantic queer family pairing, Trae and Mani, who I invited together, having witnessed their particular relationship as a friend. The participants consisted of three pairings (two romantic and one platonic), and two groups: one was a group of four that dropped down to a group of three,<sup>3</sup> and the other was a group of five. Therefore, as intended, the total number of participants in the project did not exceed 15, which allowed for intimate and in-depth inquiry work.

This project engaged a variety of methods, including an open-ended background information sheet completed by each participant, an optional collage which was completed in a variety of ways that I will discuss in more depth later, a photo consent form if photos with people's faces were included, and three semi-structured focus groups with each queer chosen family/kinship group or pairing. With regard to data analysis, transformation, and representation, I employed a post-qualitative Critical Analytical Practices (CAP) ethnographic approach. I will

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<sup>3</sup> The participant that left the project in part left because of changes in their relationships to the queer kin they were participating with. After completing focus groups, when I reached out to them as part of the member checking process they stated that, "so many things have changed in the world and in me since the project started, causing me to relate to myself, the people in the project, and academic research in a very different way." They expressed that because of these changes they no longer wanted to be included as a participant in the project.

expand on both the data collection methods and my approach to data analysis, transformation, and representation in the methodology chapter.

As indicated in the research questions above, this project explores how Black, Brown, and white anti-racist LGBTQ+ social justice workers are living for more liberatory world(s) with/in and through queer kinship solidarity relationships. With the methodologies used, this project also served as a space for bringing to life more possibilities with regard to queer kinship solidarity relationships and the social justice education and enactments that can happen with/in and through them among existing relational configurations and, hopefully, in the relational configurations had by participants beyond the scope of the project. Many of the focus group participants expressed seeing the project as something that was important to them, the organizations they are a part of, and the communities they serve as much as it is for me, my dissertation, and my work. I am excited to see what they do with the data we gathered and where we, interdependently, go from here with what we learned/taught and continue to learn/teach with each other.

### **Participant and Topic Selection**

In the shadow of structural abandonment, political alienation, family rejection, chronic illness, state violence, and medical neglect, queer friendship saves us. (Bassichis, 2019, p. XVI)

I focus this project on LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina and on what I term queer kinship solidarity for several reasons. For one, I believe that not enough work is being done to highlight the ways in which LGBTQ+ people, particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous queer and trans people, have and continue to be at the forefront of working for social justice in the South. It is vital to recognize what queer and trans people across the South do to fight for justice for all and to honor the ways in which many of us have been organizing and fighting for social justice with a lived analysis of interlocking, or as Lugones (2003) refers to them, intermeshed (p. 8), systems of oppression (racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism able-

bodyism, ageism, etc. to name a few) working in “cross-cutting and complementary ways” (Arquero et al., 2013, p. 23). While I am sure powerful chosen families and fictive kinship solidarity groups and networks that are prefigurative exist among cisgender and straight social justice workers, I chose to focus this project on queer chosen family relationships among LGBTQ+ social justice workers because I am interested in understanding the ways in which social justice education and action are queered in queer kinship solidarity work. Through my own lived experience of being a part of and witnessing the complex queer kindred network that exists among LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South, I know these relationships, even in breakdowns and fallouts, to be transformative.

Additionally, I embraced a queering of what chosen family/kin groups in research “should” consist of and was intentionally open with regard to the kinds of relational configurations that were included in this project. Queer kin configurations in this project included two sets of romantic partners (one married couple, the other a partnership that has since dissolved), a platonic pair (though, as is often the case in queer friendships, feelings were not always platonic), a group of four that dropped down to three (which included a partnership and two, then one friend), a group of five folks who would likely be seen as friends and movement comrades to each other despite having been (and potentially being again) many things to each other. I believe including this variety of relational configurations and including folks who have been many things to each other brings a queerness to the literature on ally, solidarity, and coalition relationships and even LGBTQ+ chosen family/kinship that is not as present. I discuss this in more depth in the literature review. This inclusivity in the relational configurations included in the project and the ways in which participants and I use the words friendship, chosen family, kinship, etc. interchangeably speaks to how, in queer kinship solidarity relationships, we are embracing fluidity and change in how we show up and who we show up as or with in our everyday relational liberation praxis. I believe that those taking up social justice education and action work with others in a variety of settings could learn a great deal from

looking at the complex ways the folks in this project are teaching and learning with each other and creating the more liberatory world(s) they want to live in with/in and through everyday queer kinship solidarity.

### **Queer Orientations and Queer Relations**

While much has changed in the realm of the acceptance (and assimilation) of LGBTQ+ people into the mainstream culture of the United States, even in the past 14 years since I first publicly came out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, LGBTQ+ folks, particularly those living in more religiously and politically conservative areas, can find themselves distanced, ostracized or rejected from their families of origin and/or by the communities in which they are a part of (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; James et al., 2016; Kahn et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2013; Ryan et al., 2009). As Ahmed (2006) puts it, “These differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others (because of the directions we take), can ‘move’ us and hence affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others” (p. 101). According to Ahmed (2006), this directing of desire in ways that form relationships and family that are not “in line” with the existing order, this “different way of extending the body in the world through reorientating one’s relation to others” (p. 103) brings near others and relationships that “would not be allowed ‘near’ by straight ways of orienting the body” (p. 92). Failing to orient toward the ideal and failing to “reproduce” in the ways they are supposed to, the queer body, Ahmed (2006) argues, poses “a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (p. 91).

Even in the absence of directly experiencing relational and communal ostracization or distance, there still are LGBTQ+ people who open up to what Ahmed (2006) calls “a queer moment of deviation” (p. 179) and take up the (dis)orientation of “not following” the conventional scripts of being in relation with others, in marriage, family (pp. 177–178), friendship, community, etc. These LGBTQ+ people find themselves being moved to and moving towards the “possibility for another way of dwelling in the world” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 178) with others and take up the difficult and exciting task of living and loving differently from the scripts and paths available to us

(Ahmed, 2015, p. 155). This possibility within the LGBTQ+ experience of pursuing desires and relationships that are “out of line” with the normative, dominant culture informs my choice of participants and topic. I believe embodying this (dis)orientation, choosing deviation, and the kinds of relationalities it can lead to can offer up a liberatory framework for choosing-creating relationships and networks that take us to different worlds. It is thus this element of the directionality of queer desire and (dis)orientation that can make queer kinship solidarity relationships and networks particularly radical forms of prefigurative solidarity social justice work.

Like Ahmed (2006), I understand that just because queer orientations “can ‘get out of line’” doesn’t mean all queer bodies (or trans/nonbinary bodies) do. Inhabiting a queer positionality and orientation can bring bodies not normally in reach within reach, but this doesn’t mean that folks will extend their reach in that disoriented direction. There is homonormativity where nonstraight and noncisgender people take up relationships, family styles, and relationships to land and private property that support the state (Halberstam, 2003 as cited in Ahmed, 2006; Morgenson, 2011 as cited TallBear, 2018b).

Eng (2010) in his work *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, discusses this a bit more through an in-depth exploration of what he terms queer liberalism, “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (p. 3). Eng (2010) argues that prior historical efforts by queers to “defy state oppression and provide a radical critique of family and kinship have given way to a desire for state legitimacy and for the recognition of same-sex marriage, adoption, custody, inheritance, and service in the military” (p. 4). Through a detailed analysis of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* and its historical context and global situatedness, Eng (2010) reveals the ways in which “repressed legacies of race and property” and contemporary manifestations of “neoliberalism and globalization,” “issues of empire and sovereignty” along

with “problems of immigration, citizenship, welfare, the prison industrial complex, and human rights” “underwrite the contemporary emergence of queer liberalism’s claims on family and marriage, and on intimacy and domesticity” (p. 34). He argues that scholars in queer studies must “recognize how queer liberalism secures its legal, social, and moral claims through the simultaneous dismantling of affirmative action and the configuration of normative gay and lesbian U.S. citizen subjects as a new model minority on the global stage” (Eng, 2010, p. 49). For this reason, he contends that scholars in queer studies should take up work that tracks “the folding in of those individuals once sexually stigmatized into the mandates of U.S. empire” (Eng, 2010, p. 49).

I am not arguing that all LGBTQ+ folks inherently embrace queer orientations and build “out of line” queer relationships and lives. I recognize that many fall in line with the ways Eng (2010) describes. However, as Birdsong (2020) reminds us, there is also “a long history of queer folks staying open to the infinite ways that love, romance, family, and friendship can manifest while straight people adhered to a handful of options” (p. 22). The queer people and relationships in this project employ an understanding of homonormativity and queer liberalism and do what they can to resist it. They understand and operationalize queer as being against the state (Wiley as cited in TallBear, 2018a), “anti-normative” (Dean & Lane, 2001 as cited in Ahmed, 2015, p. 149), and/or “inhabiting norms differently” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 155). To quote Trae, a participant:

... queerness for me is not so much sexual behavior ... it’s more about my political beliefs and who is family for me. My queerness includes family people that are gender non-conforming, that are immigrants, that are Muslim, that come from two-family homes, it’s like all these very dear disparate, overlapping spheres that make up queerness

What Trae shares here illuminates the ways in which queerness, for many of us, including participants in this project, is not about identity or sexual orientation but about living a particular orientation to others and the social world, in alignment with what Ahmed (2015; 2006)

describes. Queer is about living a politic in the world with other marginalized others in a way that creates new, more collectively liberatory possibilities for all.

I agree with Eng (2010) that homosexuality, and potentially even some forms of queerness, “once considered anathema to family and kinship,” are now “legally and ideologically reconciled to its normative mandates” (p. 28). But I cringe at how quick he is to say that this has led to a “paving over” of “alternative public worlds and social formations that previous generations of gays and lesbians have made” (Eng, 2010, p. 28). I worry that if we only take up the work of looking at and deconstructing these manifestations, we will miss out on seeing how some of the alternative public worlds and social formations we thought were paved over, like tree roots breaking sidewalks, continue to come through, and others are out there taking root in what we thought was uninhabitable ground in ways we didn’t know were possible. And so, I follow in the footsteps of brown (2017), moving away from “our beautiful deconstruction” and toward people who are teaching/learning with me “to reconstruct” (p. 59).

No, I am neither trying to “idealize queer worlds” in the sense of flipping hierarchical pyramids on their heads nor am I trying to “simply locate them in an alternative space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 106) outside of the systems and structures of oppression we find ourselves in and having to navigate. However, I am, offering up the messy, in process, living wisdom I’ve been blessed to witness from a few of the queer kinship solidarity relationship configurations in my universe. And I see this project as unapologetic labor of romantic love. Romantic in the sense of being “marked by the imaginative or emotional appeal of what is heroic, adventurous, remote, mysterious ...” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). Love in the sense that hooks (2000) talks about—an action, one that involves, as she evokes through quoting Peck (1978), “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (p. 10), only I would change *or to and*.

Just as I do not believe that turning toward reconstruction makes this project less rigorous or critical, I do not believe that being romantic or being in love with/in this project makes it without rigor or criticality. To quote brown (2017):

When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts. (p. 9)

“Love,” brown (2017) continues, “leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion” (p. 9).

This project is a living love letter to the Black, Brown, and white anti-racist Southern queer and trans LGBTQ+ social justice kin network that I call my family and community. It is an embodiment of my romance, my lifelong love affair with queer kinship solidarity. I know that it is because of the romantic love that I have for and within these relationships and what they make possible that I will continue to observe them, learn from them, and engage them deeply in this project and beyond. And since love begets love, it is my love offering to you who read it.

### **Solidarity Relationships**

Solidarity goes side by side with a critical mind. I cannot imagine the world getting any better if we don't adopt the feeling and immediately become a great mass of solidarity, if we don't struggle for solidarity. (Freire et al., 2014, p. 43)

We have chosen each other  
and the edge of each other's battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose someday women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win



there is no telling

we seek beyond history

for a new and more possible meeting (Lorde, 2007, p. 123)

I understand solidarity relationships as relationships across lines of power difference (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, ability, religion, etc.) wherein those involved work collectively for a more liberatory world, taking up “the struggle of trying to escape various forms of oppression” (Freire et al., 2014, p. 77). Within solidarity relationships, those with more power in relation to the systems of oppression, where one is not directly targeted and negatively impacted by such forms of oppression, work alongside those who have less institutional power because they are direct targets. Additionally, what is under-discussed and overlooked are the ways in which we are often working in solidarity with people with whom we share multiple social locations or positionalities but have some points of difference (age, educational status, job title/position) that, in particular circumstances, make a significant difference in our experience of systems of privilege and oppression. A solidarity relationship, as I define it here, refers to a relationship where those within it are committed to choosing, as Lorde (2007) states, “the edges of each other’s battles” (p.123). For me, this means that among the folks *with*<sup>4</sup> in the relationship, there is not merely a shared understanding of power as systemic and structural (A. G. Johnson, 2014), but also a taking up of social justice work together in order to disrupt those power inequities and work for a more just world for all.

I believe these solidarity relationships, particularly those that take the shape of chosen family relationships or kin relations, bring us closer to creating the world(s) we want to live in because it is with/in and through these relationships that we can co-create more liberatory ways

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this project I use *with* in the Freirean sense to emphasize relationship with rather than to or having relationship, which I will discuss at length later. Being in relationship with, whether it is learning/teaching through co-participation (Freire, 2001, p. 42) or being with another in solidarity, is not about being for or “helping”, but instead about being alongside (Freire, 2000, p. 49) and engaging relationally in co-liberation. The use of with/in is to try and get at the relational dynamic by which we experience ourselves with another person while also being in something more than ourselves which is the relationship and experience change and transformation where those things are happening simultaneously, something that is both and beyond inter and intra.

of being in the world with others in the here and now. Taking time to learn more deeply from and with each other about these relationships and the learning and teaching and living world(s) made possible with/in and through them can offer us more insight into how we can deepen, expand, nourish, and grow relational social justice education and action for collective liberation.

### **Queer Kinship Solidarity**

We have been taught so forcefully, especially in the deeply conservative time that we live in, that we must look out for only ourselves and indeed conserve our resources. That our resources are what others have deemed valuable- money, time, material things. But the faggots have other ideas. They say that ‘the more you share, the less you need.’ They make a way out of no way and build a life together in fugivity. (Tourmaline, 2019, p. ix)

Queer kinship solidarity then refers to the *queer* (as defined earlier) forging, building, and sustaining of solidarity relationships (as defined above) within a chosen family or kinship group and/or network as a part of living and working for social justice work in the pursuit of collective liberation. What differentiates queer kinship solidarity relationships from other forms of LGBTQ+ chosen family configurations and other forms of social justice kinship and/or solidarity relationships then is that they are driven by the queer orientations that Ahmed (2006) speaks of, orientations that “put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable” whether “by the lines of conventional genealogy” or by conventional society (pp. 106–107). Queer kinship solidarity, then, is about failure—failure to reproduce the reproduction and transmission of mainstream culture through how one lives one’s life in relation to others (Ahmed, 2015). In failing to reproduce the reproduction and transmission of mainstream culture through how we live and work for social justice in relation to others, those in queer kinship solidarity connect queerly (Ahmed, 2015) and hold space for uncommon relations, dissidence, and the discomfort of “inhabiting norms differently” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 155). It is this putting into reach and reaching for bodies (and relations) made unreachable by the current, unjust social structure that makes

queer kinship solidarity relationships prefigurative in the sense that through choosing and creating these off-limits, out-of-reach relations, those involved are engaged in “alternative forms of world-making” (pp. 106-107). The LGBTQ+ folks who this project focuses on take up relational configurations that embody this queerness.

### **Researcher Positionality: My Connection and Commitment to the Research Topic**

Queer friendship—that thing that is sometimes called mutual aid, solidarity, disability justice, care, organizing, abolition, or maybe just love—is what raised me ... (Bassichis, 2019, p. XVI)

Queer kinship solidarity shapes me and raises my consciousness as a white, working-class, able-bodied, mad, queer, genderqueer femme with higher educational privilege, U.S.-born citizenship, and access to generational wealth. I first began experiencing the transformative power of these kinds of relationships, the work taken up with/in and through them when I came into grassroots social justice organizing work and community for the first time in 2013 as a member of an anti-racist contingent to a queer Black and Brown led LGBTQ+ organization. While the organization that I was a part of no longer exists, the queer kinship solidarity relationships that began in that time and space continue today. Because of these queer kinships and those I have developed since I get to reclaim and birth all the parts of myself within all of my relations, I experience living and loving for collective liberation with/in relationships and community in ways I never have before.

Coming into consciousness, into social justice community and community work can be a powerful and meaningful experience, as has been recounted by many social justice workers (Malott et al., 2015; Rusch, 2010; Smith & Redington, 2010; Thompson & WWCR, 1997; Warren, 2010). And while relationships enduring beyond a moment, a class, an organization, a campaign, or action are not a unique experience, I do believe there is something special at work in queer kinship solidarity relations. I know queer kinship solidarity relationships, families, communities, and networks do something profound because they have and continue to change

me in ways I can't completely express. It is felt, it is lived, I am feeling it and living it now, and yet I often feel in writing about it that I am just barely scratching the surface of what I experience. Because I, as a queer person, experience this and witness it in the lives of other LGBTQ+ social justice workers, I was called to, through this project, explore queer kinship solidarity relationships more deeply, seeing what folks are doing with/in and through them and what they make possible for those in the relationships and beyond them.

### **Conclusion**

Liberation isn't only something folk are fighting for; it's something some folk are living for with/in and through their everyday relationships. This project focuses on just that, the everyday relational liberation work of Black, Brown, and white anti-racist LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina. Engaging verbal and visual narratives from pairings and groups collected through focus groups and creative methods, this project takes up an in-depth analysis of the distinct, varied, and expansive ways participant queer kin pairings and groups are, with/in and through their queer kin solidarity relationships, bringing into the here and now more liberatory and just worlds for all. Through examining what is at work and working with/in and through these relationships, this project aims to open up and offer new possibilities for living for liberation relationally in all of the spaces we are in.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

I see this inquiry project on queer kinship solidarity among LGBTQ+ social justice workers as located at the intersection of three bodies of research: kinship/fictive kinship research, specifically LGBTQ+ chosen family research; alliance, solidarity, and coalition building research; and lastly, critical friendship and critical community building research.

**Figure 1. Bodies of Literature**



The queer kinship solidarity relationships that I have personally and have witnessed exist at the intersections of these areas or types of relationships. They are creative kinship formations composed of various kinds of relationships and people that challenge notions of family and relationality. They have alliance, solidarity, and coalitional relationship qualities with relationships that straddle various points of privilege and marginalization and are social justice-oriented. And lastly, like critical friendship and critical community relationships, those within queer kinship solidarity relationships engage in critical questioning, dialogue, reflection, and problem-posing around issues of power, oppression, and privilege.

In the sections that follow, I briefly engage each body of literature, discussing patterns that I have noticed in the articles I've surveyed and highlighting studies most relevant to this

project. I will also identify the areas for growth and possibility present within the existing research that this project addresses and to which it contributes.

### **Kinship, Fictive Kinship, and LGBTQ+ Family Research**

Up until the 1980s, the majority of kinship research in anthropology was, unsurprisingly, euro-american-centric (Stone, 2001, p. 1). It was a critique put forth by Schneider (1980) that brought this issue to the fore. According to Schneider (1980), while there were variations in terms of “kinship terminology, systems of descent, and marriage” present in the literature, “all were presumed to be derived from universal human concerns with relationships founded upon biological reproduction” (as cited in Stone, 2001, p. 1). Stone (2001) argues that while anthropologists had, prior to this, “noted some slippage between real or presumed biological relationships and ‘kinlike’ relationships that did not correspond to biological ones” (p. 3), it is the legacy of Schneider (1980) and others that made it so “kinship studies are now more culturally contextualized” with a focus on “how local persons construct kinship and the meaning they attribute to these constructions” (p. 17). Kinship studies now include what has been termed fictive kinship or “those relationships that are not characterized by consanguinity” (Maddy, 2001, p. 286).

Research on fictive kinship in kinship studies spans many topics, from “cousinship” (Baumann 1995), to mentorship (Maddy, 2001), to fictive kinship networks among African Americans (Collins, 2000; Kane, 2000; Stewart, 2007), migrants/immigrants (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Kim, 2009; Lee, 2013; Li, 1977), to LGBTQ+ chosen and created families (Weston, 1997). Within and beyond kinship studies, there has been much research since the 1980s and 1990s on LGBTQ+ chosen and created families and queer kinship (Duran & Perez, 2019; Goodfellow, 2015; Greene, 2019; Hayden, 2004; K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Mitchell, 2008; Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Onishenko & Caragata, 2009; Ould & Whitlow, 2011; Shange, 2019; Soler et al., 2018; Stacey, 2004; Stacey, 2005; Weston, 1997; Wood, 2018). While there have been an increasing number of studies on LGBTQ+ families that focus on marriage (Onishenko

& Caragata, 2009; Ould & Whitlow, 2011), parenthood through formal and informal adoption and fostering (Goodfellow, 2015; Stacey, 2006; Wood, 2018), donor insemination, In vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, etc. (Epstein, 2018; Goodfellow, 2015; Hayden, 2004; Stacey, 2006), this project is most closely aligned with research on the creation of LGBTQ+ chosen families.

Of particular relevance to this project is Weston's (1997) groundbreaking ethnographic study of the ways in which gay men and lesbians were using the discourse of gay families in San Francisco from 1985 to 1986. Using "techniques of friendship pyramiding and snowball sampling," Weston (1997) recruited 80 participants, of whom 36% were people of color, 64% were white, 14% were Jewish, and over 50% came from working-class backgrounds, with an overlapping 58% employed in working-class occupations at the time of the interview (Weston, 1997, pp. 10). In addition to completing "long hours of participant-observation so central to anthropological fieldwork," Weston (1997) conducted in-depth interviews with participants (pp. 7-10). She also engaged in informal follow-up interviews that allowed her to interact with them as part of a group (Weston, 1997, pp. 7-10). As a result of the latter data collection method, the direct quotations woven throughout her work are drawn not only from interview data but also from "dinner table conversations, birthday parties, a night out at a bar, or asides during a ballgame" (Weston, 1997, p. 10). Weston (1997) found that, in terms of structure, while some chosen families incorporated "physiological contributions to procreation of gay men who donate sperm and lesbians who bear children" (p. 197), unlike "nuclear" biological families, most chosen families were not "intrinsically stratified by age or gender" (p. 196). Instead, most chosen families were "often comprised primarily of relationships with peers" and were "characterized by fluid boundaries, eclectic composition, and relatively little symbolic differentiation between erotic and nonerotic ties" (p. 206).

A conclusion Weston (1997) reached that is of particular interest to this project was her belief that "as constituted in the 1980s," chosen families had "some distinct advantages over both nuclear families and the unattainable ideal of a unified, harmonious gay community"

(Weston, 1997, p. 196). She stated that one of these advantages was that “face-to-face relations” everyday relations “gave families we choose a fighting chance to encompass conflict and dissent without denying the difference that crosscutting identities (of race, class, etc.) can make or the divisions that can come between people” (p. 196). According to Weston (1997), “many lesbians and gay men in the Bay Area cited a relationship’s ability to weather conflict as itself a sign of kinship” (p. 196). For this reason, she argues that “gay families have created a cultural space in which people can love but also fight, without expecting their chosen kin to walk away” (Weston, 1997, p. 207).

However, Weston (1997) also cautions against painting an idealized and/or reductionist portrait of gay families as inherently and intentionally committed to creating social change (p. 207). Chosen families are not a monolith; they “are not opposed to collectivism, nor are they inherently privatizing”; they neither “offer a substitute for political organizing” nor do they threaten “political action or collective initiatives” (Weston, 1997, p. 207). Weston (1997) asserts that while “families we choose offer novel possibilities for healing some of the rifts and wounds left over from a painful decade of learning to deal in difference,” such possibilities and healing are never guaranteed (p. 207). In fact, Weston (1997) found that even within the context of gay families, “many people have a tendency to create ties primarily with people who they perceive to be ‘like’ them, using one criterion or another to gauge similarity” (p. 207). So, while she argues that her findings reveal that there is radical potential present in the discourse of gay families and chosen families, Weston (1997) contends that this potential, because it is only potential, requires action “with great care and attention to cultural context” (Weston, 1997, p. 210) in order to be realized.

Similarly, in her ethnographic study on gay men in Los Angeles, Stacey (2005) found that the gay men were engaged in “redesigning kinship with creativity and verve, along with tribulations” (p. 1913). Stacey’s (2005) study included field research conducted in Los Angeles between January 1999 and February 2003 and “lengthy multisession family life history



interviews with fifty self-identified gay men born between 1955 and 1976 and with members of their designated kin, community, and affinity groups” (p. 1916). The gay men and families in Stacey’s (2005) study “encompass diverse racial, ethnic, national, geographic, religious, and social class backgrounds” (p. 1916). Her research sample included gay men in various relational configurations, including single gay men, open, and monogamous couples, and a committed trio (Stacey, 2005, p. 1916). Additionally, the men in her sample engaged in various residential practices, including residing or parenting “alone or with friends, lovers, former lovers, biological and adopted kin, and children of various origins” (Stacey, 2005, p. 1916).

Stacey (2005) found that the men in her study practiced “kaleidoscopic patterns of intimacy” (p. 1931). The families she encountered were much like those that Weston (1997) did, families where “natal and chosen kin” were blended and that included “former lovers, who traverse a striking range of demographic boundaries--race, nation, social class, education, age, gender sexual identity, marital status, religion” (Stacey, 2005, p. 1931). Like Weston (1997), Stacey (2005) also notes how gay families can be seen as similar to “traditional families,” stating that they held “a host of familial desires, behaviors, patterns, and conflicts by no means unfamiliar to mainstream heterosexual culture” (p. 1931) existed among her participants. In her concluding remarks, she asserts that both “the familiar and more exotic forms of intimacy forged by the gay fellow families” in her study “suggest the inadequacy of continuing to regard them, or any other genre of contemporary family, as alternative” (Stacey, 2005, p. 1931). She holds that “gay families of men display a level of creativity, reflexivity, and challenge far greater than do most families generally considered to be conventional” and contends that this is “precisely because they must self-consciously configure their intimate and kin relationships outside the conventions of the established family tent” (p. 1931).

Since Weston (1997), there have been studies on LGBTQ+ friendships and chosen families/kinship networks in areas including, but not limited to, Psychology (Mitchell, 2008), Sociology (Almack et al., 2010; Greene, 2019; Stacey, 2004), Women’s and Gender Studies

research (Stacey, 2005); Sexuality research and social policy (Soler et al., 2018; K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019) and Education (Duran & Perez, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo et al., 2017; Shange, 2019). Similar to Weston (1997) and Stacey (2005), other studies have found LGBTQ+ people applying the language and ethic of family to friends (Almack et al., 2010; Croghan et al., 2014; Heaphy, 2009; Nardi, 1999; Traies, 2015; Weeks et al., 2001; Weinstock, 2000) or conceptualizing and practicing family beyond the traditional and conventional (Almack et al., 2010; K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Soler et al., 2018). Some of these studies look at chosen families or friends as family among mid-life (de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Weinstock, 2000), older (Traies, 2015), aging (Heaphy et al., 2003, 2004; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011), and elderly LGBTQ folks (Almack et al., 2010; Croghan et al., 2014; Heaphy, 2009; Lucco, 1987). Other studies focus on LGBTQ folks of color (Moore, 2011), including street families (Greene, 2019), “houses” within ballroom communities (Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2014), and “gay families” (Levitt et al., 2015). And then, there are studies that focus on LGBTQ young adults (Soler et al., 2018) and LGBTQ+ folks navigating and living with HIV and AIDS (Horne et al., 2015; Kipke et al., 2013). There have also been studies that focus specifically on the fictive kinship or chosen family relationships between friends of different genders and sexual orientations (Muraco, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001).

Of these more contemporary studies, Levitt et al.’s (2015) study of gay families is most relevant to this project because of its focus on the ways in which gay families can work to combat intersecting forms of oppression such as “poverty, ill health, heterosexism, and transphobia” (p. 198), with family roles forming at “this intersection of marginalization across sexual orientation, gender, and race” (p. 194). Their study was also the only study on LGBTQ+ chosen families that I found situated in the South. However, this study was situated in the mid-south, specifically in the Memphis metropolitan area (Levitt et al., 2015). Levitt et al. (2015) assert that gay families “act as a culturally congruent support system in the face of

overwhelming and intersecting racial, sexual, and gender minority stressors to create a platform for familial roles in which gender identity is decoupled from biological sex” (p. 194). They argue that gay families in their study “formed organically to provide support and acceptance to African American GBT individuals” at the “intersection of marginalization across sexual orientation, gender, and race” (Levitt et al., 2015, p. 194).

Levitt et al. (2015) contrast the gay families in their study with ballroom families,<sup>5</sup> arguing that gay families, unlike ballroom families, “were shaped to respond to members’ needs with parents motivated to care for those in need within their community” (p. 195). These families, Levitt et al. (2015) contend, focused on “intimacy and support and focused on development across areas of social, vocational, and emotional life” rather than competing exceptionally well in performances (p. 195). According to Levitt et al. (2015), one of the most remarkable things about the families they studied was the ways in which members inhabited family norms differently, “developing family roles that are based upon gender and are independent of the biological sex of a family member” (p. 194) with gendered family roles “designated and adopted in response to both members’ internal sense of gender and performance and then elaborated in social roles” (p. 197).

This project differs from Levitt et al. (2015) in several ways. For one, this study includes two pairs and a group where family members are of different races and cultural backgrounds (the section that describes the participants based on their responses to a background information worksheet as well as the narratives in the data chapters illuminate the nuances of this). This study also looks beyond the ways in which queer families provide support to members and create a sense of belonging and acceptance to explore the ways queer families/kin groups and relationships serve as a place where folks challenge one another, their

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<sup>5</sup> Ballroom families refer to gay chosen families where “parents” coach their children to compete in dance and artistic performances at community-held balls (Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013).

perspectives and actions, engaging in constant learning and unlearning with each other. However, like Levitt et al.'s (2015) study, this project focuses on the ways in which LGBTQ+ families/kin groups and/or relationships exist and operate at the intersections of oppression and redefine families (and I would argue reimagine worlds) through new ways of being and being in relation.

### **Areas for Growth and Possibility in Kinship, Fictive Kinship, and LGBTQ+ Family Research**

In several of the studies on LGBTQ+ chosen families, there is an emphasis on how these families are created because of shared identity and experience in the context of social stigma, rejection, and related stressors (Blair & Pukall, 2015; de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Dewaele et al., 2011; Greene, 2019; K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Soler et al., 2018; Stacey, 2005; Traies, 2015; Weston, 1997). Additionally, while many studies highlight how there has been a shift away from participants describing chosen families as substitute, supplemental, or complementary, most still emphasize the idea that friends as family or chosen family function as additive, alternative families (de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Dewaele et al., 2011; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Weinstock, 2000), reifying the centrality of bio-legal families and the distinction between “real” families and “fictive” kinship groups and networks. Even when discussing how respondents included chosen family members in defining their own current families (K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Soler et al., 2018), there is still this emphasis on chosen family as a set of relationships complementing biological families (K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019). Few scholars took the perspective that the overlapping dimensions of family and friendship relationships (Almack et al., 2010; K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Nardi, 1999; Soler et al., 2018; Stacey, 2005; Weston, 1997) in the lives of LGBTQ+ people might indicate that those with/in these relationships were engaged in constructing a shifting and expanding notion of family and relational networks in their totality. Moreover, K. E. Hull and Ortyl (2019), among others (Dewaele et al., 2011; Traies, 2015), speculate that “as social acceptance

of LGBT people increases the need to find social supports to buttress against stigma and homophobia from biological relatives may decline” (p. 41), again supporting the idea that these families are alternatives or substitutes and only exist when the ‘real thing’ isn’t available.

There is also a tendency in the research to describe these families as operating like biological families only in a way that is morally better in terms of unconditional love, care, social support, and acceptance (Almack et al., 2010; de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Weinstock, 2000). Due to being more affirming regarding LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, scholars argue that these environments offer comfort, safety, and stability to people who have lost it because of family or community rejection (de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Dewaele et al., 2011; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco, 2006; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Weinstock, 2000). A great deal of attention is paid to how these families offer care in the forms of chosen-family members acting as trusted confidants, tending to each other’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being, sharing and providing resources, offering guidance and support, showing nurturance and care, etc. (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2011; Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Shange, 2019; Traies, 2015; Weinstock, 2000; Weston, 1997). Therefore, with few exceptions (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Soler et al., 2018; Weston, 1997), little attention is paid to the ways in which people are challenged to grow, encounter differences in social location, life experience, or perspective, and/or experience and navigate conflict with/in these family or relational configurations. Additionally, even when inclusive of diverse participants (K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Soler et al., 2018; Stacey, 2005; Weston, 1997) with regard to social locations and attentive to the presence and importance of conflict and dissent within chosen family relations (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015), most

studies did not take up a detailed examination of the being with and learning from difference within relations studied.

In focusing on the emergence of chosen families because of identity rejection, scholars also emphasize how chosen families affirm and contribute to individual LGBTQ+ identity formation and expression and serve as supportive environments for individual LGBTQ+ people in coping with stressors, making important decisions or receiving the care they need (Almack et al., 2010; de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015). Despite studying and discussing a relational phenomenon, two studies linked chosen families with notions of individual choice (K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019) and desire (Weinstock, 2000) rather than collective, interdependent relational formations. Only a few studies (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Shange, 2019) engage in a more relationally focused discussion of social position and attend to issues of relationality and identity formation and affirmation paying attention to multiple social locations with an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1991).

The overwhelming emphasis in the literature on individual identity development and expression, rather than group or relational understanding, development, and action, leaves much to be desired, considering that the topic being taken up is within a relational framework and context. In the existing literature, when relational dynamics, communal connection, and mutual care are discussed, there is an emphasis on togetherness, unity, sameness, and highlighting of shared identities, experiences, and understandings (de Vries & Megathlin, 2009; Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Weinstock, 2000). Furthermore, reflecting on the divisions present in the larger LGBTQ+ community and society, I found that many of the families included and discussed in the studies were overwhelmingly homogenous with regard to race and class (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Stacey, 2005; Traies,

2015; Weston, 1997). This gap in the literature means that there is much left to be learned about the complexities of the relational configurations, dynamics, and acts that take place with/in and through diverse chosen family relations.

Few scholars (Almack et al., 2010; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco, 2006; Stacey, 2005; Weinstock, 2000; Weston, 1997) touch on the ways in which these families open up the possibility for what families can do or discuss how these families challenge and disrupt normative ideas of family and kinship constructions and functions, bringing to life creative and transformative possibilities. And few scholars took up an exploration of how creating and sustaining chosen families can be a political act for LGBTQ+ people (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Weston, 1997). Largely absent in most of the studies were in-depth explorations of the everyday, practical ways in which the building and sustaining of these families are seen and experienced by participants as part of their collective working and living for a more just world. In my review of the literature, I was unable to find a single study that looked at the understandings and workings of chosen family or fictive kinship among LGBTQ+ social justice workers.

### **Alliance, Solidarity, and Coalition Research**

Research on individual and group relationships of alliance, political solidarity, and coalition are also relevant to this study. Studies of these relationships and their relationship to social justice action and social change at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels span disciplines and fields of study, including but not limited to Communication (Lawless, 2016), Education (Cerecer, 2010; Ng, 2012; Quijada, 2009), Social Welfare, Policy, and Practice (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017), Race and Ethnic Studies (González, 2016; Shah, 2008), Lesbian Studies (Hunt & Holmes, 2015), Native Studies (Wallace, 2011), Social Psychology (Becker et al., 2013; Bredewold et al., 2016; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Subasic et al., 2011),

Sociology (Mallett et al., 2008; Van Dyke & Amos, 2017), Urban Studies (Black et al., 2016), and Women's, Gender, and Feminist Studies (Luna, 2016; Tuominen, 2012).

### **Alliance and Ally Research**

The research I surveyed on alliance relationships and allies was most often concerned with how advantaged or dominantly positioned peoples who identify as allies actualize their commitment to oppressed or minoritized peoples and communities. These studies examine ally characteristics, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors (Case, 2012; Lawless, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Wallace, 2011), exploring how allies work to either disrupt or perpetuate the systems that advantage them. Several of the studies relied on surveys (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018) or experiments (Becker et al., 2013), while others used textual analysis of an organization's documents and materials (Russell & Bohan, 2016), interviews (Case, 2012), and observation (Case, 2012; Lawless, 2016; Quijada, 2009). With one exception, Hunt and Holmes (2015), all the alliance and ally studies that I reviewed were conducted by outside researchers and consisted of either a number of individual participants recruited through various methods (Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018) or members of organized groups (Case, 2012; Lawless, 2016; Quijada, 2009; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Wallace, 2011).

There were some slight differences among the alliance and allies group studies that I surveyed. Case (2012), for instance, studied a group for white allies to people of color, mostly women, that was functioning as a support, study, and accountability group for members in their anti-racism. Lawless's (2016) study was of middle-class mentors to poor folks within a national nonprofit organization "whose goal is to create learning communities that help build social and economic capacity" (p. 336). Russell and Bohan (2016) studied a church that had gone from condemning LGBT people to being supportive and used textual data analysis of meeting minutes, curricula, notes, reports, church bulletins, and other print materials, including print media coverage of the church, in addition to interview transcripts. The only exception to these



ally-focused group studies were Wallace (2011) and Quijada (2009). Wallace's (2011) work compares and contrasts the experiences of indigenous groups with various groups of non-indigenous allies in different settings, looking at which non-indigenous allies engaged in decolonizing practices and which engaged in ways that were "reproductive of colonial patterns, privileges and practices even in the terrain of solidarity" (p. 163). Quijada's (2009) study involved people of various positionalities who were in a group working together to be in alliance with one another, making it the study most similar to this project.

While most studies examining alliance and allies centered on advantaged-group positioned people who identify as allies (white allies to Black and Brown people, heterosexual-cisgender allies to LGBTQ+ folks, middle-class allies to poor folks), some studies took a different approach by looking at impact and experiences of alliance relationships and allies from the perspective of marginalized peoples. Becker et al.'s (2013) study of LGBTQ+ participants took up an examination of the impact of positive contact with majority group members on disadvantaged-group members with regard to collective action. Brown and Ostrove's (2013) study looked at allies from the perspective of people of color, asking people of color to identify the characteristics and behaviors of the people they considered to be allies in their lives. This was similar to Wallace's (2011) study, as I described earlier, that looked at non-indigenous ally behavior and its impact from the perspective of indigenous groups. Brown and Ostrove (2013) also included their participants' perceptions of how allies of color to their respective group compared to white allies, making it one of the two alliance studies I surveyed, the other being Quijada's (2009), that looked at alliances among people of color who belong to different racial groups. Brown and Ostrove's (2013) work also included a third study where they brought together data "from people of color about both an ally of color and a white ally" with data obtained "from both allies concerning their interactions with people of color in the study" which allowed them to compare perceptions and experiences across these people (p. 2217).

I noticed several themes across the studies. Studies mostly looked at peer-level allies (Becker et al., 2013; Brown & Ostrove, 2013) or “a peer with whom participants may have formed a friendship” (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). There were a few studies that considered multiple kinds of allies in addition to cross-group friendships; these studies talked about allies as mentors (Lawless, 2016), romantic partners (which were excluded from inclusion in Brown & Ostrove, 2013), parents, teachers, co-workers, employers, and strangers in everyday interactions (Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015). While one study, Becker et al. (2013), included an experiment with strangers, the majority of the studies that I reviewed engaged participants around existing relationships across difference (Becker et al., 2013; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Lawless, 2016; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Quijada, 2009; Wallace, 2011).

Across the studies, allies were conceptualized in the following ways: respectful, affirming, and connected (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Wallace, 2011), empathetic, understanding, and willing to disrupt the “varying levels of privilege and disadvantage as they are lived on a day-to-day basis” (Lawless, 2016, p. 346) embodied in their communication and interactions with marginalized peoples (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Quijada, 2009; Wallace, 2011), able to recognize and respect similarities and differences (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Quijada, 2009; Wallace, 2011), supportive of causes that impact the marginalized group (Becker et al., 2013; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Wallace, 2011), someone who delegitimizes or disagrees with inequality and rejects their superior status (Becker et al., 2013; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Wallace, 2011), and, most importantly, someone who takes informed (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Ostrove & Brown, 2018) and collective action (Mallett et al., 2008) on issues of social injustice faced by the marginalized group that they are not a part of (Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Wallace, 2011). What I

most appreciated about several of the alliance and ally studies that I reviewed was the emphasis on the educational, interpersonal learning, and teaching involved in cultivating and sustaining alliance relationships. The studies in which participants and researchers spoke to this most were Case (2012), Hunt and Holmes (2015), Quijada (2009), and Wallace (2011).

Lastly, while several studies might have accounted for the multiple positionalities of participants in the gathering demographic data (Becker et al., 2013; Lawless, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018), many of the studies I surveyed focused on only one identity or social location such as race, ethnicity, or indigeneity (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018; Wallace, 2011), sexual orientation (Becker et al., 2013; Mallett et al., 2008; Russell & Bohan, 2016) and class (Lawless, 2016). I only found a few exceptions to these patterns. One was Quijada's (2009) ethnographic study of an ethnically diverse group of youth involved in Youth Dismantling Oppression (YDO), a social justice nonprofit organization. Another was Case (2012), whose study and the participants in it applied an intersectional analysis to their discussion of white anti-racism, discussing how gender, sexuality, and social position (e.g., job), shape their experiences of white privilege and inform the anti-racist actions they take up. And yet another was Hunt and Holmes's (2015) duo-ethnographic study on the everyday decolonization they take up as indigenous and non-indigenous queer people within and beyond their friendship, in various relationships and contexts.

In looking at a multiplicity of social locations/identities and thus taking up a more complex exploration of building alliance relationships across differences, these studies most relate to this project. Quijada (2009) captures the complex ways in which the youth in his study talk, listen, and learn with each other in 'difference' in order to have "connected conflict" (Collier, 2003 as cited in Quijada, 2009, p. 464), find unity, and promote social justice around collective concerns. Hunt and Holmes (2015) dig deep into the multiplicity of social locations, the dynamism of relationships, the importance of context, and what this all means for everyday decolonization work. It is because of their attention to multiplicity and complexity with regard to

social positions, relationality, and social justice work that these two studies are most relevant to this project. Additionally, while they do not employ narrative methodology, though Quijada (2009) does use discourse analysis, these studies include more narrative-like data from lived (Hunt & Holmes, 2015) and studied (Quijada, 2009) conversations and experiences. By sharing the stories, dialogue, and more evocative scene-like descriptions of experiences, these studies are more in alignment with this project than the other studies on alliance relationships and allies.

### ***Areas for Growth and Possibility in Alliance and Ally Research***

While some studies in this area discussed issues of trust and reciprocity within relationships across power difference (Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Lawless, 2016; Ostrove & Brown, 2018), few (Quijada, 2009; Hunt & Holmes, 2015) examined interactions from participants' lived experiences within existing alliance relationships in enough detail to capture the complexities of the efforts at mutuality made and the challenges and conflicts experienced. Furthermore, few studies on allies and alliance relationships (Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Lawless, 2016; Quijada, 2009) directly engaged the alliance relationship within the research project. As mentioned earlier, many studies centered on the perceptions and experiences of large groups of individual participants (Becker et al., 2013; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018). Also, while Case's (2012) study was of participants who were members of a group and thus in relationship with each other, they were all anti-racist/ally identified; thus, the study was not engaging the perspectives of those with whom they were in alliance relationships. The focus on individual participants and the use of individual survey (Becker et al., 2013, Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018) and interview (Russell & Bohan, 2016) methods and controlled experiments (Becker et al., 2013) left much to be desired. By engaging existing relationships through focus groups and observations, this project contributes rich insights into the complex and nuanced dynamics at work in alliance relationships from more vantage points which are at present largely absent from the existing literature.

Lastly, studies in this area were usually only focused on one point of social identification or location and framed ally relationships in binary terms. The majority of studies I surveyed focused on alliance relationships between white people and People of Color (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Mallett et al., 2008; Ostrove & Brown, 2018), middle-class people and poor people (Lawless, 2016), LGBTQ+ people and straight people (Becker et al., 2013; Russell & Bohan, 2016), and indigenous and non-indigenous people (Wallace, 2011). With few exceptions (Case, 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Quijada, 2009), ally and alliance studies overwhelmingly neither engaged multiple positionalities and the complexities that exist within groups nor did they apply an intersectional analysis. I believe that by employing an intersectional analysis and being attentive to the multiple positionalities of participants, both of dominance and of marginalization, this project has much to contribute to the literature.

### **Solidarity Research**

The studies I reviewed on political solidarity relationships also involved studying relationships across race (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) and class (Ng, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011), and the social justice efforts that were or were not actualized within and through those relationships. However, while two studies I reviewed in this area placed most of the focus on one point of identity and the traditional dominant and marginalized positionalities within that point in the way that some alliance or ally studies did (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011), the others were more likely to take into consideration multiple positionalities as well as differences within groups (Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012). More of the solidarity studies that I reviewed looked more at relationships among people across marginalized groups (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) than did the alliance and ally studies.

Solidarity relationships were described and conceptualized by researchers and participants in ways that were similar to the conceptualizations of alliance relationships. For instance, there was an emphasis on the ability to recognize and respect similarities and differences in cultures, histories, and lived experiences of systems of privilege and oppression

(Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) and a willingness to take collective action (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011). Like the ally and alliance studies I reviewed, solidarity studies used various methods, including surveys (Bredewold et al., 2016), experiments (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011), textual analysis (Luna, 2016), observation (Luna, 2016), interviews (Luna, 2016), circle dialogue (focus group) (Ng, 2012), and arts-based engagement (Ng, 2012). Solidarity studies also fluctuated between having large groups of individual participants—undergraduate students—not in existing relationships with each other (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011) and others that were focused on people working together in social justice organizations (Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012).

The studies from this area that most resonate with this project are Luna's (2016) study of cross-racial work among Women of Color within SisterSong Women of Color Health Collective and Ng's (2012) study on the building of relational solidarity between Aboriginal and workers of color in and through labor education. These studies not only employ methods similar to those in this project (observation, interviews, and arts-based methods), but they also, similar to Hunt and Holmes (2015), Quijada (2009), and Wallace (2011), look at the pedagogical elements of relationships across difference and the social justice work taken up within and through them.

Luna (2016), like Quijada (2009), looks at the power of the dialogical and how it played a role in allowing members within SisterSong to work together to acknowledge both "same difference" (p. 779) or their shared experiences as Women of Color, as well as allowed them to recognize their differences, or "difference-in-sameness" (p. 780). Luna's (2016) description of the observations she completed has narrative qualities. I especially appreciate how she engages participant voices in ways that allow them to be more whole and story-like, letting the participants' words guide the reader in witnessing what an activity or ritual in a workshop or meeting felt like for them. This style of representing the interview data, rather than dividing it up, which is often the case, spoke to me. Most importantly, Luna's (2016) study both digs into the tensions and struggles participants experience within their relationships across difference *and*

highlights the ways in which participants and the organization attend to intersectionality “as an ongoing, multidimensional process” (pp. 786–787). As a result, the study offers complex, nuanced, and living insights that might help to inform relational and organizational short and long-term frameworks, strategies, and practices with regard to political solidarity social justice work.

Like Luna (2016), Ng’s (2012) work focuses on multi-racial participants who are engaged in social justice work, labor organizing in this instance, and their experiences of cross-racial alliances. However, Ng (2012) employed an approach to inquiry wherein research is “a collaborative process of knowledge production and relationship building” (p. 530) through the use of circle talks or focus groups. The circle talks in the study were facilitated by four participants, two aboriginal workers and two workers of color (Ng, 2012, p. 530). Following in the tradition of oral storytelling and relational knowing, Ng’s (2012) work interweaves the voices and lived experiences of research participants into a “collective narrative” that “reflects the embodied knowledge of labour activists who are Aboriginal and workers of colour” (p. 531). Additionally, Ng’s (2012) study employed an arts-informed approach in which participants, in small groups, “created a visual representation on their vision of solidarity” (p. 531). What is especially powerful is that, as a result of the research process, participants came together as a group to continue their work together, forming a “solidarity circle” (Ng, 2012, p. 531). My hope was that this project could, like Ng’s (2012), invite connected and creative collaborative inquiry through the final optional across-family focus group, but that did not come to fruition. However, the ways in which participants have interacted with me around the project, to this day, gives me hope that we may be able to take up future communal connection and work.

### ***Areas for Growth and Possibility in Solidarity Research***

While attention to multiple identities and the application of an intersectional analysis were present in more powerful ways in two of the solidarity studies that I reviewed (Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) than was the case with ally studies, it was still common for identities and ideas

around the social injustices facing relational solidarity social justice work to be conceptualized and reduced through binary categories and positions. Furthermore, two of the four studies that I reviewed in this area were, again, despite the topic being relational, focused on data collected from individual participants through surveys or experiments (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011). Lastly, while Luna (2016) and Ng (2012) employ intersectionality, look at a multiplicity of identities and social locations, and engage relations in their inquiry projects, their projects both focus exclusively on working relationships that were either already established within an existing organization (Luna, 2016) or brought together through the inquiry project (Ng, 2012). While this project engages some participants who may have come together through organizing or may organize together presently, it brings more of a personal dimension to the solidarity literature in that participants identified each other as chosen family and are/were in relation with one another in ways that are always both personal and political and not restricted to a particular organization or organizing space.

### **Coalition Research**

Similar to the solidarity research I reviewed, the studies I surveyed on coalitions were slightly more attentive to multiple identities, specifically race, ethnicity, class, gender, and legal status (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012), were more engaged with the complexities of these identities and positionalities (González, 2016; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012), and were more likely to employ an intersectional analysis around systems of oppression (González, 2016; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012). The coalition studies I surveyed looked at people forging coalitions across lines of difference to engage in various kinds of community organizing and social movement work together. Cerecer (2010) and Tuominen (2012) looked at coalition building between members of different races, genders, classes, etc., within existing organizations.

González (2016) looked at coalition building between Latinas and Black women working on similar issues within the same regional organizing community. Shah's (2008) study of



Laotian teenage girls and adults active in the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) looked at their perspective on inter-group relations between Laotians and African Americans. Lastly, Black et al. (2016) and Lesniewski and Doussard (2017) looked at coalition building among differently positioned “movement participants” belonging to differently focused social justice organizations with different tactical and strategic approaches and working in different neighborhood “turfs” or terrains within a particular region. The studies overall relied heavily on interviews (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012), observation (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008) and focus groups (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; Shah, 2008). Additionally, Shah (2008) and Tuominen (2012) conducted archival research.

What I found most interesting and relevant to this project was that some researchers (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010) were involved in the social justice movement work they were studying; as a result, they fluctuated between participant observers and non-participant observers. As a researcher who is similarly situated, I felt encouraged to see this in the literature. Perhaps because of their lived experiences in social movement and community organizing, scholars of the coalition studies that I surveyed were all very attentive to historical and contemporary contexts within which the coalition building they were studying was taking place. In their studies, they pay a great deal of attention to the place- and time-based factors that informed and shaped relational dynamics across difference and the social justice organizing people were engaged in on both small and larger scales (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012).

In addition to emphasizing the importance of historical and contemporary contexts and the related power dynamics at play shaping the coalition building they were studying, scholars of the research that I surveyed emphasized the importance and challenge of the everyday building of trust across race, ethnicity, gender, class, and legal status (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012)

as well as between folks with different focus areas including immigrant rights (Black et al., 2016; González, 2016; Shah, 2008), labor organizing (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Tuominen, 2012), and climate justice (Black et al., 2016; Shah, 2008) for example. Two studies looking at this dynamic of trust-building took up detailed explorations of within- and between-group racial identity conceptualization and the impact of those conceptualizations on inter-group relations and coalition building (González, 2016; Shah, 2008). Similar to Quijada's (2009) study of intercultural alliance and the solidarity studies of Luna (2016) and Ng (2012), several of the coalition studies I reviewed talked about the importance of striking a balance between finding common ground in the form of shared experiences, concerns, values, and goals, and attending to differences in lived experiences of privilege and oppression (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; González, 2016; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012). Additionally, like some alliance studies (Becker et al., 2013; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Quijada, 2009; Wallace, 2011) and two of the solidarity studies (Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) that I reviewed, several coalition studies emphasized the importance of communication, listening in particular, relational learning, and the crucial role these acts play in making it possible for people and organizations to acknowledge and attend to lived and ideological differences (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Tuominen, 2012).

Lastly, while they also discussed the importance of trust-building, communication, and attentiveness to differences, studies of coalitions among organizations, including unions, churches, community groups, and membership-based social justice organizations, for example, focused on organizational actions, including narratives, strategies and tactics, consciousness-raising and political education, mobilizations and direct actions, and large scale campaigns (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012). These studies were most interested in what these organizational-level practices revealed about what the scholars labeled the success or failure of the organizations (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017) to achieve a "sense of solidarity and commitment to mutual respect" (Black et

al., 2016) between/among the organizations and/or identity groups (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012).

There are certain aspects of the studies in this area that relate to this study. A few of the studies looked at the importance of learning and education within coalitional relationships in organizations (Cerecer, 2010; González, 2016; Tuominen, 2012), between them (Black et al., 2016; Tuominen, 2012), and among organizations and communities (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012). In particular, Cerecer's (2010) multilayered analysis of a debriefing conversation between two differently positioned organizers, Tom, a white male activist, and Tanya, a Black woman activist, resonates most with this project as it looks at the "educative moments" present within coalitional relationships (p. 186). Specifically, by digging into and dissecting the "relational type of talking and listening that interrogates collective efforts" (p. 186), Cerecer (2010) reveals the ways in which Tom and Tanya "bond and struggle in alliance" (p. 187). Cerecer (2010) stays in the messiness of Tom and Tanya's conversation and thus invites us to see how they "learn from their differences" and "move to forge coalition-building" always within "the dynamic relational context" that is never "free from constructs of power and privilege" (p. 187).

### ***Areas for Growth and Possibility in Coalition Research***

As stated above, most of the studies on coalition building were organizationally focused (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Shah, 2008; Tuominen, 2012). In two instances, Black et al. (2016) and Lesniewski and Doussard (2017), this led to findings that mostly spoke of positionalities, relationships, groups, organizations, and social movements in oversimplified binaries, resulting yet again in a loss of the specificity, complexity, and nuance of lived experiences, positionalities, relationships and relational dynamics, and social justice issues and movements. Additionally, Black et al. (2016) and Lesniewski and Doussard's (2017) studies were concerned with the effectiveness of coalitions and their tactics, speaking in terms of wins and losses, success and failures. Public actions and legislative or

policy campaigns that met organizational goals were usually classified as wins and successes (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017).

Though these things are important with regard to grassroots organizing and social movement work, like other feminists (Case, 2012; DeShazer, 1994; Hunt & Holmes, 2015) I have written elsewhere (Dominguez, 2012) that a hyper-focus on this narrow conceptualization of activism and the “what counts as political” (Lugones, 2003, p. 2) can erase or at the very least diminish the significance of relational and cultural change happening in the everyday in organizing spaces and the spaces in between actions, campaigns, protests, meetings, etc. What troubled me most when reviewing this area of literature was that, while the scholars of some of these studies (Black et al., 2016; Cerecer, 2010; Tuominen, 2012) mention the importance of personal relationship building and interactions within coalition work, the studies themselves do not explore this work in depth. For example, while Black et al. (2016) discussed the significance of “a pre-event meal” where youth organizers “shared stories, celebrated their successes, and discussed possibilities for future collaborative direct actions and civil disobedience,” they did not go into great detail.

Through pulling individual quotes alone, the relational gets individualized, and the observations, using short, broad descriptions, become depersonalized, detached, vague, and distant. This reminds me of Lugones’s (2003) assertion that what is “significantly missing in much of the work that attempts to acknowledge difference is the *interactive* step” (p. 69). Moreover, when the personal gets discussed, it is often framed as a “tool” that can contribute to “effective” “mutually beneficial organizing strategies” (Black et al., 2016, p. 295). This framing was present in Tuominen’s (2012) work as well. While she emphasizes the importance of “nurturance and personal support” within consciousness-raising groups, she is quick to end that thought with a description of such support as a “proven tool in organizing women” (p. 42). Yes, the relational can lead to stronger organizing work (which can be about working together for a more liberatory world) *and* the relational connections in and of themselves can be about living

for and thus creating a more liberatory world. I worry that Tuominen's (2012) phrasing, which was common in the literature, can be read as reducing the power of the personal as only important if it gets us closer to tangible, measurable, activist campaign/action "wins," reifying neoliberal and capitalist conceptualizations of the relational and relationships as transactional tools to achieve something "larger."

Without a more in-depth analysis of what happens in personal relationship building within coalition relationships, we miss out on so much. In the conclusion of their article, Black et al. (2016) ask, "What will future activism alliances ... look like on the ground?" and "Can they function elsewhere as they might ... prioritizing relationship building, contextual knowledge, and where possible, clustering around tables in classrooms, trailers and taco shops?" (p. 295). I believe that the literature could benefit from the inclusion of more detailed observation description and analysis, as well as focus groups with the people who experience these relationships that center their narratives. By employing these kinds of methods, this project works to move "past outcomes that are anchored in successes and failures" (Cerecer, 2010, p. 186). In looking at the personal aspects of coalition relationships not to mine them of their contributions to effective strategy and tangible wins but to explore how the relational possibilities are brought to life with/in and through them, this study does not frame coalition relationships as tools for social justice but prefigurative acts (Maeckelbergh, 2011) engaging social justice in the way that Bell (2007) describes it, as both a process and a goal.

### **Critical Friendship and Critical Community Building Research**

The final body of literature that I reviewed was research on critical friendship and critical community building. Critical friendships and critical friend groups have usually referred to "reflective learning communities" within which teachers challenge each other to reflect on their teaching practice through the giving and receiving of feedback and constructive critique (Bambino, 2002, p. 26). In practice, critical friends give each other feedback, collaborate, find solutions, and create community (Bambino, 2002, p. 27). Critical friendships and critical friend

groups can, following in the tradition of critical pedagogy,<sup>6</sup> function as relational sites where teacher-peers engage each other in the form of problem-posing education around their teaching practices. When employed in this way, critical friendships and friend groups can serve as a supportive environment where teachers engage in collective critical analysis and reflection regarding social justice issues in education present in each other's practices as well as those of their peers and schools in general.

Critical communities are also spaces of supportive critique. However, critical communities are, by definition, spaces designed for social justice-oriented reflection. The intention of these communities is to foster critical relational consideration of the "multiple constructed realities, historical contexts, and lived experiences that are continually impacted by issues of power" and the "complex interplay of structure and agency" (Bettez, 2011a, p. 81) within which people are situated and taking up the work of social justice separately and together. According to Bettez (2011a), critical communities, at a minimum, "attempt to question dominant norms" and work to "further one another's critical thinking particularly around issues of power, oppression, and privilege" (p. 81). Therefore, critical friendships and critical communities (Bettez 2011a, 2011b) are similar in that they are relational sites meant to engage participants in critical questioning, dialogue, critique, analysis, and reflection. Though not as explicitly social justice-oriented as critical communities, critical friendship and critical friend groups can also be spaces that potentially shape teaching practices and lead to enactments of social justice education and action.

Across the works that I reviewed, critical friendship groups and critical communities were described as relational sites in which people came together in dialogue and engaged in problem-posing, critical analysis, and reflection (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017;

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this project I narrowed my review of critical friendships and critical friend group to those that followed in the tradition of critical pedagogy and thus only surveyed studies that looked at the role of critical friendships/groups within the context of social justice education.

Behizadeh et al., 2019; Bettez, 2011a & 2011b; Carlson, 2019). Critical friendship groups and critical communities functioned as collaborative educational spaces where people could be simultaneously supported and challenged (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Bettez, 2011a & 2011b; Carlson, 2019). Within these relational sites, people, through dialogue, engaged in the sharing of knowledge and perspectives, posing critical questions, and taking up challenging topics around social injustices (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Bettez, 2011a, 2011b; Carlson, 2019).

Scholars of the critical friendships and critical friend groups and critical community works that I reviewed approached their study of these relational sites in a variety of ways. The works in this area engaged autoethnography (Bettez, 2011a, 2011b), collaborative auto-ethnography (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017), action-research (Alarcón, 2016), and traditional qualitative methods (Behizadeh et al., 2019; Carlson, 2019). The data used in these studies included: researcher lived experiences (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Bettez, 2011a, 2011b) and reflective notes (Alarcón, 2016), documents and course materials, including “course evaluations from the previous semester, responses to prompts in the form of exit slips at the end of class, mid-term evaluations, and other instructor created documents related to the class segments” (Alarcón, 2016, p. 157), observation field notes (Alarcón, 2016; Carlson, 2019), student discussion board posts (Behizadeh et al., 2019), course assignments (Carlson, 2019), and participant interviews (Carlson, 2019).

All of the works that I found engaging critical friendship and critical friend groups and critical communities discussed the ways in which these groups functioned as professional learning communities (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Bettez, 2011a; Carlson, 2019). Specifically, studies looked at how critical friendship groups and critical communities functioned as a space for a communal or relational kind of professional development for pre-service and/or current teachers/educators (Alarcón, 2016; Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Bettez, 2011a; Carlson, 2019). While Behizadeh et al.

(2019) and Carlson (2019) focused on critical friendship groups among undergraduate students in pre-service education courses, Alarcón's (2016) and Bettez's (2011a) works on critical community building looked at this relational work not only as it occurred among peers in undergraduate (Alarcón, 2016) and graduate-level courses (Bettez, 2011a), but also between the students and themselves, the professors (and researchers).

Alarcón and Bettez's (2017) collaborative, auto-ethnographic study of their experiences peer-to-peer mentoring each other through a Muxerista approach brought a bit of a different dimension to this body of literature. Though not explicitly a study of critical community building, Alarcón and Bettez (2017) cite critical community building and name it as a part of their mentoring approach. This is the only work in this body where critical friendship was explored by the peers involved, making it similar to Hunt and Holmes's (2015) work on their alliance relationship. Unlike Hunt and Holmes (2015), Alarcón and Bettez (2017) share race and write about how they navigate other positions of power difference, namely their differences in rank at the time, with Bettez being tenured and Alarcón being tenure track. However, like Hunt and Holmes (2015), Alarcón and Bettez (2017) provide storied descriptions of their interactions and experiences with one another and others that are both professional (and political) and personal (and political). These storied descriptions engage the reader in the complex and layered living aspects of critical friendship and peer-to-peer Muxerista mentoring in embodied and emotional ways.

Through their side-by-side and then collective storytelling, Alarcón and Bettez (2017) share the learning, teaching, and action that takes place within and through their relationship. They illustrate the ways in which the critical community building in Muxerista peer-to-peer mentoring allowed them to support each other in navigating the challenges of being Latinas in the academy and enabled them to engage in subversive and disruptive actions separately and together to make the academy more socially just. This differentiates this study from others in this area that looked at peer-to-peer relationships within critical friendship groups and critical



communities as a space for collective reflection that would inform independent action by one of the members in their group or community outside of the relations in the group. While this project also reveals the ways in which queer kinship solidarity relationship work informs actions members take outside of their kin/group relationships, through being relationally focused, the project, like Alarcón and Bettez's (2017), illuminates the ways in which the critical relational dialogue, analysis, and reflection that occurs with/in queer kinship solidarity relations leads to and informs collective action by the people in relation in actions taken up within the relation itself and through it.

### **Areas for Growth and Possibility in Critical Friendship and Critical Community Building Research**

Both of the studies I reviewed on critical friendship and critical friendship groups and the works that I reviewed invoking critical community building were situated in formal or traditional educational settings—undergraduate and graduate classrooms (Alarcón, 2016; Bettez, 2011a; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Carlson, 2019), meetings (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017), conferences (Bettez, 2011b) and workshops (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017). Though Bettez (2011a, 2011b), who coined the term critical community building, defines critical communities as “interconnected, porously bordered shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critical thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege” (p. 10) the critical communities she focuses on are groups of students, teachers, and colleagues in academia. Similarly, the existing studies on critical friendship and critical friend groups are often restricted to pre-service and in-service teachers.

I also noticed that many of the studies and works that I reviewed in this area were completed by scholar-educators in their classes. Though, as a critical pedagogue myself, I believe that power dynamics between educators and their students can and should be disrupted (Freire, 2000), the reality of the teacher-student power dynamic coupled with the researcher-participant power dynamic can have an impact on what is shared by participants in the data

collected, even if anonymity is promised. Furthermore, as was the case with studies in the areas of alliance, solidarity, and coalition studies, only certain kinds of relationships were explored. Overwhelmingly these studies and works explored critical friendship groups and critical community building among students (Alarcón, 2016; Bettez, 2011a, 2011b; Behizadeh et al., 2019; Carlson, 2019), between students and their teachers (Alarcón, 2016; Bettez, 2011a, 2011b), and among academic colleagues (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017). In focusing on queer chosen family members who know each other through a variety of ways, including but not limited to current or former romantic partnerships, friendships, grassroots and community organizing work relationships, classmate relationships, work relationships, and LGBTQ+ social community, etc., this study brings more diverse perspectives and experiences regarding critical friendships, critical friendship groups, and critical community relationships to the literature.

In discussing how the critical communities built within her graduate classrooms go beyond that space, Bettez (2011a) invites us to consider how web-like and expansive critical communities can be. However, these studies and works overwhelmingly focus on communities that are bound to a class, a department, a school, or a conference. What is missing from the literature are studies that show the presence of critical friendships/friend groups and critical communities in places other than traditional educational environments and how critical friendship and friendship groups and critical communities operate within and between different spaces. Members of critical communities are often part of multiple critical communities, and these critical friendships/friend groups and critical community relationships and relational configurations exist across space and time.

Employing a purposeful snowball sample that moves from people who I am in queer kinship solidarity relationship with into their various queer kinship solidarity constellations, this project contributes to the literature an exploration of the layered, porous, overlapping, web-like configuration of queer kinship solidarity relations/groups/families and thus yields a representation of the complex expansiveness of critical communities that Bettez (2011a, 2011b)

describes in her work. Furthermore, by centering the complex relational configurations and dynamics of queer kinship solidarity relational groups, this project unearths findings that reveal the diverse and complex ways these relational configurations and the work done with/in and through them move, shift, and grow interdependently, forming networks that span different settings, different focuses, different relationships and groups of people.

### **Conclusion**

Sitting at the intersections of kinship/fictive kinship research, specifically LGBTQ+ chosen family research; alliance, solidarity, and coalition building research; and lastly, critical friendship and critical community building research, the current project offers insights into relational liberation work not currently present in existing literature. First, the current project involves a diverse group of participants with regard to socio-historical positionalities and regional location, types of relationships included (romantic, platonic, work, etc.), as well as the kind of social justice work folks are engaged in, and the spaces and sites they are operating in together and with others. Second, the current project contributes an intersectional approach and analysis, an attentiveness to the multiplicity of identities and relationalities, relational research methods, and embodied data creation and collection. Lastly, by holding space for the personal and the political without privileging one over the other or creating an arbitrary separation between the two, the participants in the project offer something that was largely absent in these bodies of literature with one exception (Hunt & Holmes, 2015). I believe scholars, pedagogues, students, organizers, and community members living and working with others for social justice can learn a great deal from the insights, approaches, and living practices shared by Black, Brown, and white anti-racist LGBTQ+ social justice workers in North Carolina taking up queer kinship solidarity as a praxis of liberation.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As stated earlier, the purpose of this research project was to learn more about how LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South are building more liberatory relations and worlds with/in and through queer kinship solidarity relationships. As stated earlier, the preliminary research questions that I have come up with include: How are LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South engaging with doing/living queer kinship solidarity relationships; What might queer kinship solidarity relationships entail that is particularly unique due to the queerness of them?; And, How do queer kinship solidarity relationships inform, sustain, and expand the social justice work done by those in kinship with/in and through the relation as well as “outside” of it? I believe that through centering an exploration of the everyday, relational, embodied, and living dynamics of queer kinship solidarity relationships, this project will contribute to the existing research discussed previously.

### **Epistemology**

Like many feminist epistemologists, I am called to projects that engage in “unearthing subjugated knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3) or highlighting the ways in which people in the everyday are knowers. I believe that “everyday life ... is the best for the origins of research” (Ardovini-Brooker, 2002, p. 4) and that ideas are “communally wrought” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 1) as are our actions and movements. As a result, I work to embody a feminist epistemology that positions knowing as relational and collective and, as such, am drawn to methodologies that legitimize relationships as sites of knowing and knowledge creation rather than individuals as knowers or independent knowledge producers.

Put simply, in my view, inquiry on queer kinship solidarity relationships should not be done by an independent researcher who sees themselves as an individual conducting research on a set of separate individuals who have criteria in common. For this reason, this inquiry project sought to explore and embody a relational “being on the edge” with/in and through the study of

queer kinship solidarity, where people together engage, mobilize, and live for social justice “not autonomously but in a densely woven web of connectedness, within a complex and multivariant relationality” (Shohat & Stam, 2003, p. 1). While I crafted the research questions shared earlier, they are questions that have been born from my experiences and conversations with my own queer chosen family members. Within the family focus groups, participants asked questions of each other, spoke directly to each other, and asked questions of me throughout the research process, disrupting traditional power dynamics and making it so that the pedagogical aspect of the research process was co-intentional.

Additionally, while the final across-family focus group did not come to fruition, follow-up conversations between participants and me have extended past final family focus groups and have allowed for continued learning and connection beyond what I anticipated. I believe this project allowed for the creation of new relationships between me and participants I did not know prior to the project and the deepening and expanding of the existing ones.

### **Theories Informing My Work**

In this work, I primarily drew upon and wrote with the works of Women of Color feminists (Ahmed, 2006, 2015; Anzaldúa, 2002, 2012; Bettez, 2008, 2011a & b; Brock, 2005; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Lara, 2002; Lorde, 2007; Lugones, 2003; Mohanty, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Rendón, 2009) and the works of white anti-racist feminist thinkers and pedagogues (Boler, 1999, 2004; Felman, 2001; Jones, & Hughes-Decatur, 2012; Oliviero, 2016; Pratt, 1984; Segrest, 1994; Thompson, 2017). Their work on the importance of attending to difference, wholeness and multiplicity, and, lastly, relationality and movement shaped this project’s approach and focus.

### **Attending to Difference**

First and foremost, my research project is informed by the work of Lorde (2007). In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” an essay that ends with the lines I have included earlier (on pages 13-14) from her poem “Outlines,” Lorde (2007) contextualizes some

of the challenges of forging solidarity among women across lines of difference in the interest of feminist mobilization and movement building. She posits that one of the main phenomena blocking the formation of bonds of solidarity across power differentials, including race and sexuality or sexual orientation, is a historical orientation towards difference brought to us by western european culture through colonization. She argues that “much of western european history” has conditioned us “to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115).

For Lorde (2007), this central organizing phenomenon of western european culture, the “institutionalized rejection of difference,” is an institutionalized, cultural-political socialization that depends on all people being “programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing” (p. 115). According to Lorde (2007), part of internalizing the “fear and loathing” involves assuming a default approach to the differences “between us” where we “handle” difference through ignoring it, and, if that is not possible, copying it “if we think it is dominant” or destroying it “if we think it is subordinate” (p. 115). This once formal but, more recently, in the “post”-colonial context, hidden curriculum (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 718) of western european colonization, teaches us to position our human differences as either “insurmountable barriers” or lies or illusions, made of nothing, “nonexistent” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115). This hidden curriculum works to secure the normative and thus dominant position of the “mythical norm;” those who are “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure”<sup>7</sup> (Lorde, 2007, p. 116).

Lorde’s (2007) discussion of the institutionalized rejection of difference includes her contention that, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences” (p. 123). The work of other Women of Color (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Bettez, 2008, 2011; Brock, 2005; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Lugones, 2003;

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<sup>7</sup> I would add cisgender, able-bodied and U.S. born citizens.

Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Rendón, 2009) and white anti-racist feminist thinkers and pedagogues (Boler, 1999, 2004; Felman, 2001; Pratt, 1984; Oliviero, 2016; Segrest, 1994; Thompson, 2017) also emphasize the importance of attending to and holding space for our differences. Like Lorde (2007), these thinkers and pedagogues see attending to difference as critical to our collective liberation in that attending to difference makes our identifying and developing “new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” in ways that co-create “new paths to our survival” more possible (p. 123).

### **Multiplicity and Wholeness**

The emphasis of Women of Color and white anti-racist feminists on the multiplicity of identities and the complexity of socio-historical positionality as well as the significance of the wholeness or an understanding of the bodymindspirit deeply informed this project.

Of particular influence is Anzaldúa’s (2012) mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa (2012) insisted on existing with/in her wholeness not only as a mixed-race person or mestiza but also as an embodied, thinking and writing, spiritual and sexual being and recognized her unwillingness to fragment her existence as an act of resistance. Her living theory of mestiza consciousness, her lived experience of holding and moving with/in her own hybridity and others taught me about the power of holding the complexity and ambiguity of ourselves, others, and the social world. For these reasons, her work, as well as those of other Chicana feminists who have continued her legacy, deeply inform my ideas on the multiplicity of identities and, the complexity of socio-historical positionalities, the importance of the bodymindspirit (Lara, 2002, p. 437), and the dwelling with/in and engaging the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities of intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) /intermeshed (Lugones, 2003) systems of oppression, positionalities, and solidarity relationships.

Like Anzaldúa (2012), other Women of Color feminists (Ahmed, 2006, 2015; Bettez, 2008; Brock, 2005; hooks, 2003; Lara, 2002; Lorde, 2007; Lugones, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Rendón, 2009) and white anti-racist feminists (Boler, 1999, 2004; Felman, 2001; Jones &

Hughes-Decatur, 2012; Pratt, 1984; Oliviero, 2016; Segrest, 1994; Thompson, 2017) emphasize the importance of the embodied, emotional, and spiritual experiences of oppression, power, and solidarity. They draw from and engage everyday lived experiences moving about in the world with others (Ahmed, 2015; Boler, 1999, 2004; Brock, 2005; Felman, 2001; hooks, 2003; Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012; Lara, 2002; Lorde, 2007; Lugones, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa 2015; Pratt, 1984; Segrest, 1994; Oliviero, 2016). They tackle dreams and hauntings by dead family members, ancestors, spirits, and history (Anzaldúa, 2012; Brock, 2005; Lara, 2002; Lorde, 2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Pratt, 1984; Segrest, 1994). They dive deep into anger (Ahmed, 2015; Boler, 1999, 2004; Brock, 2005; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007; Lugones, 2003), sadness, despair, and hope (Ahmed, 2015; Boler, 1999, 2004; hooks, 2003; Pratt, 1984; Segrest, 1994; Thompson, 2017), connection and disconnection (Ahmed, 2015; Brock, 2005; Felman, 2001; hooks, 2003; Lugones, 2003; Lorde, 2007; Pratt, 1984; Segrest, 1994; Thompson, 2017) and the collective grappling (Bettez, 2011a, 2011b; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Segrest, 1994) experienced unevenly within relationships across lines of difference (Lorde, 2007; Lugones, 2003; Oliviero, 2016). Through taking up critical analyses of these bodymindspirit relational experiences, these Women of Color and white anti-racist feminists teach us that engaging and learning from these experiences is integral to liberation work.

### **Relationality and Movement**

Women of Color and white anti-racist feminists not only bring nuance and realness to the ways in which we understand people as complex, socio-historically situated, and moving beings in relation to each other and the social world but also emphasize how these dimensions expand our understanding of relationality and relational movement as critical in working toward a more liberatory world.

The work of Lugones (2003) and Ahmed (2006), in particular, resonate with my lived experiences of the relationality and movement at work in solidarity relationships, especially among queer and trans people, and thus help to shape my current theorizing of them and



approach to this project. Specifically, Lugones's (2003) conceptualizations of "pilgrimage," "trespassing," "playful world traveling," "curdling separation," and "tactical strategies of the streetwalker," and Ahmed's (2006, 2015) notions of queer genealogy, gatherings, commitment, lives, moments, and a politics of disorientation speak to the ways in which, through co-constructing what Lugones (2003) describes as "antistructural selves, relations, and practices" we can break from the orientations we've inherited (Ahmed, 2006), building and moving towards new worlds. Both Lugones' (2003) and Ahmed's (2006) work call us to move into "queer moments of deviation" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 179), where we can co-constitute "the spatiality of resistances within and against the spatiality of dominations" (Lugones, 2003, p. 8).

Additionally, the work of hooks (1994, 2003, 2010) and Bettez (2011a, 2011b) around learning and critical communities also inform this project. Both hooks (1994, 2003, 2010) and Bettez (2011a, 2011b) discuss the importance of building and sustaining community in education for liberation (Freire, 2000) or social justice education (Bell, 2007; Hackman, 2005). Both of these Women of Color feminist pedagogues put forth an understanding of community building work in education for liberation and social justice education as a way to hold those involved in collective struggle (Segrest, 1994) or a "sitting in the fire" (Bettez, 2011b, p. 7). These communities are built to be sites where we hold each other in the tension, conflict, discomfort, and even pain (hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010) that come with "interdependently and collectively read[ing] the world through a critical lens" (Bettez, 2011a, p. 81). They argue that building and sustaining such a community can "empower us to take action against oppression" (Bettez, 2011a, p. 81). These notions of learning community (hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010) for liberatory education or critical community (Bettez, 2011a, 2011b) resonate with my understanding and lived experience and understanding of solidarity relationships and thus informed my approach and focus in this project.

More contemporary writings by feminists that position friendships across power difference, dissident friends (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016), and friendship as social justice

activism (Gadelha, 2018) deepen this emphasis on relationality and relational movement. Utilizing Gandhi's (2006) notion of "dissident friendships" or "all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment," Chowdhury and Philipose (2016) put together an anthology that features border-crossing friendships which demonstrate "the power of affect and emotional bonding" to counter the "national, racial, imperial, class, gender" divisions (p. 3). In their view, those involved in these dissident friendships experience "human and heart-centered connections with unlikely interlocutors" and live experiences through relationships across lines of difference that resist the "divisive and fragmenting lies of structural power" (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016, p. 3).

Similarly, Banerjea et al. (2018) describe friendship as social activism as being about "the renewal of our imagination about who we are and who we wish to become" about being or "wanting to be entwined, in allegiance, in resonances with those who are border-crossers, un-/misrecognized, silent, departed, awkward misfits, un-aligned souls" (p. 2). Through the contributors they include, both collections work to demonstrate the ways in which dissident friendships or friendships as social activism are sites of subversion in that the kinds of relationality and movement they make possible are "potentially transformative, personally and socially" (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016, p. 3). These collections, with their contribution of relational lived-experienced theorizing from multiple accounts, inspired my desire to make this project a collaborative one.

In her work *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, brown (2017) defines emergence as, quoting Obolensky (2010), "the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions" (p. 13) and emergent strategies as "ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions" (brown, 2017, p. 20). I see queer kinship solidarity relationships as a prefigurative political act or an emergent strategy for collective liberation. Several of brown's (2017) principles of emergent strategy, including "change is constant (Be like water)" and "Never a failure, always a lesson" (p. 41), were directly named by several participants as critical to their approach to queer kinship

solidarity. Additionally, participants also engaged brown's (2017) "fractal" conception as well as her understanding of interdependence, change as non-linear and iterative, and the importance of relational resilience and transformative justice (p. 50). Because of how resonant and applicable they are, these principles and elements inform my analysis and representation of what participants shared and what I witnessed them doing with one another in the project.

Birdsong's (2020) book, *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*, which I've already mentioned in the introduction, is similar to this project both in focus and in that the text includes stories from Birdsong's life and relationships, from people that she knows through community or people she met and formally interviewed. Through storytelling and analysis, Birdsong (2020) offers insights into ways of building and being in connection through family, friendship, and community, that move "beyond the confines and the defaults" (p. 22) of the dominant culture.

Both Birdsong (2020) and brown (2017) include the perspectives of Black, Brown, and white, LGBTQ+, working- and middle-class people of various ages. And many of their contributors, like them, are engaged in some kind of social justice work. In fact, in some ways, the contributors to their texts are more diverse than those in this study regarding educational experience, age, and social class. However, I see this project as an important contributor that is in community and conversation with brown's (2017) and Birdsong's (2020) works, offering valuable and revolutionary insights that are specific to the living relational liberation praxis with/in everyday, queer solidarity kinship relationships among a variety of social justice workers situated in the South who are not movement famous and who aren't afraid to show the mess in their process and progress. I am especially grateful for the work of brown (2017) and Birdsong (2020) and their contributors, and I am excited for the ways in which this current project further adds to the conversations that they have started, offering distinct insights and experimentations to radical relational liberation praxis.

These feminist works on attending to difference, multiplicity, and wholeness, as well as relationality and movement, make up my theoretical framework. I see these theories as partners in this project. I speak with them and learn from them. They have informed and shaped my project in every way, from the topic that I am called to take up and the particular focus I take up within it to the design of the project, including the participants I have included, the research questions I constructed, the collaborative analysis and interpretation I engaged in alongside participants, and how I wrote up the findings and conclusions. The theories that I have included here give language to why I was called to do this project and what I believe I and others can learn with/through/from it. These theories held my hand through the process, guiding me as I invited myself, participants, and you who are reading it to more deeply take up exploration and analysis of a phenomenon that many of us are trying to live.

### **Research Approach**

Grounded in a feminist epistemology that positions knowing as living, embodied, relational, and collective, this community enmeshed and accountable post-qualitative (St. Pierre, 2013, 2018) feminist research project employed a bricolage of Narrative Inquiry, Visual Narrative, and CAP Ethnography.

### **Community Connected Accountable (Post) Qualitative Research**

Similar to community-based qualitative research (CBQR), community-connected accountable (post) qualitative research involves engaged learning “whereby learning occurs as a part of authentic participation in ‘real-life settings’” or settings “outside of a typical classroom” (R. J. Johnson, 2017, p. 23) and learners are viewed “not as passive consumers of information but as active participants in creating knowledge” (R. J. Johnson, 2017, p. 24). Like CBQR, this community-connected and accountable (post) qualitative research project was collaborative, critical, and transformative (R. J. Johnson, 2017). The project was collaborative in that the design and implementation were birthed out of my conversations and experiences with many of the participants and also was open to and shaped by participant ideas, questions, approaches,

needs, desires, etc. (R. J. Johnson, 2017). For example, not every group or pair engaged the optional collage component (which I will discuss more below) in the same way.

Participants asked questions of other participants and me during focus groups and spoke directly to each other rather than always directing their responses toward me. Thus they engaged research spaces and processes for them and not just for this project, using our meetings as places for remembering, connecting, healing, and dreaming together. They also sometimes engaged me, not as the researcher, but as their kin, including me in their remembering and their moments of gratitude for queer kin, sharing these things in the space though I wasn't technically "part" of the kinship being "studied."

The project is critical in that it challenges status-quo narratives by "eliciting multiple perspectives related to the topic and examining how intersections of various factors and characteristics such as race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and/or age, function to shape individuals' perspectives and experiences" (R. J. Johnson, 2017, p. 25). This project is also critical in that it held space for participants to engage in counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001, as cited in R. J. Johnson, 2017), stories that speak back to, challenge, and disrupt oppressive, hegemonic, dominant narratives. Lastly, the project is transformative in that it was a space for engaging in "transformative pedagogies" or "bidirectional" learning processes around the topic in real-time within focus groups with participants "sharing expertise and acquiring new knowledge and skills" (R. J. Johnson, 2017, p. 26), making possible changes in perspectives and practices of all involved (R. J. Johnson, 2017) with regard to queer kinship solidarity relationships.

I call this project a community enmeshed rather than a community-based project for several reasons. I use enmeshed to invoke Lugones's (2003) concept of enmeshment, her assertion that worlds of sense and communities have "ill-defined edges" and are "enmeshed with each other" (p. 209) and thus are not "bound, fixed entities in naturalized bounded spacio-temporalities" (p. 201). I believe, as Lugones (2003) does, that our knowledge comes from

community, not individuals, and I see this project as answering her call to do “the collective work of revealing to each other the interrelatedness of our worlds of sense, of our histories (spatialized), of our spatialities (produced)” (p. 202) with/in, through, and for my community and all the communities we spill out into.

Another one of the reasons I use the term enmeshed is to name my place with/in these communities. As a researcher who is queer and in direct queer kinship with many of the participants in the study while studying queer kinship solidarity relationships/configurations I am not a part of, I operated as an outsider-within (Collins, 1991), a researcher who studied “community or identity groups they ‘come from,’ ‘belong to,’ or ‘identify with’ (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, as cited in Pillow & Mayo, 2007). Like other feminist researchers I believe that the “empathic, interpersonal relationships” that I have with participants allowed us to collectively “gain insight into the meaning” folks give to their experiences (Collins, 2000; DeVault, 1990, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007) of queer kinship solidarity relationships, which will be “multiple,” “not fixed,” and “ever changing” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 148). I did this by incorporating methods that lent themselves to reflexive knowledge building; knowledge building that occurs “through the dialogical practice of sharing with others” and “requires interrogation of social biographies and historical context, examination of intersectionality of privilege, and power, and the decentering of knowledge claims around interpretation and representation” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 148).

I use the term accountable to indicate that, in part because of my relation with/in these communities that preceded this project, I am committed to being accountable to the needs and desires of the groups/communities involved in this study for the long-haul, beyond the scope of this project. While I believe that there are some community-based researchers who act in ways that demonstrate accountability, commitment, and connection to the communities that they are researching, there are others whose projects don’t engage the community members as true partners in the project (R. J. Johnson, 2017). I operationalized accountability through traditional

mechanisms, including member-checks on transcripts, coding and themes, and on my writing/analysis (I will elaborate more on how I took up these measures in my discussion of ethics). Like everything that is living and relational, I recognize that accountability is much more complex, nuanced, and slippery than these mechanisms can account for. Through being vulnerable and open, I will continue to do what I can to disrupt power dynamics and continuously learn and unlearn so as to, as best I can, be more fully and wholly accountable to the people I know and love and those that they know and love, with/in all of the unevenness (Oliviero, 2016) of the power dynamics, histories, presents, and futures involved.

Lastly, the project is post-qualitative because it is born out of my living with theory (St. Pierre, 2018), and not only the theory that I have read but also the theory of the living-experiences I have learning/teaching with others within queer kinship solidarity relations. I am, this project is, “a simultaneity of relations with humans and the nonhuman” and so we require “a simultaneity of living, reading, and writing” (St. Pierre, 2013, p. 468). Following in St. Pierre’s footsteps, I use writing as a “field of play” and not only think/write with “textualized data,” participant documents and creations, focus group transcripts, and embodiment notes, but also think/write “with data that were not textualized, fixed, and visible” (St. Pierre, 2013, p. 469). As you will see in my data chapters, I work to break the “artificial separation” between participants’ words and those of theorists in my writing and will include “transgressive data clearly at work in my study-*emotional data, dream data, sensual data, memory data and response data*” (p. 470). While I used open inductive coding to serve as a “backup” of my analysis of focus group transcripts, visual narratives, and embodiment notes, I primarily engaged in St. Pierre’s (2013) vision of “doing analysis”:

I imagine a cacophony of ideas swirling as we think about our topics with all we can muster—with words from theorists, participants, conference audiences, friends and lovers, ghosts who haunt our studies, characters in fiction and film and dreams—with our bodies and all the other bodies and the earth and all the things and objects in our lives—

the entire assemblage that is a *life* thinking *and, and, and ...* All those data are set to work in our thinking, and we think, and we work our way somewhere in thinking.

Furthermore, this project is a post-qualitative project because though it appears to be studying that which is “already made” about queer kinship solidarity relationships and doing so using some traditional qualitative methods (in-depth interviewing with/in focus groups and observation), the project is really about being with (and being a part of) what is “in the making” (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604). Through simultaneously being in a space of learning with participants and opening up the space for “something unimaginable” to “come out” (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 607), this project takes up “the provocation and challenge” of creating “different worlds for living” (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604).

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) contends that “Researchers who work in the margins need research strategies that enable them to survive, to do good research, to be active in building community capacities, to maintain their integrity, manage community expectations of them and mediate their different relationships” (p. 213). So, I take up post qual inquiry in this project as an effort to, like brown (2017), “write about the revolutions I long for” (p. 36) by focusing on the “wisdom and experience and amazing story in the communities” I love (p. 10). I also do my best to do so in a way that is living, connected, and moving with what I am learning from and with participants. I see my employing this style of inquiry as allowing me to continue my work as a student of Black and Brown feminist writers-pedagogue-thinker-organizers who continue to decolonize research and writing, tracing them as my primary teachers and naming their work as my theoretical grounding.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

According to Chase (2013), narrative researchers are interested in “how narrators make sense of personal experience in relation to cultural discourses” and thus “highlight what we can learn about anything (history and society as well as lived experience) by maintaining a focus on narrated lives” (p. 56). I employed narrative inquiry in this project through the use of semi-



structured, conversational, open focus group spaces where queer kinship groups/families were invited to and supported in sharing stories about their everyday experiences of creating and sustaining queer kinship solidarity relationships. I took on the role of listener and invited participants to be narrators (Chase, 2013) through the three small focus groups I had with each queer kinship pair/group<sup>8</sup>. I used the questions that I had along with questions that organically emerged from participants to guide the in-depth, semi-structured focus groups. I invited narrators to share “specific stories” (Chase, 2005 as cited in Chase, 2013, p. 61) and memories. I used probes and follow-up questions in all focus groups to “encourage narrators to explore memories and deeper understandings of their experiences” (Polkinghore in Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, as cited in Chase, 2013, p. 61) of queer kinship solidarity relationships. I took detailed embodiment notes (see Appendix A) during and after focus groups on nonverbal-embodied communication or body language and “linguistic practices (such as word choice, repetition, hesitation, laughter, use of personal pronouns)” (Chase, 2013, p. 57).

Like Chase (2013), I believe that “even as they constrain, some families, friendships, classrooms, workplaces, and organizations *also* provide members with narrative resources for creating strong relationships and vibrant communities” (p. 76) and, I would add, new and different worlds. This project thus studied what is working in queer kinship solidarity relationships, exploring the ways in which those in these groups/families are able to “marshal ordinary resources in their everyday lives to strengthen their relationships and their communities” (Chase, 2013, p. 76). Therefore, this project’s main focus remains on what is presently working and the possibilities present in what is in the works with regard to southern queer kinship solidarity relationships being studied.

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<sup>8</sup> As stated earlier, focus groups ranged from 2-5 people.

## **Visual Narratives**

In addition to having focus groups as a space for participants to share narratives, I invited participants to share visual narratives in the form of collage. Inspired by narrative researchers who have collaborated with their participants in the construction of visual images, namely Luttrell (2003), who invited the pregnant teens participating in her ethnographic study to create self-portraits and collages, I invited participants to create (optional) collages that represented their living-experiences of queer kinship solidarity within queer chosen-family or kinship group/relationships (as cited in Chase, 2013). I was drawn to the use of collage as a research method because I believe it can allow participants to engage in what Rendón (2009) terms “sentipensante” or sensing-thinking pedagogy, whereby participants will teach/learn in embodied, nonverbal, emotional, and spiritual ways through putting together and sharing a visual narrative. Though there were challenges with incorporating this method, particularly as they pertained to the context within which this study took place (during the height of COVID-19) and as it relates to confidentiality, both of which I discuss at length later in the methods section, inviting participants to include a visual narrative along with their verbal narratives allowed us all to learn a great deal about what is working, at work, and in the works with regard to queer kinship solidarity with/in queer chosen-family or kinship group/relationships in a creative, embodied, and holistic way.

## **Critical Analytical Practices (CAP) Ethnography**

CAP Ethnography is a class of ethnographic writing that is produced through “creative analytical practices” or social scientific writing that has moved outside what is considered conventional or traditional (Richardson, 2000, p. 9). According to Richardson (2000), CAP ethnographies push the boundaries of the traditional ethnography and can include “poetry,” “conversations” (p. 9), and “autoethnography,” a form of evocative writing through which an author through telling “stories about their own lived experiences” relates “the personal to the cultural” (p. 11). CAP ethnographies can use “scene setting,” “overlapping dialogue,” “multiple

points of view,” “flashbacks,” and “foreshadowing” (Richardson, 2000, p. 89). They privilege emotion “so as to evoke emotional responses for the reader” (Richardson, 2000, p. 89). By emphasizing “the personal and the emotional” through evocative writing, CAP ethnography makes possible “a new kind of theorizing” and “social action” (Richardson, 2000, p. 89).

I engage CAP ethnographic writing alongside the post-qualitative writing that St. Pierre (2013, 2018) describes, bringing together CAP’s approach to writing with an evocative style and “within a literary format” (Richardson, 2000, p. 87) and St. Pierre’s (2013, 2018) post-qualitative approach of breaking down the artificial separation between participant narratives, embodiment notes, the words of theorists, and transgressive researcher data and instead, weaving them together as they are lived. Along the way, I have held my writing to the standards Richardson (2000) lays out, asking myself if what I had written makes a substantive contribution, has aesthetic merit, displays reflexivity,<sup>9</sup> is impactful (emotionally and-or intellectually), and expresses a reality (or several). The evocativeness of CAP ethnographic writing is in alignment with the feminist theories that shape me and this project because such writing allows for the representation of the social to be felt and experienced by the writer’s and readers’ mindbodyspirit (Anzaldúa et al., 2012).

In utilizing post-qual and CAP ethnographic writing as a form of inquiry and data presentation, I have played with the organization and flow of the writing within the data chapters. In the chapter on trust, I organize the stories under subthemes, tugging at the through lines in each section while still telling the stories as fully and with as much dimension and detail as possible. I use the organization and my interpretations and conclusions to bring to the fore the contributions and powerful insights present in the data. In solidarity, I organize the chapter into three main sections and stories from two groups and a pair more fully with subheadings acting as chapters within each group/pair’s story rather than weaving the stories together under

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<sup>9</sup> Reflexivity refers to a “process whereby researchers recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions affect their research” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp. 16–17).

themes. I see the chapters on care as a hybrid between trust and solidarity where the stories are organized into small vignettes, organized into sections in conversation with each other and the conceptual analysis offered. The final data chapter on connection is most similar to care and trust in that there are small vignettes organized into sections, and conceptual analysis weaved throughout with expansion sections at the end.

In every chapter, I use the introductions, conclusions to the structure, and delivery of the stories as the primary places to share my interpretations and analysis, but I also weave my interpretation and analysis throughout. I also tried to include dialogue, more lengthy quotes, and some of the embodied communication that took place via our Zoom meetings where I could. Lastly, I used imagination and some auto-ethnography in relationship with the narratives in an effort to bring to the page how I am being and living with participants and what they are sharing off the page.

### **Research Plan**

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I reached out to my first points of contact, my queer chosen family members who are LGBTQ+ social justice workers. As I wrote earlier, I met and became friends with most of my participants through my involvement with a community LGBTQ+ social organization that became a social justice organization. I have come to know other potential participants through these relationships as well as through my participation in local and statewide grassroots social justice organizations and through being in community with the social justice organizers and workers across the South. I reached out to these first points of contact via email (see Appendix B) to share my current research project, including the research questions and design, while explaining that I was open to the questions, desires, interests, etc., that emerged along the way. Within the email, I asked them if they were interested in participating, in reaching out to their kin person(s) or group/family, and to reply with

all members cc'd to coordinate a Zoom<sup>10</sup> interest meeting where I discussed the project design in more depth, went over the informed consent form, and answered questions.

During the interest meetings, I shared, in detail, my current research questions and design with each set of kin person(s) or groups/families. In these meetings, in addition to sharing my research questions and design, I engaged with participants in an open discussion of the project. There were many folks who I reached out to who were unable to participate due to the constraints they were experiencing from COVID-19 on their time, particularly folks who worked in healthcare, education, and organizing around the presidential campaign of 2020. However, all of the families and pairs that I held interest meetings with were able to participate in the project. Once I received all informed consent forms, I began data collection. COVID-19 did impact how long it took to complete all of the focus groups due to unforeseen challenges that arose in my life as well as those of the participants. Participants remain engaged with me in follow-up communication up to the present for member-checking and also because of the kind of relationships we have built and fortified with each other.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection in this project consisted of individual and relational background information (gathered through an information sheet and follow-up contacts), focus groups, collage, and embodiment notes.

### **Individual and Group Background Information Sheet**

As discussed earlier, much of the existing literature on alliance, solidarity relationships, and coalitions tends to focus on one or two social locations and frames these relationships in simplistic, binary terms across dominant and marginalized social locations (white people in alliance/solidarity/coalition with Black and Brown people, non-indigenous people in relationship

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<sup>10</sup>Due to COVID-19 I had to substitute in-person meetings, including focus groups, for Zoom meetings to practice social and physical distancing to keep folks safe. While this was not ideal as it limited the embodied nonverbal and spiritual/energetic engagement between/among participants and me who do not reside with one another, it was necessary. I still used observation as a data collection method on Zoom calls.

with indigenous folks, cisgender, straight people in relationship with LGBTQ+ people, middle class people in relationship with poor folks, etc.). Even in the studies that looked at alliances, solidarity relationships, and coalitions among marginalized groups, only one or two social locations were taken into account.

This project was attentive to the multiplicity of identities and foregrounded an emphasis on the complexity of social locations in relational solidarity efforts within queer kinship solidarity relationships. As a result, data collection included an open-ended handout sheet to collect background information completed by participants. Through this information sheet, participants described their social locations with regard to age, race, ethnicity, class (generational and income), gender, physical and cognitive ability, sexual orientation, relational orientation, religious affiliation or spiritual identity, regional identity, and educational level or experience (see Appendix C). Participants also had the opportunity to name and describe any social location not on the sheet that they wanted to have included in the data collected. Lastly, the sheet asked participants to describe the kinds of social justice work they are engaged in, from the more recognized and “organized” ways and forms to the more intimate, “private,” everyday, interpersonal ways and forms (and everything in between).

During focus group and follow-up conversations, participants also shared the duration of the relationships within their configuration as well as details around when and how they met and came into being in relationship. Lastly, during the member-checking stage, participants were also invited to share, if they wanted to, the current state of their relational configurations.

### **Focus Groups**

As I was interested in the relational dynamics of queer kinship solidarity, I engaged in focus group research because I believe that talking with people within their queer chosen family relationships/groups through focus groups would provide more insight into the relational than individual in-depth interviews. Focus groups “capitalize on the richness and complexity of group dynamics” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 340). With their “synergistic potentials” and

“dynamism,” focus groups can “produce data that are seldom produced through individual interviewing and observation,” thus yielding “powerful knowledges and insights” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 339), including “sedimented collective memories and desires” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 340).

Focus groups also appealed to me because, in addition to being used in interpretive inquiry, they can be pedagogical and political (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 309). They can be pedagogical in that they can involve “collective engagement designed to promote dialogue and to achieve higher levels of understanding of issues critical to the development of a group’s interests and/or the transformation of conditions of its existence” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 310). They can be political and promote activism in that they can offer those involved, through engagement and dialogue, an opportunity to “transform the conditions of existence” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 310). I believe the focus groups in this study existed at the intersection of inquiry, pedagogy, and political action, acting as a practice of social justice inquiry, education, and action with regard to queer kinship solidarity relationships and the social justice education and action that occurs with/in and through them. What was most rewarding, as I mentioned briefly earlier, was to hear participants describe focus groups as a place where they were experiencing affirmation and appreciation, healing, re-commitment, and accountability, as well as joy and connection.

As I stated earlier, I completed three focus groups per queer chosen family/kin group (or pairing) that ranged from one hour and five minutes to two hours and 24 minutes in duration, totaling approximately 26 hours. The first focus group focused on the queer kinship origin story and journey (see Appendix D). The second focus group focused on the teaching and learning and the queerness of the kinship relationship(s)/ chosen family/group. The third focused on the social justice and liberation work taken up by participants with/in, through, and because of their queer kinship solidarity relationships, as well as what makes the relationships and their work queer and prefigurative. I had originally hoped to have an unstructured, across-family focus

group involving all families/groups that were willing to participate. However, only one kin pair expressed a willingness and capacity to opt-in to this component. While I cannot know for sure why, I suspect, as I will discuss later, that this was because of Zoom fatigue and because the study already had required a great deal of time, energy, and coordination on behalf of participants, particularly because of my and other participants' life events and challenges.

These family focus groups engaged participants in a discussion around what the building and sustaining of queer kinship solidarity relationship looks like for them, the learning, teaching, and action that takes place with/in and through them, and the ways that these relationships extend beyond "workspaces" (spaces where they are taking up the work of social justice in more formal or action/campaign-based ways) and are lived in the everyday. They were semi-structured conversations facilitated by me through the use of open-ended questions and probes designed to welcome the sharing of narratives (see Appendix D). Additionally, some families/participants chose to create a visual narrative in the form of collage (Trae and Mani; Alex and Sophie; Nicole and Tomi; and JuJu). All of the pairings/groups/participants that created collages used them as a springboard for the first focus group.

While I used research questions and related inquiries and shared the questions, topic areas, and probes that I had with participants during initial interest meetings, the participants and I engaged focus groups in such a way that they were "a process of seeking meaning together" (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 181), where we were open and engaged in what took place and shape in real-time in the focus group. I served as a facilitator of focus group conversations and a mirror, reflecting back on what was shared while transparently sharing my understandings and interpretations along the way so as to check myself and stay in deep, authentic, accountable relationship, disrupt the hierarchy of power between myself and the participants and allowing knowledge to be co-created as much as possible. With my connection to participants and to the topic, as well as my epistemology, I did not desire to act as a "strict researcher." However, I was surprised by the strong pull I felt at times to do so or the judgment



and shame I experienced when actively resisting or seeing, in the data, how I actively resisted. I made a note of this pull and self-judgment/shame during and after focus groups as well as while reviewing transcripts in the form of notes and memos within the transcripts.

This demonstrated, for me, the hold that these narrow ideas around objective research and “objective researcher” have, even on those of us with analysis around the oppressive histories that these ideologies and practices come from, even on those of us trying to do something different in terms of our engagement with inquiry. As I predicted, in the moments when I was able to break free from this conditioning and to be more fully myself when asking questions, mirroring, sharing my understandings and interpretations, and even offering up my own memories of folks participating in inviting narratives and pushing the conversation further, the conversations had a “richness” (Brock, 2005, p. 122) and dynamism that was lacking when I was afraid to do this out of fear of being an “unprofessional” researcher engaged in research that wasn’t “rigorous.” While I was first and foremost a facilitator and an active listener, I did answer direct questions posed to me by participants about the questions, my thoughts, and interpretations, as well as my own experiences with them or with others related to the topic. This allowed me to operate from a “hermeneutics of vulnerability” (Clifford, 1988, as cited in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013), foregrounding “the ruptures of fieldwork, the multiple and contradictory positionings of all participants, the imperfect control of the researcher, and the partial and perspectival nature of all knowledge” (p. 341).

We relived memories together, and when asked, I shared my own experiences of the different dynamics we were discussing. Contrary to the idea that, by sharing, I would “lead” and “coach” them into only offering what was similar to my experience or what they thought I wanted to hear, participants readily shared different experiences and perspectives and layered nuances and complexities into our discussion in response to my share. There was, in real-time, multiplicity and relationality and collective critical consciousness-raising. This fear around being open to and part of the process with participants, and specifically the fear that sharing

interpretations or analysis is a form of leading or manipulating participants, erases participant agency. I see this fear as related to either/or thinking, the idea that knowledge is objective, and that there is only ever “one right answer,” all of which are characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021).

With the topic of this project and my and the participants’ relation to it and to each other, focus groups were ideal as they are structured to allow for reflexive knowledge building, which “occurs through the dialogical practice of sharing with others” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 148). Within feminist and womanist traditions, focus groups have “mitigated the Western tendency to separate thinking and feeling, thus creating possibilities for reimagining knowledge as distributed, relational, embodied, and sensual” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). I took inspiration from how Brock (2005) conducted focus groups in her work *Sista Talk*, facilitating them as group conversations. In Brock’s (2005) sister-circles, she and seven of her Black female students investigated their collective journey toward self-awareness. For Brock (2005), “the group conversation method is a way of knowing and understanding the reality of Black life” and “is a culturally relevant qualitative ethnographic strategy ...” (p. 121).

For as long as I had dreamt of this project, I had envisioned doing focus groups in a way that is conversational and communal, where critical questioning, lived experience sharing, knowledge co-creation, connection, and future imagining take place in a homey setting and over food. This approach resonated with me and this project because it has been what we have engaged in with each other in the multi-racial, queer, feminist community organizing and public education spaces where we have come into consciousness-raising, social justice, and community with one another. However, it is important as a white researcher who worked with predominantly Black and Brown LGBTQ+ social justice workers to reiterate that the group conversation consciousness-raising tradition that informs this study is the Black and indigenous tradition that Brock (2005) names.

I still grieve that I was unable to conduct focus groups as I had originally envisioned them, taking place in someone's home and over food, which was not possible due to the state of COVID-19 at the time of data collection. However, I was amazed at the intimacy with which these conversations unfolded and attributed that to the relationships we had with each other before the project, as well as our ways of being in community as LGBTQ+ people in the social justice circles in which we run in North Carolina. We organically checked in with each other about life and updates at the beginning of and over the course of calls. Folks ate meals and had drinks and even cheered/toasted each other and me. We were in our living rooms, kitchens, offices, outside, wearing pajamas or comfy lounge wear or still in our work clothes from the day. We were never "interrupted" by cats and dogs, children and babies calling out for the care they needed, tea kettles signing and kitchen timers beeping, neighbors saying hello or playing music outside; it felt part of it all, part of being in relationship and in the world together, in the work of liberation together. In connecting with chosen family over Zoom over the course of the pandemic, I have talked with folks as we have both prepared and had meals, we've Zoomed while we were both outside, and showed each other the nature around us, and I've seen multiple videos of people using Zoom or FaceTime to eat together and dance together. It was beautiful and special to experience this in the context of this project which was occurring at a time and in a context that had all of us the most isolated that we had ever been.

### **Collage**

As I mentioned above briefly, in an attempt to attend to the embodied and nonverbal, inspired by auto-ethnographer Minge's (2013) collage method, I invited participants to create found object collages using physical objects, images, songs, etc. that they felt spoke to their journey and experience together as queer kin or queer chosen family to be included as visual narrative data. In her chapter "Mindful Autoethnography, local knowledges," Minge (2013) uses a "found object collage" to help the reader learn "what home can mean when we look to and learn from local actions within local contexts" (p. 435). Her goal, she explains, is to offer her

reader “a collage of texts” so that they can “engage the sensory pleasures of experience and nature” (Minge, 2013, p. 435). The photographs and collages she includes work to “create layers of texture and add a visual story to the text” and engage the audience’s senses differently (Minge, 2013, p. 434). Inspired by Minge (2013), I invited participants to incorporate collage as a visual narrative in order to allow them to, in a more holistic and embodied way, “share the sources, scents, voices, noises, and kinesthetic moments” (p. 434) of queer kinship solidarity relationships and the social justice education and action that take place with/in and through these relationships.

Originally I had told participants that if they wanted to do this optional component, my desire was that they either co-create it (in person if they were podding, living together, or virtually if they had the time and capacity to co-create it online) or each individually create a collage to share with the larger group/pair and myself during the first small family/kin group focus group, using them to deepen the conversation and the narratives they share about their kin relationship/groups’ origin story and journey. Those who did take up collage making didn’t end up using physical “found objects.” Instead, collages consisted mostly of photographs (with identifiable faces of folks not participating in the study blocked out), digital illustrations, and images “found” online via Google images. Additionally, participants took up the creation process of the collages in different ways. The varied ways they took it up, which I will discuss more below, evoked narratives and dynamics that might have been missed had participants all chosen to embark on creating visual narratives via collage in the two ways I had suggested. I see this as a queering of the research process *and* one that lays bare what is possible when researchers let go of being in complete control of the way the project and specifically, its methods, get taken up. It reminds me quite a bit of how, in queer pedagogy, we give direction and make room for multiple readings of texts and assignments or projects so as to hold open space for what is possible in the magical moment of learning. Ultimately, what resulted was the collages serving as a way for participants to story their relationships visually in a way that

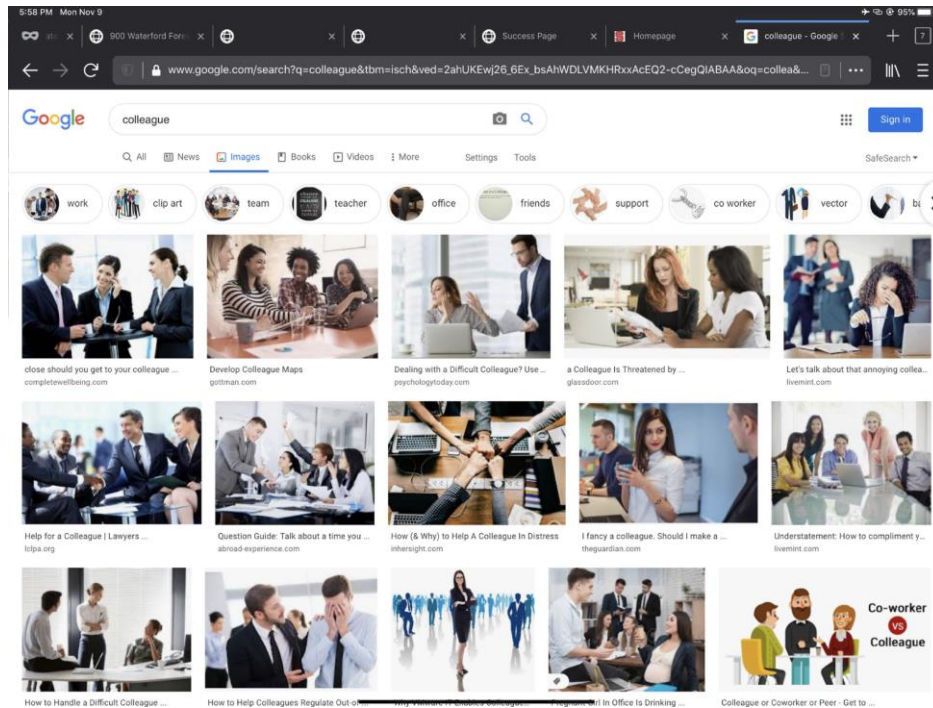
deepened the sharing of narratives as well as our conversations and learning together. And so rather than analyze them as standalone data, I wove them into the dissertation to operate as more of an addition to what was shared and expressed in focus groups, seeing them as additions that offer a visceral experience of what was shared about queer kinship.

Trae asked Mani to send him pictures, and Trae assembled the collage based on the pictures Mani sent as well as pictures he had of the two of them and those of Mani to which he gravitated (see Appendix E). Their collage was composed entirely of photographs, with the exception of the inclusion of a digital illustration Trae had done of his group of friends that included Mani. Mani elected to begin the first focus group with Trae's creation as a jumping-off point because they were eager to see what they had trusted him to create. What I loved was that Mani asked Trae directly why he chose certain pictures, and the two experienced so much joy and laughter remembering the memories captured in the pictures, sharing what those memories meant to them, and explaining what they said about their relationship, how it had grown, as well as what it was doing for them and in the world.

Sophie and Alex co-created their collage which was composed of photographs as well as images they found online via Google Images to represent what they understood to be significant characteristics of their relationship and important moments and memories (see Appendix F). Alex guided us through the collage at the beginning of focus group one, with Sophie also sharing why they selected the images they did. What was particularly interesting and telling about their collage share was how they brought a lot of meta-analysis, with humor, to their discussions of their experience of searching for and finding images for the collage, specifically the "colleague" image, which included people who looked nothing like either of them. In a way that only two sociology doctoral students could, they included the image to include that discussion and analysis into their collage, dissecting the dominant culture's racialized, gendered, and classed ideas present in the image of colleagues as a bunch of white cisgender appearing men and women dressed in suits. They explained how this, in some ways, mirrored

some of the racist, sexist, cis-sexist, heterosexual, and classist power dynamics they both, particularly Alex, navigate in the academy.

**Figure 2. Representation of “Colleagues” from Alex and Sophie’s Collage**



Tomi (see Appendix G) and Nicole (see Appendix H) each completed their own collages that were also almost entirely composed of photographs, with the exception of Nicole, who incorporated some images she found online and artwork that she felt represented her social justice work as an educator. They each shared their respective collages in focus group one, speaking about each photo, what it meant to them, and why they included it, speaking to me directly for the most part but also engaging in a remembering together. Nicole joked that she could have combined their two collages but didn't know how to do that; instead, they kept them separate and presented them one after the other. Their collages were focused on who they were as individuals and a couple, how they had grown individually and as a couple because of the relationship, how they saw the other person, and what they had been able to do and experience within and through the relationship, together and separately. Completing separate collages allowed them to really highlight the differences of their experiences in their journey

together within the relationship and what the relationship made possible for them individually and in other relations beyond it.

Lastly, the only group to incorporate a collage was Green, Holden, Morgan, JuJu, and Tree's group, with JuJu completing a collage by themselves and sharing it with the group (see Appendix I). Similar to Nicole and Tomi, JuJu selected images to share who they are and how they experience the relationships within the relational configuration of the group. JuJu volunteered to begin focus group one with their collage share, which consisted entirely of digital images that they had found, including no photographs, making it unlike any of the other collages. The group and I listened as JuJu took us through the collage and why they selected each of the images. All of the other participants in this kin group expressed their gratitude to JuJu, similar to how Mani did with Trae, for creating the collage and taking them through their re-membering and experiences of the group. After JuJu finished, other participants in that group began sharing their experiences and stories organically, flowing off of what JuJu had just shared.

While my initial hope was that all queer chosen family or kinship pairings and groups would be able to complete a found object collage together prior to the first focus group, with the physical challenges of COVID-19 and the toll the capacity took on folks in terms of time, energy, etc. this was not possible. However, as stated above, the ways that folks completed collages in the capacities they could and the ways that they desired allowed for a sharing of narratives, insights, and memories in ways that I did not anticipate and that might not have been possible before. Furthermore, I think that for the folks who used photographs, seeing themselves before the pandemic, traveling, going out, dancing, and being in physical space allowed them to feel both joy and grief, which some expressed, and allowed them to experience healing and connection together that they really needed. The collages provided a grounding for the conversation and the narratives that were shared by participants about their kin relationship/groups' origin story and journey. In short, despite the challenges, I believe that

incorporating this method allowed participants and I to be in and learn from more embodied and mindbodyspirit (Anzaldúa, 2012) ways of knowing that are often missing from the research and were missing from this project in some ways due to some groups and pairs losing the ability to meet with me and each other in-person.

### **Embodiment notes**

In addition to collecting verbal data from focus groups, I also incorporated observation. I took embodiment notes during each Zoom focus group and inserted what I call embodiment notes into the transcripts in the form of typed notes via the comments feature. All transcripts with my notes and memos<sup>11</sup> were transferred to a secure file in Box, which is password protected. After I transferred all transcripts with their memos and notes to Box, I deleted what was kept elsewhere, including the audio recordings and the transcripts I either created myself or obtained through an IRB-approved transcription service to maximize data security. All final transcripts that I kept used pseudonyms selected by participants or their names if they chose to use their names and pseudonyms for anyone not participating in the study who participants mentioned. Incorporating embodiment notes allowed me to take into account the embodied and experiential, which is in alignment with the theoretical foundation and focus of this project.

With the classic approach to observation being “a model of interaction in which power resided in the ethnographer (who set the research agenda and implicitly represented the more generalized power of elite institutions)” (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2013, p. 155), I was mindful of how incorporating this method might feel to participants. As I stated earlier, I feel a deep kinship with many of the participants in this project and, as a social justice scholar, I think it is critical

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<sup>11</sup> Memos in research refer to the writings researchers complete during a study on what is occurring in the study (Johnson, 2017). They are often used by researchers to make note of and later address issues within the study (Johnson, 2017). Reflective memos typically consist of notes where the researcher reflects on “initial impressions of a community” “tensions that arise” or “commonalities or areas of divergence between themselves and participants” (Johnson, 2017, p. 127). Methodological memos are a space for researchers to, through writing, “work through obstacles encountered in data collection or critique aspects of the data collection process” (Johnson, 2017, p. 127). Lastly, analytical memos are writings in which researchers begin to explore and work through their analysis of data (Johnson, 2017).



that researchers not treat participants as “depersonalized objects of research” (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2013, p. 166). I made clear to all the participants that I saw myself as working with the community (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2013, p. 167), doing research “with people and not on people” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64), and intended to do what I could to share power in the research process (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2013, p. 155).

For these reasons, I disclosed early on during interest meetings with queer families/kin groups and pairings that I was interested in using observation as a method and that my intention was to take notes after focus groups about what I observed in an effort to try and capture the embodied, nonverbal, experiential dynamics of queer kinship solidarity. I shared transcripts with my embodiment notes for them to member-check.<sup>12</sup> I also shared with them that I would turn the powers of observation on myself as a practice of reflexivity and included these in notes and memos in and alongside the transcripts that I shared with them as a way to continue to move in transparency and accountability.

### **Challenges and Issues in Data Collection**

In this project, participants and I navigated challenges with regard to confidentiality and technological issues. Both of these issues were compounded by the impact of COVID-19 on the structure of the project. I believe that the participants and I were able to, through engaging consent and communicating clearly, find solutions that honored all involved and provided meaningful ways to engage with each other in the project.

#### **Confidentiality**

In focus group research, as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013) warn, confidentiality is harder because while I, as the researcher, could reassure participants that I am bound by IRB to keep confidentiality, I could not and cannot still guarantee that other participants will do the same. I informed the participants of this challenge but also indicated to them and IRB that I

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<sup>12</sup> Member-checking is when a researcher asks participants for feedback on transcripts, field notes, memos, and/or analysis. Member-checking can enhance the reliability and validity of a project (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 327).

believed the potential risk of participants breaking the confidentiality of focus groups was outweighed by the benefits of what we could learn together (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

I asked participants in the informed consent for permission to record using audio so as to facilitate transcription and also put an option on the form for them to consent to allow me to use the audio recordings in future presentations of the data. I assured participants that all written transcripts would use pseudonyms should each queer chosen family/kinship group select to use them. Some participants elected, with the group/pair's consent, to use their real names. I explained to all groups and pairs that this might make those folks using pseudonyms more identifiable. I also, as stated earlier, automatically used pseudonyms for any person discussed in the focus groups who was not a participant in the study as they were not able to give their consent. Additionally, at the direction of participants, I used descriptors for the organizations, groups, locations, institutions, etc., that they discussed so as to minimize identifiable data.

There was also the issue of confidentiality regarding collages for the participants who selected to include that form of narrative in the project. I informed participants that their use of pictures of people or personal objects in the collage could make them and others more identifiable in my dissertation and any future publications based on these data.

What makes issues of confidentiality a bit more complicated with regard to this study is that, with COVID-19, I conducted all of the focus groups via Zoom. I took precautions while using Zoom, including requiring a password for folks to access the meeting as well as utilizing the waiting room feature and manually admitting participants to the meeting one at a time. I disclosed the challenges and risks of focus groups and using Zoom with participants in the outreach email, during the initial interest meeting, and within the informed consent form. All the participants were comfortable with and consented to the privacy measures that I took.

Lastly, while I am being mindful of the autoethnographic pieces I include in this dissertation, my being connected to the project in the way that I am, makes it easier for people reading my dissertation or any publications that should come out of the project to identify those

who have been involved due to their relational proximity to me. I have invited participants to member-check my writing to see if it is too identifiable and have told them that, if they desire more anonymity, I am willing to work with them to change aspects of how they are described (Tullis, 2013), fictionalizing some of the narratives shared (Ellis, 2004, as cited in Tullis, 2013) or using “composite characters” (Ellis, 2007, as cited in Tullis, 2013) for family/kin members and/or groups/pairings that represent them but make them less identifiable.

### **Technological Issues**

Another issue that I experienced in having to use Zoom was the strength of the Internet connection. There were several focus groups in which participants lost connection or cut out during the call and had to exit and re-enter. Thankfully, folks were patient with getting everyone back on the call and continuing each time. There were other instances, particularly with the largest group that were not together in a pod, where, in order to maintain connection, folks had to turn off their cameras, which meant that I could not take notes on how folks were being embodied during the conversation. These issues were frustrating and did disrupt the flow of being together in conversations and narrative sharing, but they are to be expected in these times. Additionally, as was the case with the collages, folks were creative and used the chat as a way to interject and affirm without interrupting verbally and, through the use of emojis, folks were virtually “embodied” in real-time with one another even when having their cameras off.

Lastly, many of the participants were already experiencing burnout with regard to these technologies as they had to spend more and more of their time on Zoom calls for organizing and other work. As mentioned earlier, I believe that this was potentially a reason folks did not elect to participate in the final, optional, across-family focus group. However, the commitment to each other and the project within the within-family focus groups seemed to keep folks as energized as possible, with folks engaging with each other and with me on camera and sometimes in the chat in ways that were warm, holistic, embodied, playful, etc. These moments of coping and connecting using these technologies despite their challenges continue to mean so much to me

as they really showed me how adaptive we could be in navigating the times we are in and the issues that arise in doing this kind of inquiry and in general.

### **Data Analysis, Transformation, and Representation**

Although like others (Pillow & Mayo, 2007) I trouble the notion of an “end” to such work, at the “end” of the data collection, I, as St. Pierre (2013) puts it, stayed “close to the data” and read “transcripts and embodiment notes” and listened “to tapes repeatedly” (p. 470). I engaged in reading, thinking, and writing—being in the entanglement of data, data collection, and data analysis (p. 471). I believe, as St. Pierre (2013) does, that “when one must bring to bear on writing, in writing, what one has read and lived, that is thinking that cannot be taught. That is analysis” (p. 469). And so my analysis has been with the participants and with theory because I have never been without them.

As I discussed earlier, I employed both a post-qualitative and CAP Ethnographic approach to data analysis and representation. I believe that a hybrid post-qualitative and CAP Ethnographic approach best suited this project because of how such analysis and representation can hold complexities, nuances, and multitudes in ways that are embodied and relational in process and product.

### **Accountability and Trustworthiness: Member-Checks**

As I stated earlier, I would have loved for this project to have been more participatory, with participants acting as co-researchers; however, many participants were working demanding social justice-related jobs and, with COVID-19, were having to shift work in new and unexpected ways, navigating completely new terrain. These shifts have demanded a lot of them, so taking the time to participate in three focus groups and the follow-up communication was already a lot to ask of them.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, one participant left the project after data collection concluded. They provided the following information for me to share in the project to give more context:

So many things have changed in the world and in me since the project started, causing me to relate to myself and the people in the project in a very different way. As a result, I no longer wish to participate.

The group with the three remaining members did continue to participate, and out of respect to the other person and to themselves, because the conflict and struggles were so raw and present, they did not go into detail regarding what they were navigating.

Since the time the last focus groups were held, some of the relationships/relational configurations between and among participants have changed shape with folks not, at present, in active relationship with one another. This was shared with me by participants in follow-up communication, and I will include this information in the “Meet the Families” section and discuss it more at length in the chapter on connection.

In an effort to be as accountable as possible to the participants and move in integrity with the community-enmeshed grounding of this project, I incorporated member-checking of all transcripts, embodiment notes, and researcher memos. I also shared the themes that I identified with participants within pairings and kinship groups/families prior to engaging in analysis and writing. I invited participant feedback on transcripts, embodiment notes, and researcher memos, as well as themes and subthemes, asking them if there is anything that I’ve missed that they remember or experienced in the focus group. I spoke to several participants at length before I began writing data chapters and completely shifted the conceptualization I had on the last theme, connection, based on what was shared with me.

Lastly, with folks who expressed an interest and capacity, I shared portions of my writing and analysis that applied to their pairing or group and/or participant for them to check on and offer feedback on. With the current conditions that folks have been navigating for the last 2 years, while I desired extensive feedback, this kind of review and communication, in addition to participating in three in-depth focus groups, was just not feasible for all of the participants and/or kin pairings/groups because of the time and energy required. However, I still made time to get

transcripts with coding and beginning analysis, embodiment notes, researcher memos, documents with themes and sub-themes, and portions of my analysis and writing to participants for them to have and for them to provide me feedback on if they had the capacity. These opportunities for participant feedback help me to stay in alignment with my commitment to transparency and right relation with the participants in this project.

### **Ethics, Reflexivity, and Reciprocity**

My ethical framework is informed by my commitment to challenge power and oppression, “producing research that is useful and contributes to social justice” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 150). A major part of operationalizing this commitment involves maintaining reflexivity. As a feminist scholar, I worked to “maintain a reflexive awareness” as “research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but rather, are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 182). I occupy multiple positions of power as a white, able-bodied, american-born-citizen with higher educational privilege and access to generational wealth. And so, while I might share these positionalities with some participants as well as some of my positionalities of marginalization, including queerness, gender queerness, madness, and working-class status, as the researcher and originator of the project, I am always an outsider-within. I worked to be an active listener at all stages of the research process, ready to “acknowledge the ignorance” my own privileges produce (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183) and “interrogate my deep-seated assumptions about various worlds” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, pp. 184–185). As Hesse-Biber (2007) asserts, “practicing reflexivity also includes paying attention to the specific ways in which our own agendas affect the research at all points in the research process” (p. 17). I have done my best to be as vigilant as possible to the ways in which the power that I hold as the researcher, and someone who inevitably benefits directly from this project being my dissertation, shaped the events and interactions within the project.

As queer pedagogue and thinker Kumashiro (2002) reminds us, we often resist knowledge that disrupts what we already know. Citing Britzman (1998), Kumashiro (2002) contends that this involves our unconscious search for ourselves in our learning, wanting to see our identities and experiences reflected back to us in the ways we understand and know them (p. 73). Because of my proximity to the topic, employing critical performance pedagogy's ethical, embodied listening helped me to engage the resistance that may have arisen from that discomfort, particularly around relationships between and among participants ending and shifting. This enabled me to take up "un-learning or questioning" what I believe I should be or was supposed to be learning (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 74) from and teaching about participants. By engaging listening as "an active and on-going process," one that "is always a changing and relational phenomenon" (McRae & Nainby, 2015, p. 174), a critical performance that "constitutes our relationships to and with others in dialogue" and "is always situated contextually and materially in the world" I was able to stay in an on-going critical dialogue that was grounded in the socio-political realities of those involved, in all of their shifting, slippery, and complex situatedness (McRae & Nainby, 2015, pp. 173–174).

Taking up listening in this way allowed me to be co-present in the Freirean sense (McRae & Nainby, 2015, pp. 180–181), existing in communication and community with others with an ethic of mutual care and support at the heart of collaboration. Thus, as part of my research approach, I included this embodied and ethical performance of listening as it is a textured and disciplined praxis through which "we become aware of our temporal relation to a complex and evolving world" (Adorno, 1992, as cited in McRae & Nainby, 2015, p. 182). Ethical, embodied listening requires openness; it is physically demanding and requires an unselfish orientation with the other or the text so that the listener does not exclusively attend to either the similarities or differences of the other but takes a stance of openness to the complexity of the other (McRae & Nainby, 2015, p. 175).

Taking up listening as a conscious practice was a critical component of my work as a researcher in this project. Two of the practices that helped fortify and sustain me in this kind of listening involved engaging in somatic centering practices (Strozzi Institute, 2021) prior to all focus groups and using meditation and journaling when receiving challenging information during follow-ups and member-checking. These practices enabled me to expand my reflexivity and enhance my critical engagement with my own emotional and bodily responses to the information so that I could sit in the fire with my participants in the ways that Bettez (2011b) describes, and stay in the trying in ways that allowed me to dwell in and share all the complex messiness of living for liberation.

In terms of reciprocity, in my discussions with participants, I expressed how important it was to me that the project benefited those involved and the communities they are a part of and serve as much as possible. I wanted participants to feel that they have ownership over what they contributed and expressed my desire that they use it while still honoring and deferring to the various levels of confidentiality of those in their group/pairing. I am still very interested in what can come out of this project beyond my dissertation and am in conversation with some of the participants about co-writing and presentation. I hope to discuss these possibilities further with participants as well as embark on future projects together shaped and inspired by this work in order to find a way to make this kind of reciprocity a reality.

### **Conclusion**

As a committed learner, teacher, thinker, writer, and community member for liberation, I believe that scholarly inquiry that seeks to take up a social justice agenda must be “accessible for public education” and “community transformation” (Denzin, 2010, p. 102). With the bricolage of methodologies and methods that I engaged in this study, I believe the participants and I can do just that. My hope is that the work within these pages brings to the fore existing living knowledges, however partial and incomplete they may be, in ways that lead to discoveries, creations, and enactments of new possibilities previously unimagined. I believe that this project



is just a beginning, an inquiry project that I hope will allow for further opening up of our collective imaginations and thus our collective actions in the pursuit of justice so that we can “get a little closer to the longed-for but unrealized world ...” (Pratt, 1984, p. 13).

## CHAPTER IV: LEARNING FROM THE TRYING

“The participants you are selecting,” my committee member asked from the little box she inhabited on my screen over Zoom, “you are picking them for this project because they are exemplars of queer kinship solidarity?” I did and didn’t understand her question. I guess she could tell by the look on my face, however pixelated from the strained Internet connection I had. “What I’m saying is, are they particularly good at what you are exploring?”

Are they particularly good at it? “What a weird question,” I thought. I was mildly irritated but then remembered she likely wouldn’t be the last scholar to wonder this about the participants in this project, particularly because of my selection process—I mean, they are my friends and friends of friends. Are any of us good at it? Creating a new world with each other. In my experience, the moment we think we are good at something, or better than others at it, growth, the open window to possibility starts closing. That was what I had been so frustrated with about the literature and our mainstream or common discussions in society in general about solidarity work and social justice community and relationship building—we’ve reduced something so damn hard, something so complex and messy, to neat Everyday Feminism “how to” lists that, while semi-helpful, couldn’t be further from what we are trying to do together. Things are so context-specific, personal, and ever-changing.

Now, having collected all my data, if I were to write a recipe for “how to seek out queer kinship solidarity relationships,” it would go something like this:

- go get dollar froyo together
- have Thursday night dinners and talk about getting land some day and sharing chickens
- go to Sunday waffles to “get this plate” and be a Titi to the babies
- dance, get messy drunk, go home with a mistake, and laugh about it over text

- go to trans lobby day, an action, a meeting—late, looking cute, dedicated, and interesting
- start an isolating and frustrating Ph.D. program
- carve pumpkins and do crafts
- co-work at a coffee shop
- fall in love

How do we hold that most everything in life falls into a space between intentionally seeking something and stumbling upon it? Isn't co-creating community for liberation really about building in the space between looking for and finding? Being clueless and being especially good at? Staying in the trying?

Participants over and over again said things like:

I think there's something about being vulnerable ... which is something I wouldn't say I'm particularly good at. (Parker)

I'm a work in progress, too, man. (Concetta)

I'm trying to be better at it. (Alex)

All these folks have also helped me to slow down and to really grow in my ability to have patience to build with, right? ... and sometimes I still struggle with it. (Green)

I am trying to do these things and, you know, tap into or partially, however much I can, to how they might be feeling. But actually doing that, I'm not so great at. (Sophie)

I'm still unlearning a lot of stuff and it just never stops. (Nicole)

Maybe we should be learning (and unlearning) from each other—the ones who are learning and onto something (even if we fail, or fall short, or mess up a lot)—who don't feel like they are “particularly good at it” but never stop trying, trying for and with each other, together—not together as in always on the same page, always collected or even always connected—but together in the way Archbishop Desmond Tutu described Ubuntu, with our humanity “caught up,

inextricably bound up” in one another’s—belonging to the bundle of life (as cited in Birdsong, 2020, p. 19).

As Green said, “we are grounded in the people, and we are grounded in the—in the where we’re trying to go.”

Grounded in each other and the collective, the participant kin pairings and groups of this project are staying in the trying together, the trying to go somewhere more liberatory in each moment, somewhere more liberatory for all.

## CHAPTER V: MEET THE FAMILIES

In this section, I introduce the participants and the kin pairings and groups using the information that they provided via the open-ended background information sheets and follow-up conversations.

### **Trae and Mani**

Trae and Mani have been friends since they met in December 2007 at Trae's college's Winter Formal Dance, which, as Trae said, "feels fitting as dance has featured heavily in our relationship since then." Trae and Mani remain queer kin to each other to this day.

Trae is a 35-year-old Black American cisgender man, a descendant of Enslaved African peoples from the American South and the Caribbean. He has a BA in Psychology, underwent an Anti-racism training in college, and went on to earn a MA in Peace and Conflict and Library Studies. He comes from a working-class background and, in terms of income level, is "technically lower class." He is able-bodied and does not have any mental health divergences that he knows of. He is a gay/queer, single, non-monogamous, "probably aromantic" man who is attracted to quiet masculinity in many forms. He is a "Southern Boy," having lived most of his life in North Carolina, specifically the Triad. He was raised in the Church of God in Christ, a very conservative church, and while he identifies as culturally Christian, he does not ascribe to any organized religion and instead practices some Hoodoo traditions. He has worked as an Academic Librarian since 2010 and engages in social justice through the displays and blog posts he does as an information specialist at a private, predominantly white institution of Higher Education. He also sees the everyday practices he takes as part of his social justice work, including the interpersonal support he provides to friends who are frontline activists, his everyday practice of not using gendered language to refer to folks he does not know, as well as educating others on systems of oppression and what they can do to disrupt them in his

everyday conversations and interactions with them. As part of his engagement with activism, Trae has also illustrated a Two Spirit Children's Book.

Mani is 32-year-old immigrant queer from Oaxaca, Mexico. Mani graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a BA in biology, a minor in medical anthropology, and a concentration in chemistry. They are currently working on their degree in nursing. Mani describes their experience living as an undocumented person in the United States as the training that has shaped their life. Mani learned early on that being queer, speaking a foreign language, and undocumented, they had to be extra fucking fierce. Their experience going through the asylum process in the U.S. and being inside a detention center were probably some of the most difficult moments in their life. After being released from the detention center, Mani joined a Black-led LGBTQ+ organizing collective for queer and trans people of color in North Carolina, and this was a really important moment for them to learn how to be a better ally to the Black community and also learn tips from them on how to survive as a queer POC in this country.

### **Alex and Sophie**

Alex and Sophie met through their Ph.D. program in 2016, beginning as friends and colleagues and then becoming involved romantically after a night out at a gay nightclub and drag show in the North Carolina city where they were both attending school. Today they no longer are involved romantically but remain close, again, another queer tradition of sorts. In addition to being queer kin, colleagues, and peers, they share custody of a furry companion, a bunny rabbit named Bunz.

Alex is a 32-year-old non-Black-assumed Latine Colombian immigrant, from Bogota, with Spaniard blood from their paternal side and indigenous blood (Colombian territory) from their maternal side. For Alex, their immigrant identity is central to who they are; additionally, as the eldest child in their family, they, like other eldest children in immigrant families, had to navigate important familial obligations that "one does not easily get away from." They said of their generational class background, "My parents are college-educated (in Colombia), but that

doesn't always translate to much as immigrants in the US. Growing up, my parents put food on the table ... always at a cost somewhere else." Currently, they are living on less than a liveable wage as a doctoral student living on a graduate assistant stipend from a large, public, predominantly white state institution in North Carolina. Alex struggles with mental health and has an "invisible" handicap; they are deaf in their left ear and have a head injury that periodically flares up. They move in the world as a cis-assumed trans person and explained that while some folks would classify them as non-binary, they do not resonate with that term because "it reaffirms the (fake) binary." They are a queer serially monogamous person with poly tendencies, lean toward relationship anarchy, and are a believer in platonic intimacy. They have lived in the Northern U.S. and Southern U.S., and while they "used to call myself a northern," if asked, they explained that that feels disingenuous now and that they are "Slowly learning to embrace the south; though not an identity, it feels worth naming."

Regarding their engagement with social justice work, they said the following:

What isn't social justice work? Sometimes that is what it feels like. I do my best to show up across all spaces grounded with ideas of harm reduction, trauma-aware, and equity in mind—both personal and "professional" spaces, whatever private and public means in today's world. What work can happen is dependent on the space, people in it, and capacity. Sometimes it's just listening (biweekly meetings with students in my department to hold space for them). It can be connecting resources (current employment with local Latine non-profit). Giving time (mentoring young trans and gender-expansive youth). Community-building and relationship-building has been recent work—it's what sustains, it's how we learn to care for one another, lean in towards one another; this is part of healing, part of continuing the work. Direct action through marches, protests, rallies, letter writing, phone banking. Taking up leadership positions within the university to get face time with leadership and other powerful actors to raise the conversation

about mental health. Visibly and loudly existing as a Brown trans person is in itself social justice work.

Sophie is a 31-year-old white American cisgender woman. She has a MA and is currently completing her Ph.D. in Sociology. She comes from an upper-middle class white suburban family and currently is right above the poverty line “with student loans and debt.” She is a neurodivergent person who navigates the world with ADD/ADHD, severe anxiety and panic disorder, and OCD. She is queer and monogamous. She was born and raised in the U.S. South and is living in North Carolina currently. During data collection, she was an instructor of Sociology & Criminology at a liberal arts college for women in the triad area of North Carolina and is now currently teaching at the institution she attends as a doctoral student. In addition to engaging in social justice work in her doctoral studies and teaching, she has been involved with in-the-streets Black Lives Matter protests and direct actions, including recent protests in response to anti-trans legislation. She also has been actively involved with a group for friends, partners, and allies of transgender people and considers the everyday conversations she has with students about their gendered experiences inside and outside of the classroom. She considers everyday conversations and holding folks accountable for the ways in which they perpetuate oppression “arguably the most important, on-the-ground social justice work one can do.”

### **Nicole and Tomi**

Nicole and Tomi met through mutual friends just before Nicole’s senior year in college, 1996/1997. On Nicole’s graduation day, which was May 18, 1997, also her birthday, they officially planned to move in together and have been together ever since. They remain spouses to each other to this day.

Nicole is a 49-year-old Black American “Southerner by way of the North” whose primary identities include: Wife/Partner, Daughter, Sister, Friend, and Teacher. She is middle class and has a Ph.D. She lives with chronic sinusitis, a chronic environmental disability. She is a



monogamous queer/lesbian cisgender woman. Nicole has a history of active involvement with local and statewide social justice organizations, having served on the leadership of an LGBTQ+ safe schools board, mentoring Black boys and Black girls, and serving as a founding board member of a social justice-focused experiential public charter school. She presently takes up social justice work through “intentional #hashtag activism,” teaching K-Graduate students, curating house music content alongside Tomi, distributing and mixing essential oils, writing and co-writing, working as a curriculum facilitator at the school where she teaches, and engaging in national community building and organizing efforts with teachers of Color committed to racial justice in schools.

Tomi is a 55-year-old Black American, Southern, non-practicing Methodist. She is a monogamous lesbian tomboy whose primary identities include Daughter, Sister, Aunt, Cousin, Friend, and Teammate. She sees herself as taking up social justice work as an entrepreneur and artist as well as through Sister/Brother gatherings. She considers herself an advocate for Sisters/Women in Business and in the workplace, LGBT rights in the workplace, Environmental Justice, Equal Pay for Women, Women in Politics, and Women in Technology/Entertainment.

### **Parker, Loni, and Concetta**

Parker and Loni met through the North Carolina LGBTQ+ social and political community around 2010/2011. Parker and Concetta met at Trans Lobby Day in Washington, DC in 2013. Concetta met Loni through Parker when Concetta moved to North Carolina to begin a life with Parker in 2014. Concetta and Parker remain in a romantic partnership, and they both still are queer kin to Loni.

Parker is a 39-year-old light-skinned Black survivor of childhood abuse who is originally from New Jersey with paternal lineage in North Carolina and Virginia, so, to quote him, “not from the South but of the South.” He has his Ph.D. in Educational Studies with a concentration in Higher Education and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. He also underwent training with Black Organizing for Leadership & Dignity (BOLD). Historically poor-working class, he now is

experiencing new class privilege/mobility. Parker owns his own business and makes approximately \$40,000 a year, and Concetta, his white partner, makes \$118,000/year. He is queer non-binary, trans masculine, and butch. Parker experiences and understands himself as neurodivergent as a person with ADHD, depression, and PTSD. In terms of social justice work, Parker is a community organizer and a Healing Justice Practitioner that does group and individual work as a mental health therapist in private practice. Parker also, as a community elder, practices deep care work that has him “on call for crisis moments,” serving as a “stand-in doula during moments of life and death and most things in between.”

Concetta is a 36-year-old white Italian-American queer, polyamorous, genderqueer femme. They have working-class roots and now are middle class. They are a mentally ill person who is also physically disabled, living with chronic back pain. They also identify as spiritual and a Southerner. Concetta primarily engages in social justice through their work, a health care association that supports 42 community health center organizations with over 300 clinical sites across North Carolina. These 42 organizations provide high-quality primary care to individuals regardless of their ability to pay and regardless of immigration status.

Loni is a 42-year-old Black queer, genderqueer non-binary, relationally fluid, fat, Southern person. They grew up working-class, went to graduate school, and are now middle class. They describe themselves as non-religious but spiritual. They have ADD, depression, and anxiety. They see themselves as taking up social justice work through arming/food justice, personal healing, accountability, and transformation work, as well as studying/learning about systems of oppression.

### **Green, Holden, Morgan, JuJu, and Tree**

Green and Holden first met through their involvement in social justice community organizing in North Carolina in 2014. Within the next 2 years, Green and Holden both, through statewide organizing work, came into community and relationship with Morgan, Tree, and JuJu. Since the last focus group, some of the folks have remained close with each other, while others

are currently on the outs. All expressed a deep love and care for each other, even those who took up more “distant” connections with one another. Some expressed that they held out hope for future repair and returns.

Green is a 32-year-old Black queer polyamorous North Easterner with ancestral lineage from the deep South. Some primary identities for them include single teen parent, trans, and survivor. They grew up low-income and are now working-class. They have dyslexia and seasonal depression. They practice West African spirituality. In terms of social justice work, they lead both statewide and national Black-led formations.

Holden is a 32-year-old Black person of African/Indigenous descent, specifically West African, Gullah Geechee, and Turtle Island indigeneity. Regionally, they are a Southerner of Turtle Island, a Carolina queer. They are a non-binary, gender non-conforming, transgender pansexual non-mongamous queer person. They grew up and continue to be working-class. While they were raised Christian, they have a hard time holding that identity due to the role of institutionalized Christianity. They said of this, “it doesn’t feel aligned with my beliefs. I’m a believer in the radical teachings of Jesus and identify as a churchy mystic.” Some of their primary identities include artist/creative, observer, and experimenter. They wear glasses and have since they were young and also had this to say about disability and mental health:

I’m considered mentally ill by the DSM, and to be Black, and queer, and trans in this society can be a mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically destabilizing and disabling experience.

With regard to social justice work, Holden serves grassroots networks across North Carolina, supporting them in coming together and carrying out local efforts. They do similar work on a national level as well. In their everyday acts, they buy local as much as possible to divest from big agriculture and grow their own food when they have access to resources. They also support campaigns for abolition and expanding our imagination around safety.

Morgan is a 26-year-old Black American Southerner. They grew up poor and low income and are now working class. They are queer, polyamorous, non-binary, and gender fluid. In terms of physical and mental health, they experience recurring back and hip spasms and depression. They are a community organizer, nonprofit director, aspiring Prison Industrial Complex abolitionist, and a Black queer feminist, caretaker of kin.

JuJu is a 30-year-old Black American Southerner who is originally from rural Maryland. They are working class. They have depression and anxiety. They are queer, nonbinary/fluid, and polyamorous. One of their primary identities is parent, which they represented by incorporating an image of a baby bottle on their collage. They take up social justice work in many ways, including through community-based research, campaigning (nationally for reparations and NC Supreme Court), emotional support, healing and safety (BYP100 rep and broadly in community/family), and environmental-healing justice through teaching QTBIPOC in the South how to swim. They are also engaged in cross-cultural relationship-building from NC to Rwanda, trainings/presentations locally and internationally about anti-racist and intersectional pedagogical approach, and peace and justice youth work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. They are an outdoors enthusiast and bake cookies and send gifts to folks as part of their care for their soul and others.

Tree is a 46-year-old Black, Afro-Powhatan. They most identify as an energetic signature that expresses as gender non-conforming, Queer, and Indigenous spirit. They have lived, loved, and worked alongside new arrival Southeast Asian, African, Mexican, Central American Indigenous refugees in urban West Coast, Midwest, and they have made a home in a rural Southeast unincorporated community of the United States. They grew up poor and remain in the peasant class as a recent land steward and new farmer. They are physically fit, recovering from lifelong systemic and personal trauma and PTSD, and regaining a sense of safety and their abilities in language and executive function. They take up social justice work by facilitating timebanking, coordinating resource distribution and value alignments, as well as a

self-governance experiment among local, Black-led, and Indigenous land-based solidarity economy projects based in the Southeast and extending throughout North America and the global south to expand Black folks' capacity to divest from the carceral economy, sustain and protect economic self-determination. They are working to create and curate a forum of transformative and abolitionist music, thought, and visual work and bridge land stewards to build a global edible, medicinal and habitable food forest. Interpersonally, they often initiate mutual aid within family and tribal cohorts, aspire to collaborative creativity to practice, and try on the way they and their loved ones reimagine our experience in the world.

## CHAPTER VI: QUEER SOUTHERN BECOMINGS

In this section, I discuss the ways in which queer kinship solidarity is characterized by fluidity in terms of how people come into and move in relationship with one another. I discuss the role of the South, specifically North Carolina, in the relational configurations in this project, fleshing out the ways in which the relationships within this project are of, with, and for the South. Lastly, I share what bearing I think this has on the learning possible from this project for those engaging in liberation work within the current times and in the larger context of the United States or colonized Turtle Island.

### **Fluid Meetings and Beings With**

Parker, Loni, and Concetta, who were podding at the time of data collection, sat cozily on a couch together under some blankets remembering and recounting how they each met and came into relationship with each other.

“We met, I think, at D’s house,” Parker said, looking at Loni.

“At whose house?” Loni asked, looking puzzled.

“D’s,” Parker repeated.

“No, I don’t think so,” Loni replied quickly.

“You don’t think so?” Parker asked.

Loni looked off, trying to find the memories and the words, “I think it was,” they paused, “Oh,” they said, snapping their fingers, “it was at a general assembly meeting.” “I remember your sister being there,” they continued, “it was like in a rec center or something for some event.” Loni was looking at Parker from across the couch, beside Concetta, gesturing with both of their hands out and around as if to bring the space, which they were now picturing in their mind, to life in the living room. “And then we just kept crossing paths because of the collective,” they explained, bringing their pointer fingers together in front of them, “we just kept crossing paths, I think.”

Parker interjected with a playful lightness in his tone, looking at Concetta and Loni, who were looking at him, sitting beside him on the couch.

It just sounds like we all lesbian dated each other. It wasn't like, \*laughs\*, I don't think, it wasn't like we actually dated. I don't know, it was like, uh, we became immersed. I don't remember making a decision, like conscious or like, "Oh, I should get to know this person," "We should plan to hang out," I don't remember it being like that.

Loni looked up at the ceiling and then back at Parker, sitting both with their memory and what Parker had just shared.

I don't remember the first time, but I remember like, I think you invited me out to the cabin at some point or maybe there was something at the college or something and we got to, we got to talk, and I was like 'Oh yeah, I like this person' ... and I think we just kind of ended up hanging out.

Like what Loni and Parker describe, participants in this project came into kinship with each other in many ways, and all seemed to be in the both/and space of stumbling upon and intentionally seeking.

Trae and Mani met through mutual friends while Trae was in college.

The same was true for Nicole and Tomi.

Alex and Sophie met in their Ph.D. program.

Concetta met Parker at Trans Lobby Day in Washington, DC in 2013 and came to know and be in community with Loni after they moved to North Carolina to begin their life with Parker.

Green saw Holden walk in late to a workshop they were facilitating and met again later as fellows in the same social justice organization; Morgan saw and met Holden while Holden was leading a Black Lives Matter action; Holden, Green, and Morgan met Tree during the

Charlotte Uprising;<sup>13</sup> and later, Holden, Green, and Morgan met JuJu at a convergence they organized, bringing JuJu into queer community through social justice organizing and connecting JuJu to Tree among other folks.

This kind of queer fluidity, flowing intimately into each other's orbits, was not only present in the ways these relationships came to be. It was also present in the ways folks have been within relation with each other over time. In other words, in true queer form, these folks have been many things to each other.

Trae first had a crush on Mani, and then, over time, their bond became a strong platonic one. Nicole and Tomi were friends who became lovers and became wives to each other. They also have been involved in grassroots community organizing and social justice work together and separately. Parker and Concetta are romantic partners and family to each other as a couple and are together and individually family and comrades to Loni. Sophie and Alex have been colleagues, friends, lovers, and partners to each other. Green, Holden, Morgan, JuJu, and Tree have been everything from comrades and friends to mentors and mentees, to lovers to on the outs.

Trae talked about the power of queer kinship solidarity, particularly among Black and Brown queer people, and the ways in which folks are able to engage building and being with each other differently, disrupting social norms and allowing for more liberating possibilities within and through the relationship:

One way my nonqueer chosen family relationships differ from my queer ones is that the queer ones tend to not be based on norms in the same sort of way. I think that there are lots of different messages from society, from media, that kind of give you examples of what that sort of friendship or relationship is supposed to look like. If you think about

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<sup>13</sup> The Charlotte Uprising refers to protests that extended into a grassroots movement for police accountability, transparency, and social and economic equity that emerged in response to the murder of Keith Lamont Scott by police in Charlotte, North Carolina (Boraks, 2017; Charlotte Uprising, n.d.).



movies where there are like two white women who are friends, there's lots of different kinds of examples of that, but there aren't as many examples of people who are like me and Mani. So, with fewer norms comes fewer expectations, so I think we are just kind of like trying to make it up as we go along and do what feels good and what feels right to both of us. That's not to say that that doesn't happen in my nonqueer relationships, but they are just operating more inside of an enclosed box. Which again, I'm trying to say with not, not judgment, it just that, that tends to happen if you are closer to whatever is considered normal. So yeah, there's steps for you to follow and you follow them because it's easy.

Holden expressed having a similar experience:

One thing that was most exciting for me about coming into queer and trans community is that I didn't ... I no longer felt obligated to, like, follow the bullshit standards of like a heteronormative society. It's like, "Oh, right, I'm queer and trans" I actually don't have to be in those separations. I actually don't have to treat my people like this. I actually can end a relationship with somebody, and we can actually still come back together and be kindred later, right? Because we have a deep commitment to one another on a larger level that's beyond just this one-on-one relationship type of ... really, normative dynamic of ... that's really wrapped up in disposability. I think there's a lot to that that I'm interested in pulling out about like intimacy and kinship and redefining, how we think about worth within and outside of relationships.

Trae and Holden, and the other folks in this project are engaged in living within themselves, their relationships, and their communities as a decolonial project. One that not only entails breaking binaries and narrow scripts around gender and sexuality but also as it relates to co-creating expansive ways of coming into, being, and moving with/in and through our relationships and communities. They are expressing experiences and understandings of what they are doing with others in ways that resonate Brandon Wint's (n.d.) definition of queerness:

Not queer like gay. Queer like, escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like ... and pursue it.

### **Of, With/in, and For the South**

Many participants expressed that they saw the kind of relational intimacy being practiced within building and being in queer kinship solidarity relationships as a Southern, specifically a Black and Brown queer and trans Southern liberation praxis. Holden said of their experiences within the QTBIPOC organizing community and kin network in North Carolina,

It's like the L-word universe, you know, when it comes to ... (laughs) Like, queer and trans, like connections and mentorship and sometimes, right, those great connections and mentorship it's a comradeship sometimes. And it's like a lovership sometimes and it also becomes like a situationship, right? Like ... (laughs) Like, all these different things, right? But it's so important too ... the ways in which I think we think about intimacy beyond just like sex, right? I appreciate the levels of intimacy that I've been able to share with all y'all in different ways that has solidified for me even more so, wow, I feel so committed to not only the work but to do the work in this particular way in North Carolina, right?

They explained that it is this practicing of queer relationality, specifically queer intimacy, that allows QTBIPOC social justice workers in North Carolina to:

... find our folks and bring them in and to like, build out these family kinship networks that are big enough to hold and sustain each other when you have an HB2,<sup>14</sup> right?

When you have a Charlotte Uprising, when you have like other shit poppin' off around the state.

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<sup>14</sup> HB2 refers to North Carolina House Bill 2 which, as Lopez (2017) explains, "overturned and banned local statutes that protect LGBTQ people from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and prohibited transgender people from using bathrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity in schools and government buildings" (para. 2).

Similar to Holden, others explicitly named Southern, grassroots, multiracial, intergenerational, mixed class LGBTQ+ community building and organizing as significantly shaping their relationships and their ways of being.

**Figure 3. An Image of North Carolina from JuJu's Collage**



Parker touched on this multiple times in his kin's focus groups, speaking at length and with emphasis about the role North Carolina and Southern culture played in shaping his own evolution around living for social justice and engaging queer kinship. He gave particularly powerful insight into how the South, North Carolina specifically, shaped his engaging in queer kinship solidarity relationships as a liberation when sharing about the social justice and community terrain present when he first moved here, explaining that there were no nonprofits doing the work at the time, it was all people in community with each other. Parker shared that at that time

... nobody was getting paid to do this work, so everybody was still meeting on each other's porches, um, so like that collectivist, that was also unique, that was foundational to North Carolina in general. I had, I did not know what that could look like in terms of everyday living, and I think that I learned that very much from um southerners and from the South and from North Carolina specifically.

Mani emphasized how they had their consciousness raised and shaped, as an immigrant queer from Oaxaca, Mexico, who makes a home in North Carolina, by the Black and Brown LGBTQ+ grassroots organizing collective that Parker founded in North Carolina:

I didn't have the knowledge that I have today, like these terms, like even just around being queer, all of these big words were new for me and, as a concept but also as a

language, you know ... it was new for me in many ways, and yes, I was learning directly from Black people, but I was trying to like do my homework, too.

Each kin group, in different ways, emphasized the importance of context and how their relationships with each other were also always about where they were situated in time and space.

Nicole and Tomi talked about the connectedness of the spaces that their relationship grew within over the years, from gay bookstores to Southern grassroots community organizations and their events, to their and other prominent community member's homes, specifically sitting on front stoops and porches, gathered around kitchen tables, sitting on crowded couches and living room floors, or gathered around a fire pit, a backyard fish fry, cookout, or party. Though they once were pretty deep in Southern Black and multiracial LGBTQ organizing spaces and at the forefront of some organizations and efforts in North Carolina, they have stepped away from that world for quite some time now, mostly due to the fact that organizations they were once a part of were operating in ways that weren't in alignment with how they wanted to be and move in that work. Since leaving these spaces, they have been focusing their energies on individual social justice work, in education and music, respectively, and caretaking for aging family members. They continue to be a source of support and a resource for elders and young people still involved in grassroots movement work in North Carolina.

Trae and Mani's relationship also was shaped within multiple spaces, from mutual friends and each other's apartments and homes to grassroots social justice educational and cultural events held in small church fellowship halls and community centers by progressive nonprofits or affiliated nonprofit groups or grassroots collectives, to the middle of nowhere Southern gay bars and city park held small LGBTQ+ and Latinx Pride festivals all over the state and all of the long car rides in between.

Sophie and Alex talked about the significance of meeting and beginning their relationship as doctoral students in a Sociology department of a large Southern, predominantly white, and conservative public state university. While they did not experience North Carolina as a homeplace or a place where they had a substantial LGBTQ+ community at the time of the focus groups, they talked at length how the ways they moved in relationship, with regard to kinship, particularly as it relates to solidarity, has been, most recently, deeply shaped by their experiences joining students and community members in the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 prior to my interviewing them, not far from where they go to school and live. They also talked about the ways in which attending Sophie's sister's wedding that fall, in the deep South, "in Trump country," called them to reflect on and be in their partnership differently with regard to cross-racial and cis-trans solidarity as well as within their respective queerness.

This across race and gender aspect of their kinship was also significantly shaped by their having to navigate new terrain together interdependently, with Alex beginning to be read more and more as a cis-man and the ways in which called them to think about how to maintain Alex's safety as a non-Black assumed Latine trans person while also not erasing their access to community and affirming interactions as a queer and trans interracial couple living and making a home in the South. Both emphasized the importance of being actively involved and plugged into queer and trans community, with Sophie participating in a group for allies, friends, family, and significant others of people in transition or considering transition and Alex co-creating an online community cultural and educational space for and by trans people via their Instagram live as well as dreaming about hosting a bi-weekly or monthly trans brunch or a brunch gathering for trans folks on their front porch.

As brown (2017) reminds us, "in the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts," and yet "emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could imagine" (p. 13). These queer kinships then, whether they were among people who weren't born and raised here but had ancestors who were, or transplants or immigrants whose people were never from here,

or folks whose people have been on this land for generations—these relationships didn't just happen to be here, they happened here, they are of and with/in the South. What's more, in the hearts of some of the participants, their relationships were also decidedly *for* the South. And that, considering that yet another wave of anti-LGBTQ+ bills is sweeping the nation, especially the South (Yang, 2022), is especially important to hold. To quote Holden again,

What does it mean for North Carolina to be this like state and place? I think there's something very particular about that, which also has probably a lot to do about being in the South, and there's like a bunch of LGBTQ people in the South, right? Most queer people live in the South.

I think of the famous Dubois quote, "As goes the South, so goes the nation" (as cited in Kromm, 2014, para. 1). No, everything does not translate or transfer when it comes to living and working for liberation, nor should it. But, as Black, Southern thinkers and organizers and their white anti-racist Southern comrades have said, as Perry (2022) puts forth, the South is, in many ways, the soul of the nation. How do we (those of us who want to) in the South and beyond contend with that soul? And what does it make of us and ours?

The South is all too often collapsed into portrayals of a socially and culturally backward, morally bankrupt, unsavable place without the vibrancy and radical resistance that has always existed here, from Indigenous, Black, Brown, and poor white resistance, some of which were and are still led by QTBIPOC folks. Though it is unsurprising that these tropes continue, I find myself, some days irate and other days annoyed by them. If I'm honest, part of why I feel as moved as I do to amplify stories that counter the narrow narratives of the South is because, as a queer Yankee transplant, I once perpetuated them myself, and the South still came to save me, telling me about myself and raising me up.

I have learned from experience that "the South is full of queerness" (Pratt, 2020) and that it continues to have, to quote Perry again, "some of the most robust queer culture ... that you could find. And that does cross the lines of race" (as cited in Hammontree, 2022, para. 38).

In short, the South I've come to know and make a home in is, in the words of Gwen Frisbie-Fulton (2020), "Blacker and gayer than you can ever imagine." And we have the data to back this up. In 2020 the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) and the Campaign for Southern Equality released a report that indicated that most LGBTQ people are living in the South (Sells, 2020), with 40% of those folks identifying as people of color and 20-30% of those people reporting that they are raising children (Pratt, 2020). Despite this being the reality, we are overwhelmingly lacking stories that tell us of the pathways toward liberation offered up by the queer South.

### **Conclusion**

"In the Queer South," Pratt (2020) writes, "we are still fighting, we are still singing" (para. 34). The relationships and stories in this project are a testament to this. The value-practices and the dynamic elements of queer kinship solidarity relationships taken up by LGBTQ+ social justice workers that you'll read about on the pages that follow are Southern and, thus, a deep center of emergent origin in the soul of this nation. To quote Green, "Everything is connected. Like, intimacy, our relationships, our hearts, our spirits, our energy. Especially 'cause we on this sacred red clay and, you know, like, it's—it just be like, you know, well, we—how we gonna move?"

## CHAPTER VII: VALUE-PRACTICES

In the spirit of Green's quote, I want to describe a bit of what I've come to understand as some of the key value-practices that undergird their experience of and engagement with dynamic relational elements (Trust, Solidarity, Care, and Connection) that I'll be exploring in the chapters to come. These value-practices include:

- Authenticity
- Dignity
- Curiosity
- Growth
- Joy

I name them value-practices rather than value-based practices because I see participants taking them up as both values and practices inseparably. I see this as similar to the way that praxis, as defined by Freire (2000), is theory and practice always in a cyclical, unending relation with each other.

Both the dynamic elements I've named above and the value-practices that undergird them are interwoven. It is challenging to parse them out into sections and separate chapters because of how tethered to each other they are. However, in an effort to try and dive deeply into how they are working and at work in these relationships, I will present them in this way.

### **Authenticity**

To know love we have to tell the truth to ourselves and to others. (hooks, 2000, p. 48)

"Being authentic" is most commonly understood as being "true to one's own personality, spirit, or character" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). As I discussed in the literature review, much of the research on LGBTQ+ chosen families/queer kinship positioned chosen family relationships as relational spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals were finally able to come into and be



themselves. There was a focus on an individual, often one time and linear, “identity development” and expression that occurred because of relational affirmation and support.

This is neither in alignment with my experience of queer kinship relationships nor those of many of the folks I know and love. The folks I know and love move more in alignment with what brown (2017) describes Sterling Toles, a “musician/spiritual teacher/friend” of hers, as doing. Toles, brown (2017) explains, says that he, in his relationships, acts as a “dressing room where people can try on their most authentic selves” (p. 30). For one, there is a plurality of selves being acknowledged alongside authenticity, reminding us that the human experience of becoming is fluid, multiple, nonlinear, and unending. I will talk more about how this holding open for un-ending authentic selves and the inherent multiplicity and complexity of being a human being is honored through committing to curiosity as a held value-practice, but it is also worth mentioning here since some of what I include from participants addresses that. Additionally, by using the metaphor of being a “room” where others can “try on” their most authentic selves, there is an acknowledgment of the inherently relational and experimental aspects of identity and authenticity. This makes me think of Ahmed (2015), who argues that

the hybrid work of identity-making is never about pure resemblance of one to another. It involves a dynamic process of perpetual resurfacing: the parts of me that involve ‘impressions’ of you can never be reduced to the ‘you-ness’ of ‘you’, but they are ‘more’ than just me. (p. 160)

Thinking of Ahmed (2015), my experience, and others that I’ve witnessed, authenticity, then, is never just about “self” or “self in relation” but always about self with/in relation. It is a deeply relational, continuous, and complex process and practice. This is what the participants in this project describe themselves as experiencing with one another in committing to authenticity as a relational value-practice. Participants brought to the fore the ways in which authenticity was always about relational wholeness and healing; transparency and honesty; vulnerability as well as accountability.

## **Authenticity as Fullness and Freedom in Community**

For Tree, meeting Green, Holden, and Morgan allowed them to come into themselves in relationship with others with a kind of authenticity they hadn't experienced before:

When I met Green, when I met Holden ... I felt like I had already had my folks in some regard. But after experiencing that feeling of holding healing space ... it just felt so powerful and grounding and anchoring, that ... I couldn't be comfortable anymore with the spaces that I was in.

They explained that the folks they were surrounded with in their daily life, white liberal environmentalists, just "could not hold me, you know?" This was all in the midst of the Charlotte Uprising, where Tree was involved, alongside others, in holding healing spaces for community members among other organizing activities. In the midst of experiencing the trauma of that time Tree was also "coming away from an identity that was not authentic to me," and, as a result, they began feeling as though they didn't have "a tribe." Tree said of this time, "At that point, I had not fully disintegrated, I had not fully been ... traumatized. I was still holding spaces of healing, and not really seeing myself as needing that healing." It was in this context that they met Holden.

I remember Holden walking into this safe space that we had. And we were holding a community member who was presenting with some physical trauma, emotional trauma, and a lot of like relational turbulence. And I just remember ... feeling like, There's my folk.

For Tree, finding their people was about the kind of authenticity that was experienced and expressed relationally and not just between themselves and Green and Holden but among others. Tree expressed experiencing wholeness and healing through coming into relationships with Green and Holden and later Morgan and Juju, stating it was these relationships that "... brought something out of me ... where I was untethered and felt unattached, I developed attachments and intimate experiences that I had not experienced before." Addressing Green,

Morgan, Holden, and JuJu directly in the focus group, Tree said, “our interactions brought me out of isolation.”

Parts of themselves that they were holding internally, namely their gender fluidity and their deepening commitment to engaging in movement work around race and class-based violence, were seen, held, and supported. Tree named Green as being the person who first saw and affirmed their gender fluidity, stating, “Green really found that in me that nobody else could see.” What’s more, Tree expressed that the commitment to valuing and practicing authenticity and vulnerability alive in these relationships not only allowed them to experience deeper levels of wholeness, intimacy, and connectedness within themselves and within their relationships and community but also allowed them to come into a loving and politically aligned experience of relational honesty and learning from and with others. “I feel mentored and ... able to express it in my fullness.”

For Nicole, authenticity as a relational value-practice is also central to her experience of queer kinship solidarity with Tomi. She shared that this was “the most meaningful thing” that the relationship has done for her, allowing for “the wholeness of who I am to always show up.” She elaborated,

I don’t have to pick and choose parts of myself to show up. This relationship has always supported me in being authentic. So, there is definitely a Black feminist aesthetic that is all up in our relationship in that way.

Nicole explained that she carries this with her into her teaching, where she values and practices authenticity with her students as part of her engaging education as a practice of freedom:

I feel like that ... is the ultimate pre-requisite or preface for people getting free, to be able to be their truly authentic selves and to show up ... as a teacher, in the classroom, that’s what I lead with. Whatever we need to do, to carve out space, create community, so you can feel like being in the space every day, maybe not loving it, but liking it enough to be fully yourself ...

As evident in this quote, embodying a commitment to valuing and practicing authenticity with/in her relationship with Tomi acts as a foundation for Nicole, one that fortifies her in doing the same with her students.

### **Authenticity as Challenge and Call to Action**

For Sophie, similar to the way Tree spoke of their relationships with Green, Holden, Morgan, and JuJu, finding Alex also felt like finding a connection that she didn't have and didn't realize she needed until "... leaving Georgia, leaving friends ... I needed a new circle. I needed something else, and I didn't know it was missing until I found you." Similar to how Tree felt about their queer kin, by coming into relationship with Alex, Sophie was able to be authentic in terms of her queerness and her politics. But again, this wasn't just about Sophie's experience of herself and her identity; it was about valuing and practicing authenticity relationally, living one's values with/in connection, practicing these things with other people. For Sophie, the relational value-practice of authenticity that she experienced with Alex was then always also about accountability, and, in particular, being held accountable as a white and cis person for living in alignment with her commitment to racial and gender justice and liberation. Sophie said of Alex,

Alex teaches me things every fucking day ... And I don't think that will ever stop, and I was at a point where I needed a kick in the ass and to be like, "Check your fucking privilege, you know?"

She continued, "... again, it was the Trump era, you know? We were starting this rigorous Sociology (program)." Turning to Alex sitting beside her, she said, "kind of the combination of you and the program ... as much as I hate the program, it's been good for me."

Mani also echoed the presence of transparency and directness as an important aspect of valuing and practicing authenticity in their relationship with Trae. They explained that with Trae, they are able to engage in conversations with a level of transparency that they just don't experience in their non-queer fictive kinship/chosen family relationships. "I was thinking," they said, talking about their non-queer chosen family friendships, "yes, we are close, but it's a

different kind of closeness ... a lot of the same conversations I'm not able to have with her in the same way that I have with Trae, very transparent conversations.”

Similar to what Sophie described as having with Alex, Mani explained that the authenticity and transparency in their relationship with Trae are also about engaging in accountability, with Mani working to acknowledge and disrupt anti-Blackness as a Brown, Latinx person in solidarity with Black people. As challenging as thinking, talking about, and doing this kind of across-race/culture solidarity work can be, Mani expressed feeling comfortable enough with Trae to speak authentically, honestly, and with vulnerability about anti-Blackness and their efforts to disrupt. This was in large part because Mani knows that these conversations and the learning within them are welcomed by Trae within the relationship. They shared that knowing Trae will always meet them with the same level of engagement, rather than feeling scary, feels not only helpful to Mani but intimate. Mani explained:

I'm like, "Trae ... this what I'm doing, what do you think?" because I know that Trae will be very honest with me and ... I want to be better, and I want to do better and ... I feel very comfortable asking him "Hey, what do you think of this?"

Central to this level of authenticity is wholeness, not only with regard to people being able to be fully themselves, integrated, with every part of themselves seen, held, engaged, etc., but also wholeness with regard to emotionality and embodiment.

When I think of Mani and Sophie wanting to receive honesty even if it feels hard to hear, I think of Lorde (2007) stating, in "The Uses of Anger," "If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you ..." (p. 130). Even when things are hard to receive, or maybe especially, it is desired in the relationship because there is an authentic, transparent, whole, vulnerable engagement and accountability process at work that feels more connected, honest, and committed. This coming to and engaging with each other in the dimensionality of wholeness, the vulnerability of honesty, and in the hardness of accountability are central to the relational value-practice of authenticity.

## **Authenticity as Honesty and Accountability**

In some ways, this starts out simply, or what could be seen as simply, with a welcoming of and setting an intention to come whole and as you are in the moment. Not to come together under the pretense of being fine, happy, etc., by putting on a face and forcing a good time. I think of Concetta recounting the importance of the queer kin two-dollar Froyo nights that they attended with Parker and Loni as well as other folks they consider queer kin. “We would meet up for two-dollar froyo,” Concetta explained,

and ... I remember being in law school and it was exhausting, and I just remember being tired all the time but felt like there was some level of acceptance in that space. It was like show up however you're feeling, just come through and it's all good, just to be present with folks and I really appreciated that.

These two-dollar Froyo nights eventually evolved into Thursday night dinners, and this spirit of authentically showing up, coming as you are, as a way of being and moving together within and through relationship continued. Concetta elaborated on how this intentional shift came about:

I remember us all sort of at some point talking about how social space and performativity felt just really exhausting and challenging and something that folks wanted to move away from to a certain extent and how we really wanted to cultivate that in Thursday nights.

Like Concetta, it was in this space where Loni began to practice “showing up with exactly where I was ... exactly how I was with whatever was going on.” Loni saw family dinners as especially significant because they were “a more regular place of showing up,” unlike annual cabin trips and Crafternoon, a Halloween celebration that Parker started 8 years ago for queer kin, their children/the children in their lives to gather, share food, and do crafts together. Family dinners, Loni explained, invite folks to practice “a collective vulnerability” in an everyday, interpersonal way with each other. For Loni, it was through these family dinners that they began to discover

and dig into parts of themselves and their ways of being with others in the world that they hadn't before, with the support and accountability of their queer kin.

I feel myself, even at this point, peeling, I don't know if it's peeling back layers or digging into deeper layers of what it means to actually show up in and be in community ... actively not just like saying that I'm connected to people but being accountable to community as well.

Like Sophie and Mani, Loni similarly saw the valuing and practicing of authenticity as laying the groundwork needed for learning with, particularly in the form of accountability and generative conflict. In reflecting back on the moments of practicing collective vulnerability at family dinners and trips to the cabin, Loni made a point to say how this was different from how they were raised to show up in family, in relationship, particularly as it related to authenticity and accountability.

... I always felt like when we were together there was always this invitation to just be who you are and show up and ... when conflict does happen it feels like a safe container to be like "Oh yeah ... this is my stuff and I got to look at it and ... we have this bond, am I willing to step up to do what it takes to repair this bond when there is rupture?" So ... in some ways I feel like I'm kind of pulling the thread and following it where it goes ... seeing what unravels ... what I'm left with and what I can do with that. Hopefully it can continue to be of some service to family and beyond.

As Loni so beautifully articulates, getting to be with and share in all of ourselves as we are, together, while also moving toward, with honesty and accountability, where we want to be, collective liberation, are at the heart of valuing and practicing authenticity relationally.

## Dignity

Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings. Dignity is our sense of worthiness. We thrive when we are dignified, and when we know how to dignify others. Everyone is born with it. Everyone needs it. (Haines, 2019, p. 144)

All too often, we conflate dignity with respect, which, as Haines (2019) explains, is commonly understood as something to be “earned through one’s actions.” In line with conflating dignity with respect is what I already discussed in the rationale, what Amy Hunter (2019) addressed in her TedTalk, our culture’s tendency to blame individual people for their individual “poor choices” while simultaneously praising individual people for their individual “hard-earned success.” This tendency to blame and praise individuals along these lines erases the fact that some people and communities are systemically advantaged at the direct expense of others. This idealization of toxic individualism, the valuing of productivity over process, and the perpetuation of scarcity mentality often work together to have people believe they aren’t worthy of dignity because they are “Never \_\_\_\_\_ enough” (Brown, 2012, p. 25).

As discussed in the introduction, ways of being in relation with others and the world that do not reproduce the values and interests of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-het patriarchy are positioned as undignified “through images, collective narratives, and institutions” (Haines, 2019, p. 145). No wonder so many of us, particularly those of us occupying multiple “undignified” positionalities and co-creating “undignified” communities and families, are left without “... a deeply embodied experience of either our own or other’s inherent dignity” and instead experience shame (Haines, 2019, pp. 144–146). And yet, some of us, thankfully, still find ways to begin to dignify ourselves and each other.

Some of the ways that I witnessed and heard participants in this project valuing and practicing dignity relationally included: honoring self and others in the face of being erased or devalued; taking care of self and others by having, respecting, and encouraging boundaries; removing worth from productivity and perfection; and holding, taking, and taking up space.



## **Dignity as Staying Grounded in Your Truth and Purpose**

In sharing powerful lessons they had learned from their queer kin relationships, Green shared a story about when they, Holden, and Morgan had organized a statewide gathering for Black Queer and Trans social justice leaders to get together and build with each other. Green recalled that, at the event, there was a specific instance where

someone was like, “Well, you know, the labor of Black femmes are not being honored. We created all of this space.” And, I was like, “Well actually, you know, me, Morgan, and Holden actually made sure this shit fucking happened. And we don’t identify as femmes in this moment, like mostly (identify as) masculine of center folks, and gender non-binary trans people.” And their response was, you all are socialized as femmes.

Green went on to explain how this erasure of theirs, Holden’s, and Morgan’s masculine of center and non-binary trans identities by these folks was particularly hurtful. This affected Green’s ability to be fully present and engaged in the space that they had helped create and had, up to that point, been very excited to be a part of. “I remember just feeling very hurt and unable to move in that,” they said. But in witnessing how, in the face of being erased, Morgan and Holden did not allow the drama to stop them from engaging fruitfully in the space they had helped to co-create, Green learned the significance of valuing and practicing dignity relationally, even, and perhaps especially, in the midst of others not doing the same. They said of this moment:

... seeing how Morgan was there to make sure the folks who showed up got what they needed, had an experience outside of all of the drama and how Holden actually held space, just showing up as Holden does, making it feel welcoming ... really called me to be like, “Why am I showing up in this moment, regardless of the confrontation I’m having with folks and other folks outside of the people that I’m in relationship with?”

For Green, by “showing up and honoring their own dignity and humanity, even when it’s being dissed,” Morgan and Holden allowed them to understand and experience the importance of “standing in dignity unconditionally and like unmovable. ... Being unmoved in that.”

Around the same time, Green was witnessing Tree as they were trying to hold onto their self-dignity while dignifying others. They shared that through supporting Tree in navigating this balance, they were able to further reflect on actions they needed to take to practice relational dignity:

witnessing Tree at the time, navigating the organizing in Charlotte and the holding of various spaces and also struggling to hold their center and trying to be supportive in that allowed me to be like, “What ways am I doing this for myself?” I extend and help other people practice it, but ... I don’t know if I’m practicing in that way, I felt like I could have, or should have been doing more.

For Green, holding various spaces of dignifying themselves and others in their organizing work and life has meant “asking for the things I need, asking for the things I don’t need, while respecting folks’ boundaries and requests for more.” They see this constant reflection and engaging in authentic, direct communication around boundaries as central to honoring their dignity and that of others. They explained that they understand these practices as disrupting and disengaging from the toxic individualism at work in independence; “Being able to operate inside of my own boundaries and trust that the folks that I’m in relationship with are trying to, are practicing that in the moment as well allows for a more transformative experience outside of independence.” What Green shares reminds me of Birdsong’s (2020) words on wanting boundaries for herself and the people she loves:

One of the things I remind myself—and my loved ones remind me when I forget—is that my no isn’t just a no, it is also a yes. When I’m clear enough to say no to what I don’t want, then I have more room to say yes to what I do want. I can’t have my yesses without the nos. I want that for myself and the people I care about. I’m working on taking

people's nos as information for me about who they are and trying to be pleased that they are listening to themselves. (p. 44)

For Green, learning “how to center and prioritize dignity and humanity first” in their relational work with their queer kin and others also involves a disrupting of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist cultural conflation of worth and worthiness as being tied to “completed” measurable productivity. With/in and through their relational work with Holden, Morgan, Tree, and JuJu, they’ve come to understand more that what matters isn’t “about what we got done together. It’s about what we learned together. ... that we’re in a new moment every single day.”

### **Dignity as Establishing, Encouraging, and Respecting Boundaries**

Morgan also expressed engaging in an unlearning of valuing productivity over process as part of committing to valuing and practicing dignity relationally. Like Green and Birdsong (2020), they positioned boundaries as playing a key role in this work. “The boundaries piece, that’s been my main learning and consistent reminder across the board from folks here,” they explained, “I have a commitment I’m working on around balancing the love I have for myself and other people.” Morgan shares an understanding of boundaries in the way Hemphill does, with boundaries being “the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously” (Hemphill, as cited in Brown, 2021, p. 129). This understanding of boundaries demonstrates what Brené Brown (2017) talks about and what Lucien Demaris and Cedar Landsman teach through *Relational Uprising* (n.d.), which is that to quote Brown (2021), “We have to belong to ourselves as much as we need to belong to others. Any belonging that asks us to betray ourselves is not true belonging” (p. 155).

Commitment to dignity as a value-practice is then about a relational honoring that must be interdependent, not codependent or, as discussed in the introduction, transactional. Within and through their relationships with Green, Holden, Tree, and JuJu, Morgan experiences relational dignity as not only having their boundaries supported and respected but also proactively encouraged, with folks offering support and alternatives in order for them to care for

themselves and be cared for fully. “There’s a consistency with pretty much everyone on this call around checking in,” they shared. This checking in, they explained, involved folks saying to them, “Hey, the other day we were having this conversation around you being over extended or tired,” and following that statement up with, “Are you sure you can handle all that?” or “What is a way that we can ask other people in this room or that I can show up and help hold some of the weight or some of the labor?” For Morgan, “folks consistently” checking in with them in these ways that call them to “think about, how do I not be in my hyper Virgo situation and trying to do all the things and be beyond the capacity that I have?”

Parker, like Morgan, expressed that he learns about honoring his dignity with/in his relationships with Concetta, Loni, and other queer chosen family through exercising and respecting boundaries. He made a point to emphasize that, because of how they are situated socio-historically and because of family of origin trauma, this was something that they all were admittedly not good at:

it’s not a coincidence that as these predominantly Black and Brown and assigned female at birth folks, because of the history and the world, (we) are shit at talking about boundaries. We’re shit at asking for what we need. We’re shit at saying no. We’re terrible ... I do think that those things in particular, the codependency and the people-pleasing, are latent in this group.

Aware of this, Parker Concetta, and Loni, support each other in disrupting their codependency and people-pleasing tendencies with/in the relational work of the group. He said of this,

we find ... that people pleasing is not going to get us free, it’s not going to get us out, it’s not going to save us anymore as if that wasn’t made abundantly clear before the pandemic. And (so) finding the moments of what is grace and what is engaging in self-betrayal, that’s profoundly hard and deep and challenging work. I see other people really struggling in ways that I have and ways that I will and ways that I am.

Loni also shared how the group spends their time together intentionally checking in with one another through posing questions that are ways to honor and affirm each other's dignity and wellness. Loni explained that when they get together and check in with each other, it's about, "like us showing up and like 'what we working with?' and like 'how we feeling' and 'how's your day,' 'what's goin' on,' 'what's in your body,' 'how's your spirit,' 'how you breathing?'" Parker, Loni, and Concetta, by getting to engage in this work with/in their relationships to one another and others, all the while being a part of each other's "self" work, get to create new paths forward, away from codependency and people-pleasing toward relational dignity through interdependency.

### **Dignity as Holding Space**

In addition to holding one's own and other's dignity simultaneously by having, holding, encouraging, and supporting boundaries and engaging in direct communication around needed supports, I heard participants talk about and demonstrate the importance of holding space for others as a way of committing to the value-practice of relational dignity. As Alex stated, relationally dignifying people can involve "Holding space when that's not necessarily the first thing that arises in you to do, and that maybe in another time, a different space you wouldn't either have had to or you just wouldn't be confronted with holding that space at that moment." Alex sees this holding space as dignifying because through it folks are "allowing for something else to exist, even if it isn't your reality, or a reality that you understand." Alex shared that they saw Sophie as doing for them, as an act of solidarity, holding space for/holding Alex's trans identity with dignity with them and with others. "You've had to hold the trans identity for me," they said, turning to Sophie, "... you've also had to hold it for me in front of (her) mom. I think that's pretty huge." Alex explained that through holding space for their trans identity "in front of your mom," they believed Sophie became "better able to hold it in front of your students."

Like Sophie, Trae works to dignify Mani's gender as an act of solidarity, which, while I will delve into this more deeply in the upcoming chapter on solidarity, is important to mention

here as well. I got to witness Trae practicing this in real-time by seeing the ways in which he featured multiple prominent pictures of Mani by themselves in the collage he created to tell the story of their relationship for this project. These pictures, Trae explained, demonstrate the many ways Mani moves powerfully in the world, and in the South in particular, as a non-binary, femme presenting, Brown, Latinx queer person. And Mani, in seeing these photos and hearing why Trae selected them, got to share a bit about how they dignify themselves and others and are dignified by Trae through recounting and remembering various events and experiences. One picture and memory in particular embodied this, a picture Trae included of Mani being honored at an event for “Notable Latinos of the Triad” (see Figure 4). In seeing this picture and talking about the event, Mani emphasized the importance of taking up and holding space as a form of dignifying self and others.

**Figure 4. Mani at Notable Latinos of the Triad Event from Trae and Mani’s Collage**



“I was selected there as a notable Latinx,” Mani explained, “and I was like “ya know what, I’m gonna, I’m gonna take space.” Mani said there were many people from the town they live in at the event, including “people from the church” and Mani was there, being honored, wearing heels and lipstick.

By featuring this photo in the collage, Trae practiced a relational dignifying of Mani and also resurfaced Mani’s own act of dignifying themselves by attending the event in their fullness,

which, going back to authenticity, Mani feels able to do because of what they experience and build within their relationship with Trae. In talking about that, Mani said several times that they feel confident when doing drag and when just existing as their non-binary queer self because of Trae's presence in their life. At one point, they said directly to Trae, "you help me be confident in myself." As Mani expresses here, and as is evident in what Alex shared about Sophie, holding space for others and self, particularly in a way that embodies solidarity and affirmation, is a significant way participants practice value and practice dignity relationally.

### **Dignity as Taking Space and Taking Care**

Nicole and Tomi also engage in holding and taking space as part of their valuing and practicing relational dignity. In our first focus group together, they shared their long history with local and statewide movement work in North Carolina, one that, like Green's experience, involved interpersonal conflicts and ruptures that harmed them. Unlike Green, this led them to walk away from direct participation with several organizations. "We still find a way to go forth and to contribute," Nicole explained, and while "we're never actually there with the group to actually realize the actualization of the work," she said, laughing, "we've contributed." Despite distancing themselves from particular organizations, Nicole and Tomi continue to support them from afar by donating money, giving them "signal boosts in social media spaces." And so, taking space is a way that they both honor themselves and thus dignify themselves while still continuing "to do the work" in ways that feel good.

Nicole and Tomi went on to explain that some of their departures from engaging in direct local and statewide organizing has been in part because of an active choice and commitment to caretaking for both of Tomi's aging parents, who have, since we met for focus groups, transitioned. Taking on this work with each other and Tomi's parents was discussed throughout the focus groups and was featured in Tomi's collage which contained a photograph of Tomi and her father in front of a mural honoring Black horsemen (see Figure 5), which her father was for

much of his young adult life, and a photograph of the shelf in their home where Tomi's mother's urn resides (see Figure 6).

**Figure 5. Tomi and Her Dad in Front of Black Horseman Mural from Tomi's Collage**



**Figure 6. Tomi's Mom's Urn from Tomi's Collage**



“We’ve been caregivers for the last 4 or 5 years ... for my parents,” Tomi explained, “and so ... our world has changed a lot in the last 5 years.” This has meant holding space for a smaller community, Tomi said, one that consists of Nicole’s “teacher tribe and her family tribe” and Tomi’s “family tribe and DJ tribe.”

This taking a step back to caretake, to honor their dignity and that of Tomi’s parents, is particularly powerful considering what was mentioned earlier, through Haines (2019), how dignity has been historically denied to Black and aging people, among others. As Birdsong (2020) states,

Black people in America have been separated–stolen across an ocean, sold away from our people, pushed from home by everyone’s hope for us, snatched up by police and



locked in cages, detached by assimilation to education and labor systems, taken by Child Protective Services, abandoned because of unhealed trauma—a million devastations and hearts rended. (p. 87)

It is within this socio-historical context that Nicole and Tomi are giving and receiving care, maximizing the health, wellness, and lived experience of themselves and their elders. They are thus engaging in what Gumbs et al. (2016) name the “queer feminist of color practice and theory” of revolutionary mothering (and daughtering), “an alternative building practice” wherein those taking it up are valuing themselves, others, and creating “the world we deserve” (p. 31). In stepping back from some local and statewide organizing, Tomi and Nicole were able to move into their education and music social justice work, respectively, as well as their caretaking work. Through doing this, Nicole and Tomi honored themselves and those they were charged with caring for, keeping with their commitment to value and practice dignity relationally.

By staying in and holding their dignity in myriad ways while simultaneously doing the same for others, often in the midst of historical and present harms and erasure, participant kin pairings and groups demonstrated how valuing and practicing dignity relationally, in all of its complex manifestations, is central to queer kinship solidarity as a liberation praxis.

### **Curiosity**

Curiosity as restless questioning, as movement toward the revelation of something hidden, as a question verbalized or not, as search for clarity, as a moment of attention, suggestion, and vigilance, constitutes an integral part of the phenomenon of being alive. There could be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making. (Freire, 2001, pp. 37–38)

Of all the value-practices, and maybe it’s because I am a first-time parent of a one and one half-year-old at the time of this writing, this one makes me light and lights me up. This one and joy. Maybe this is because I didn’t set out expecting to write about them and talk about

them as prominently. Maybe because of my own internalization of the very “seriousness” and “challenging” “nature” of solidarity and social justice work that I myself have critiqued. But participants lifted me back up to the clouds of what we do. I think of brown’s (2017) words, “We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure, because it’s all data. But first we imagine” (p. 3)

Curiosity, as it is taken up by participants, is very much in line with the fluidity of queer kinship solidarity that I wrote about earlier. I see it as how we come into queerness and kinship with each other. It is a necessary life force, like water, present in how we flow into and within ourselves, how we flow into and within each other’s lives, and how we flow within and through the social world—in curiosity. Curiosity flows through queer kinship solidarity. This is ever-present in the ways the participants and the relationships included in this project are living. I think of brown (2017) saying, “be like water,” which JuJu also quoted in a focus group (see Figure 7). I think of Mani saying that if they had to compare their nonqueer chosen family relationships to what they had with Trae, they would say the nonqueer chosen family relationships they had were “also just like, um, maybe not dry but yes, a little bit dry” (we all laughed at this because, how could we not). I also think of how Holden, Green, Morgan, Tree, and JuJu, over and over again, used the word “juicy” to describe the most alive, good feeling, abundant moments in their kinship.

**Figure 7. Graphic of Water from JuJu’s Collage**



So, as much as I think that curiosity is what Freire (1998) describes above, I also immediately think of curiosity as a fluid, unending openness and playfulness,

Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight. (Lugones, 2003, p. 96)

Participants in this project shared a valuing and practicing of curiosity that encompassed an openness around being in change/flux/fluidity and seeing that alive, at work, and working with/in self, other, the relation, and the world. There was an appreciation for the certainty of uncertainty and both a reverence for and playfulness around our “individual” and collective unfinishedness and that of the social world. They talked about the importance of active listening, asking questions for clarification and further exploration, being present and attentive, and being with and witnessing.

### **Curiosity as Witnessing with Openness**

“I was listening to someone on a podcast introduce the show,” Trae said, looking into his computer camera at Mani and me while sipping on a glass of wine, sitting relaxed in his house. Mani leaned forward, looking into the camera listening, as did I, “and they said,” he continued, taking on a kind of podcast host voice himself, “‘Ladies and gentlemen and folks for whom language has yet to contain this is the blah blah blah the show’ and I was like ‘oh I like that!’” he said, holding up a finger to express his ah-ha experience of this phrasing. Mani smiled. “That’s how I feel about you, Mani,” Trae explained, smiling, “not just because you are a genderqueer person but just because the best things about you can’t be described.” Trae paused for a minute, then continued, jokingly, “but you know, I’m still gonna try.”

For Trae, taking up openness and curiosity is central to how he engages with Mani in their relationship. This was especially evident in his recounting moments of witnessing and listening to Mani while being there to support them in getting ready for their drag performances.

“Just like watching you, you put on your armor and get real pretty, and you know, talk about your life, and I was like ‘Oh, this is something special, this is great,’” he said, looking at Mani and then at me, with the wide, warm, grin he has. Later he explained that, through these moments of witnessing and active listening with curiosity, he feels he is better able to continuously understand and experience Mani’s gender in its ever-evolving state(lessness). “I understand Mani’s gender identity because,” Trae paused, turning his speech to Mani,

I’m aware of those subtle shifts ... it’s a part of who you are that is very nuanced, but because I know you, I understand it very intimately, so when you started using they and them pronouns, I was like, “oh yeah, like yeah, sure,” I get you.

Mani, affirming this, said, “It makes sense because you are watching me become, you were watching me become that person when I told you.”

Witnessing, being with, and being invited into becoming in a way that embodies curiosity around gender and being a fluid, ever-changing person, was also prominent in Morgan’s experience of queer kinship solidarity, in particular in their relationships with Green and Holden. They shared how these folks and their relationships with them served as the first spaces for them to engage in their own becoming with curiosity. “I have also just been learning a good amount around what does it mean to be able to honor the different iterations of yourself that’s growing,” Morgan shared, something they didn’t always have “the words to communicate” about themselves and their “gender identity” particularly in ways that honor how “it was changing and has changed again and again.” Morgan shared that prior to being in these queer kinship relationships, they didn’t feel like they had “space to express” their gender, but within this configuration and with/in and through other queer kin solidarity relationships, they feel folks “offering the invitations to be curious (laughs) about it consistently, and expressing and showing their own and yeah, some really beautiful and radical.” What’s more is that with/in and through these relationships and the communities they opened Morgan up to, Morgan got to witness various ways folks express their gender and show up in space. “A lot of times ... in the

collective's spaces in particular," the way people were living and expressing their gender, Morgan shared, "made me think or just like shatter a lot of the binary thinking I had around, gender identity" while also showing them the various ways "we could express our gender and could hold, masculinities and femininities in all the different ways." This being invited to embody curiosity around their gender while witnessing it embodied and alive through how folks were/are engaging gender themselves is something Morgan deeply appreciated.

As evident in what Morgan shares here, and to go back to Trae's referencing of the podcast introduction, the expansiveness of participants and the valuing and practicing of curiosity is not limited to how folks understand, embody, explore, or express their gender, though that was certainly present in their opposition to "the stability and boundedness of identity" (Shlasko, 2005, p. 127). In the way Trae, Mani, and Morgan express it, relational curiosity is, in many ways, an embodying of a queer pedagogy in the way Kumashiro (2009) describes it—as an inviting collective "vulnerability and unpredictability" (p. 721). Learning from and being with that element of expansiveness with one another is one of the many ways participants embody a commitment to the relational value-practice of curiosity.

### **Curiosity through Active Listening**

Trae, in particular, expressed seeing Mani's ability to actively listen as part of Mani's capacity to explore and hold multitudes relationally. He named this as something that significantly shapes how the two of them are being and moving in relation to each other. "Mani is very good at active listening," Trae explained, "they ask questions for clarification, they're not just waiting for their turn to talk, I can see the processing in real-time."

Bettez (2011b) speaks of the importance of active listening in her work on critical community building for social justice education. She states that "active listening ... is a particular kind of listening that requires conscious effort" (p. 4). This effort, she explains, is always taking place within a context, and one that, within the context of social justice education, is "messy with inequities, structures of hierarchies, clashing styles of communication, and conflicting

personalities” (p. 5). She emphasizes that “however messy that context,” active listening within it that is attentive to context and positionalities “can lead to the beauty of incredible growth and discovery, of both the self and others” (Bettez, 2011, p. 5). It is this very kind of active listening with curiosity that Trae also saw himself valuing and practicing with Mani, whether witnessing and listening to Mani as they share their experiences while getting ready for a drag performance or in his many conversations with Mani on various topics. Trae named, similar to Bettez (2011), that this was deeply informed by a desire to acknowledge, honor, and learn from their differences in lived experiences of the world and ways of knowing and moving:

since we are so different in a lot of different ways, we both were raised in different religions, we have different gender identities, we were born in different places, and we’ve also had different access to opportunities and upward mobility ... I think that’s kind of at the forefront of my mind, so, if I approach my relationship ... with openness and with “Ok, so this is a difference and ... in order for me to understand I need to be able to listen and do as much as I can to try and understand the context within which this story or whatever is being told to me is happening.”

Mani echoed this, sharing some specific conversations that were especially meaningful to them. “I remember we have talked about me becoming HIV positive, and you were able to navigate that with me.” Mani paused for a moment, and Trae nodded, taking in what Mani had just shared. Mani then directed their words to me:

having someone that is able to listen and, of course, not be judgmental, it’s just so many ... things we have talked about that it’s just hard to pick one thing. ... I remember one of the conversations was I talking about sex on grindr or jacked and ... what patterns we see, how racism looks on these apps, and us both being able to experience it from different perspectives.

As Mani expresses here, central to the relationship they have with Trae is an embodying of curiosity as a relationally held value and practice that takes up active listening; an active listening that, in the way Bettez (2011b) describes, where one is “seeking out dialogues across lines of cultural difference,” practicing a “reciprocity; both the listener and the speaker can learn in the process of engagement” and engaging “in critical self-reflexivity” (Bettez, 2011b, p. 13).

### **Curiosity as Queer and Critical Questioning and Engagement**

I also witnessed and heard Trae and Mani embodying curiosity as a value-practice together in *how* they take up being in conversation and in relationship. In addition to engaging in active listening, they ask clarifying questions and take up problem-posing (Freire, 2000, 2001), as well as ask each other “critical questions” (Bettez, 2011, p. 6) or questions around issues of power, oppression, and privilege. This allows for a collective dreaming of and planning interventions and alternatives to the challenges they face. All the while, they are taking this up as a never-ending process, living in curiosity together and, at times, doing so really playfully, as was evident in one of my favorite exchanges where, when asked about the big events that have transpired over the course of their relationships they talked about gay marriage:

Mani: How did you experience same-sex marriage being legalized?

Trae: I was like, “Oh, that’s cute” \*laughs\*

Mani: \*laughs\* Same, uh

Trae: “Now the white gays don’t have to care about us anymore” \*laughs\*

Mani: \*laughs\* “Right, right! One less thing that they will stop arguing about like, one less thing that we have to hear them bitch about, I guess.”

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: “Yeah, same-sex marriage was like ‘Ok sure’ for me. I remember that ... there was this trans Latinx woman at the White House who was, it was right after I was released from the detention center and also around the time that same-sex marriage was legalized. She went to the White House and was asking for President Obama to stop the

detention of Latinx LGBT people because of the conditions that they were living in. She was very critiqued about that because ‘that was not the right way to do it,’ ‘this is not about you,’ ‘you’re being rude,’ and that’s why ... that moment of same-sex marriage ... just became like ‘eh’ moment for me.”

Trae: “Yeah, but you know, love a gay wedding.”

Mani: \*laughs\*

Trae: “Let it be known” \*laughs\*

Mani: “Yeah” \*laughs\*

As you can see in the stories above, Mani and Trae take up a being with each other through storytelling, listening, and questioning that doesn’t close off understanding or arrive at some final point of knowing but is part of working to keep things open to more and more thinking, talking, exploration, understandings, knowings, etc. Additionally, as is especially clear in their dialogue about their experiences of the legalization of gay marriage, they take up curiosity queerly, dwelling in the both/and, within seriousness and playfulness, holding hard lines and contradictions, all at the same time.

Critical questioning and engagement are also integral to Alex and Sophie’s queer kinship with each other. While Sophie attributed that to the fact that the two are both trained sociologists, Alex understood this orientation toward questioning as both part of their commitment to living a decolonial practice with others. Alex also saw critical questioning as a significant part of how their romantic relationship and now continued queer kinship with Sophie is queer because of *how* that questioning got/gets taken up.

I believe we are pretty good at interrogation and pushing back on meanings, maybe redefining. I might do it a little bit more than Sophie feels comfortable with, but I think that’s a big piece of what makes it queer. And how the constant questioning and renegotiation, maybe it is stressful for Sophie, but the having to reevaluate what do we do in this case? ... Like, how ‘bout here? I think all of that is queer interrogation because



there's an assumption that it's not going to look the same way each time, and it's not supposed to, and it's okay that it's not.

Sophie, in response to Alex, shared her perspective and experience of engaging with Alex in curiosity and questioning, around her and Alex's experiences and naming of their sexualities, with Alex's transition and the way they both experienced the world together being shifted by that:

... going off of this, I like to throw it out every once in a while, to Alex, how do you feel about queer? Or how do you define our relationship ... in terms of sexual orientation? ... how would you classify our relationship, what about your sexual (identity), because it changes and ... we are creating meaning ... I think there's a little creativity and innovation and openness to that, that is so important as well.

For both Alex and Sophie, engaging in meaning-making about their everyday lives as an interracial/intercultural cis and trans queer couple involves taking up questioning that allows for consideration and exploration of the "multiple, fluid identities (and relations/relationalities) and knowledges" possible in each context (Shlasko, 2005, p. 131). Put another way, relationally valuing and practicing curiosity involves reading the world in ways that embody queer theory and pedagogy's approach of holding multiple readings (Britzman, 1998) and engaging in questioning around those readings in a way that will "constantly multiply the possibilities of knowledge" (Shlasko, 2005, p. 128).

As Alex makes a point to acknowledge, the necessity of curiosity and questioning is part of their existing as a non-Black, assumed Latine immigrant trans and queer person, a liminal being that has to travel "hostile white/Anglo" and cis-straight worlds "unwillingly" (Lugones, 2003, p. 77). Questioning and curiosity, for Alex, have higher stakes because of their experience of being gendered and racialized in particular ways in society, and thus their having to navigate and negotiate their safety and visibility constantly and in ways Sophie does not. Both Alex and Sophie and Trae and Mani demonstrate the ways in which the unevenness of

vulnerability (Oliviero, 2016), which I spoke to in the introduction, plays a central role in the valuing and practicing of curiosity relationally. Because of the fact that “vulnerability is mapped onto some spaces and bodies and dismissed in others” (Oliviero, 2016, p. 2), Alex and Sophie’s embodied realities of safety and danger in the world are different, as our Trae and Manis (though in more complex, context-specific ways since they are both People of Color). This relates to the importance of holding context, positionalities, and differences while engaging in curiosity and active listening that Trae shared earlier. While the role of the unevenness of vulnerability and how it is experienced with regard to being with with/in and through queer kinship solidarity relationships will be explored further in future chapters, I believe it is important to highlight it here because it helps bring nuance to the complexities involved in the value-practice of curiosity.

Questioning, then, is about engaging curiosity in the way Freire (1998) describes and doing so queerly, in a way that moves beyond a one-time remaking of a singular world. Alex and Sophie are, through living this value-practice, taking up a living queer learning and reading together where multiple interpretations are not only seen as possible but inevitable and worth digging into, with special attentiveness to the unevenness of vulnerability and their differing needs, wants, and desires. As Alex shared, the two-approach questioning with openness and curiosity, “going in with” the perspective that allows “for it to look five different ways as opposed to just one way” and continuously coming back to the table “to renegotiate those things.” For Alex, “what makes it a queer relationship” is this way of being with each other where they are engaging in the “space to reimagine.” As they so eloquently put it, “maybe queer at the end of the day is, like, the will to unlearn and reimagine.”

### **Curiosity as Never Collapsing Possibility**

Similar to authenticity, I believe taking up this kind of relational curiosity value-practice can also begin in everyday ways. As Concetta shared that unlike their family of origin, people in their chosen family know them more intimately because they ask questions about them rather

than assuming they ever have Concetta all figured out. They explained that in their family of origin, “there isn’t a commitment to spend the time to get to know, to learn about me, to be in a relationship with me ...” instead, “it feels like there’s a damn script” one where there are only “two or three topics on the table” and “that’s all anyone ever asks me about, the end.” And so, for Concetta, it is the willingness to ask questions, to never foreclose knowing each other, to acknowledge that we are all in a constant state of becoming, of unfinishedness (Freire, 2001)—to be playful, in the way Lugones (2003) describes of not being arrogant in one’s competence, that brings about more intimacy and connection. It is this way of being with each other, in curiosity, that differentiates Concetta’s queer chosen family relationships from given family relationships where who Concetta is, is a foregone conclusion.

Parker also shared something particularly insightful about how he sees queerness, particularly queer polyamory and non-monogamy informing the kind of curiosity that folks are taking up together. “I think part of the reason my bio family gets it wrong so much is because people end up being different people than they thought they were gonna be,” Parker explained. Rather than being open to or embracing these changes in folks, we often hear people in a given family/family of origin say things like “I had a certain idea of your life” or “I thought you were gonna do this, and we were gonna have this life together.” Parker attributed his learning about honoring how folks change and being open to and curious about change within queer kinship to people in his chosen family who are “non-monogamous or polyleaning.” He shared that these folks taught him to love others, recognizing that they will “change in the ways that are good and meaningful to them.” And so, to be in kinship and loving relationships for Parker always involves being willing to “re-calibrate ourselves and each other” with a “rigor” that is “beautiful and wonderful and creates so many possibilities ...” As Parker shares here, many queer (in the ways I’ve defined it) polyamorous people, particularly critical polyamorists like Kim TallBear, who I cited at length in the introduction, move in their relations with a recognition and a welcoming of the ways in which people and relationships change. Being in relationship with

others with a commitment to valuing and practicing curiosity in the way Parker describes requires an openness to the ways that belonging to ourselves is ever-changing and shifting, and this can shift the relationship configuration and all of those in it.

In *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*, Veaux and Rickert (2014) write of this, “Happy, healthy romantic lives require not just continual reinvestment but constant awareness of the changes in our partners, our situations, and ourselves” (p. 9). When talking about the how folks engaging in polyamory are exposed to a great deal more uncertainty in their relationships, they state:

Every person you become involved with stands a good chance of changing your life in a big or small way. If that weren’t the case, well, what would be the point? The same goes for your partners and the new people they become involved with—and when their lives change, so will yours. (Veaux & Rickert, 2014, p. 45)

Though Veaux and Rickert (2014) are talking about romantic relationships, I believe, as Parker is articulating, that this can apply to any relationship and thus fall in line with people like TallBear (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b), who says of her work:

I do use the terms polyamory, sex, sexuality, but I am trying to get towards a more relational set of words: talking about relationality and relational ways of being, and kind of mixing that up with the sexuality stuff, so, eventually, I can get people to think more about *being in relation*. (emphasis in original; TallBear, as cited in Madriaga-Caro, 2021, “Being in Relation,” para. 5)

With Concetta and Parker’s insights, I think of the ways in which brown (2017) and participants evoke Butler’s (1993) words on change:

All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
is Change.

God  
is Change  
is Change. (p. 3)

I also think of a recent quote from artist Janelle Monae about her being non-binary:

I'm nonbinary, so I just don't see myself as a woman, solely. I feel all of my energy. I feel like God is so much bigger than the 'he' or the 'she.' If I am from God, I am everything ...

(Red Table Talk, 2022)

The way participants value and practice curiosity together, through never-ending witnessing, active listening, openness, questioning, and imagining around being within themselves, their relationships, and the social world, has me sitting with the significance of curiosity as a way to welcome, invite, embrace, and be in change for the co-creation of more collectively liberating worlds for all. As what they have shared demonstrates, it isn't all wonder, awe, lightness, and imagination. It is also not only interrogation, criticality, negotiation, critique, and deconstruction. These insights from participants, alongside my own experiences, have led me to believe, like many others (brown, 2017; Love, 2019; Lugones, 2003), that valuing and practicing curiosity relationally, alongside joy, are what liberate us now and get us closer to collective liberation.

### **Growth**

And as we transform, we see more things that need transformation, within ourselves and the world. (brown, 2017, p. 115)

As you might have already guessed, based on what participants shared about curiosity, the valuing and practicing of growth in the form of relational learning/unlearning, healing, and moving in the world differently, plays a prominent role in taking up queer kinship solidarity relationships as a living liberation praxis. In the stories they shared, participants highlighted how they are, with each other and others, living Freire's (2000) praxis reflection and action cycle. Their stories also made evident the ways in which they are collectively engaging in the tradition

of healing justice where healing entails, as defined by Cara Page, responding to and intervening “on generational trauma and violence” through engaging “collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds” (A. Johnson & Banks, 2021, para. 2). And much like they did with committing to the value-practice of curiosity, participants bring a queer understanding of and taking up of growth, with learning, healing, and taking new action all engaged as a part of a nonlinear and unending relational journey. Central to their valuing and practicing growth relationally is an engagement of critical reflexivity that is sometimes taken up in solitude and other times taken up together. By valuing and practicing growth in a critically reflexive, interdependent way that is always grounded in an attentiveness to socio-historical situatedness of all involved, participant queer kin pairings and groups bring to life more liberatory world(s) for all through collective transformation.

### **Growth as Non-Linear and Unending**

“Sometimes the learning isn’t exactly a straight path,” Trae explained, as he began to share an experience he had with Mani that really showcased the experiential, nonlinear, and dynamic kinds of learning, unlearning, and action with/in the relational value-practice of growth. He, Mani, and a mutual friend had gone out, as they often did before COVID-19, for a night of dancing and drinking. They were not near home and didn’t feel like driving back, so Mani contacted a friend to see if the three could crash at his place. “I perceived him to be white,” Trae explained, “because he was so blonde.” Trae recounted that at the time, he was thinking to himself, “so, I was like ‘Oh, he’s white, but he speaks Spanish, and he was from somewhere in Mexico.’” Taken aback because this person looked so different from Mani and yet shared ethnic and cultural identity, Trae found himself perplexed around Latinx identity. In the focus group, he shared that at the time, he was thinking to himself, “Well, wait, if he’s Mexican, then what are y’all (with regard to race)? like, I don’t quite understand.”

For Trae, this moment of experiential learning alongside Mani, followed by other learning on his own, led to growth in Trae’s understanding of the complexities of race and ethnicity

among Latinx people. He said of this, “so that led me on my own journey to understand that Latinx identity is not necessarily a race, it’s a group of people who come from a Spanish-speaking country.” This learning led Trae to understand a bit more “what Afro-Latinx people experience and why a lot of people who I know who are famous were from the Dominican Republic or Cuba and they just don’t talk about it cause that identity is kind of erased in a way.” All of this learning became important for Trae when at his current job is charged with putting together informational displays for heritage months, including Latinx heritage month. Now, because of his experiences with Mani, he makes sure to “include lots of different kinds of people across, of all different kinds of races because it’s a lot bigger than that.” “It’s sort of one of those things where a small experience like that one just kind of kick starts something,” Trae continued, a small experience that, through reflection and research, led to him “becoming a more informed person.”

I think these everyday learnings often are what is missing in much of the work about relational education across lines of difference. What is usually presented are stories that highlight three ways people learn from and with each other in relationship with (a) People learning about their different lived experiences of privilege and oppression through storytelling and listening, (b) People witnessing each other having different experiences in real-time, and/or (c) People having a collective experience that falls unevenly and makes more apparent their different socio-historical situatedness. These kinds of learnings across differences were certainly present in what participants shared. And what Trae shares here—where someone is learning about difference through being in a web of connections and where learning is unfolding in uneven ways that aren’t even fully known or articulated in real-time—is powerful and not discussed enough. Trae wasn’t learning something about Mani; he learned and grew around a learning that was about others within the larger community that Mani is a part of. Again, while this is sometimes present in works about relationships across differences and specifically alliance, solidarity, and coalitional relationships, this learning about others outside of the

relationship often isn't as highlighted. As Mani added, "it's funny, I mean ... I didn't know that was going through your mind, and I think it's—just being around each other and being exposed to our friends or each other's friends ..."

As was the case in curiosity, Mani emphasized how openness, how willingness to learn is a critical underpinning in how this learning across difference and subsequent growth embodied in taking new and informed action, is able to unfold, "... even if you're exposed, and you go with a closed mind probably nothing will happen ... it won't spark any interest. But just being open to learning, that has a lot to do with it also." As Mani explains, learning across difference isn't made possible through exposure to difference alone or even how often one is exposed, etc.; it is about *how* the contact is taken up, with an attentiveness to difference, to multiplicity, to diversity within groups, and to what can be learned from all of that with regard to peoples' experiences of the social world.

### **Growth as Embodied and Experiential**

In addition to bringing to life how learning and growth can be a non-linear and interdependent process that ripples across relations and spaces, Trae's story also demonstrates how there are these living complexities and nuances of learning in relationship wherein asking questions or having a critical conversation in real-time is not only not always possible but is also not always necessary for powerful learning and growth to occur. In response to Mani saying, "... I didn't know that you were experiencing that and that's been many, many, many, many, many years," Trae said, "I didn't know how to ask that question or if I should ask because I didn't have enough information to know what questions to ask, but it definitely planted a seed."

This embodied, relationally attuned learning across difference that spills out and over beyond a moment and beyond the relationship itself into other spaces, with others, while talked about some in existing work, is not often done so with an emphasis on the nonlinearity, the nonverbal or not verbalized or discussed aspects, and the disjointed nature of time and space. What Trae shares here invites all of us to consider the vastness of learning when it comes to



time and space and has me considering the ways in which unlearning what learning “should” look like or is, as decolonial pedagogues (Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Shahjahan, 2014a; Shahjahan, 2014b) and Chicana feminist pedagogues (Lara, 2002; Rendón, 2009) have called us to do, might allow us to more fully experience and integrate the radical learnings, teachings, and transformations we have every day with each other as well as open up possibilities for more.

There was another set of embodied, experiential learning and growth moments discussed by Tree, Green, and JuJu. In these moments, all involved were challenged as Black, non-binary parents around their ideas and practices regarding gender, parenting, family, and respect. Tree and Green both shared with me how experiencing JuJu’s relationship with their child and, in particular, how JuJu and their child talk about and engage each other led to profound moments of learning and growth for them.

Tree explained that “the difference in how JuJu parents and engages their child with an awareness of gender identity and expression are just part of the many tools that JuJu is imparting as a parent to their child.” Tree recounted one experience they had with JuJu and their child in particular that challenged their own thinking about the relationship they have with their child and how their child refers to them. “I had never thought about evaluating whether I want my child to call me mom or mama,” Tree said, “I just kind of assumed, I just allowed it to happen without having an evaluation, (and) also in doing that I made the assumption that other folks were doing it too.” JuJu, however, was not. And so, when Tree referred to JuJu as his mom, JuJu’s son corrected Tree, saying, “they’re not my mom.”

Tree said of this experience, “it was just this amazing moment of awareness around, ‘oh that’s an opportunity too.’ Like that’s an intentional decision and some choice that JuJu has exercised to have.” Tree’s revelation that folks could opt out of being named mom or mama by their child wasn’t the only powerful aspect of this interaction; it was that JuJu’s son felt able to correct Tree, an adult, on this. The fact that JuJu’s son was, to quote Tree, “aware enough to

educate me and not just aware, but also felt safe ... this is just normal, like I'm just gonna have to correct you on this one." For Tree, this child feeling confident in their parent's not being called Mom in this instance and feeling supported by their parent to take the lead on this when adults slipped into default assumptions "gave me an opportunity to question and evaluate" not only how Tree might want to be called but how Tree would engage with their child and others around gender, parent-child, and child-adult interactions.

Green shared a similar experience that got at the way JuJu's parenting of their child challenged not only their ideas around gender and parenting but also ideas they had about what respect looks like in the parent and child relationship, particularly as it pertains to Black parents and their children. "I remember the first time I was in a space with JuJu and their child, and their child screamed 'JuJu!'" Green recalled, laughing, "And ... my Black mama hopped out real quick, like, 'Who ... What? Who the fuck you think you calling?'" Green had been raised and had raised their child with certain ideas around what it meant to be respectful to your parent, informed, in part, by traditional Black cultural notions of parenting as authority over/power over. This moment of JuJu's child calling their parent by their first name and calling out for them across the room pushed back on all of that for Green because here was JuJu, a Black parent with their Black child, doing something differently.

After first engaging the child directly, asking them, "did they give you permission to call them by their first name?" and when they did not answer directly, saying, "That's not how you call your parent," Green realized they were "imposing" and actually naming and projecting what was "inappropriate for me." This called Green to shift and name that rather than to tell JuJu's child (and JuJu) what was right for them to do as parent and child. "And so I was, like, I don't appreciate you calling Juju across the room in that way. If you need them, you should get up and go to them ... That's what I would like you to do" Green explained that JuJu's child looked at them like "'Who the fuck?'" which further "called me out my whole body, my whole spirit came

out. Like, they did what?" but in reflecting after the moment and since they said they felt pushed to grow in their thinking around parenting.

Tree, JuJu, and Green all parent differently from each other, and yet, because they are all Black non-binary parents who share a commitment to raising free Black children, Green feels able to witness and honor the differences and continuously turn to Tree and JuJu to ask, "what is possible?" and expand beyond their initial response. "There's not a Blueprint for raising free Black children," Green concluded, "there's only the inherent response that you have learned through years of conditioning from your parents that you ... well, for me, that I either catch in the moment or afterwards." They find that being with JuJu, Tree, and other Black queer and trans parents trying to heal from and push beyond the traditional way of parenting fortifies them and keeps them curious. Within and through these relationships, they are able to take their parenting dilemmas and questions to Tree, JuJu, and other Black queer and trans kin and ask, "yo, how would you respond to this?" not so they can adopt what folks are doing necessarily, just so they can hear about and learn from more possibilities while on their own journey.

For both Tree and Green, experiencing JuJu's relationship with their child and also being with/in relationship with both of them has meant a lot of (un)learning, learning, and growth around how folk can be a parent, how folk can be in relationship to their child, and how folk can be in relation to other parents and other children and witness and support their relations. What I particularly love about Tree's share and where it took the group is evident in what JuJu shared in response. With a big beaming smile, JuJu unmuted their mic and responded with this,

I had a moment recently ... hearing Green why being a Black mama is so important for them. ... it was a moment where ... you know what? I take pride in being like your parent and also, not like I'm missing out on something by not identifying as a Black mama or like a Black mom, but I had never thought about that in this way.

In seeing Green as a fellow Black non-binary, a masc (masculine) of center person, and "all of the ways that they show up in this very nurturing and loving way," this claiming of a Black Mama

identity felt interesting and inspiring to JuJu. And so, they ended up, after talking with Green, having a conversation with their child, telling him, “I would love to be your mama.” “I feel like it’s wonderful,” JuJu said, “all of these ways where we get to decide and navigate and also interrogate the meaning and when it makes sense or feels right.” Reflecting on these three intertwined, related, and different experiences, they said, “It’s such a wonder, it feels full circle, how we see ourselves and reflect ourselves and feel and create new meaning from being with each other.” JuJu credits these relationships and the growth they experience with/in and through them for making them “a better parent, a better lover, a better friend, a better child, a better sibling” because of how “good and powerful” it feels “to evolve with people.”

Here JuJu brings to life how growth, how (un)learning, teaching, and acting with/in and through relationships can be this spiraling out to multiple possibilities. Just as Tree and Green are being challenged to think about “how do I want to be called by my own kid,” “what assumptions am I making about what others want to be called or are called,” “what does it look like for a child to show a parent respect?” and “how do you raise a child freely through what they call you and how they interact with you?” JuJu is considering that maybe, being a Black Mama in their own eyes and in the eyes of their child might be more liberatory for them.

And all of this growth is being held in this flowing between, among, with each other and others. In growth, like curiosity, meanings, knowledges, and possibilities are never foreclosed; they are expanded. Living relational transformational embodiments of Black queer trans “practicing future,” afro-futuristic ways of being parents, family, and community are unfolding in these complex, expansive, and, at times, seemingly contradictory ways. Through experiencing different ways of being a parent and taking up parenting, reflecting in solitude and/or together about these differences, posing critical questions and engaging in dialogue with openness (and we are back to curiosity!) with each other, and taking up collective imagining and experimentation, they are able to engage growth as a relational value-practice. As in the example from Trae and Mani, growth again is about nonlinearity, continuous, relational

(un)learning, and teaching. It is also, similarly, about learning and living with attentiveness to multiplicity, complexity, and diversity within a community.

What is also significant in these growth stories is the role of healing within the transformation, a healing that is, as I said in the introduction, in the tradition of healing justice. By engaging in possibility making where, rather than being led to feel that there is one right way to be Black queer and trans parents raising free children, or one right way to be of support and be in community with each other in doing this, they get to be queerly in flux once again with/in and through their relationships, open to multiple possibilities they did not previously think of, witness, experience or engage. Tree, Green, and JuJu are not only practicing future together, but they are also re-parenting themselves and thus, re-membering their own pasts and those of their Black families. They are engaging in a growth that is about learning, healing, and acting as loving.

### **Growth as Unlearning and Healing**

Concetta, in sharing the growing edges they have being vulnerable with/in and through their queer kinship solidarity relationships with Parker, Loni, and others also talked about unlearning and healing what they were raised with. Concetta said,

for me growing up was very little communication, ignoring conflict, pretending like it didn't happen, talking about some things or not talking about some things that are uncomfortable or that people have disagreements. Like this performativity around family. Like showing up and making other people feel comfortable by not having conflict or having hard conversations.

For Concetta, the valuing and practicing growth through (un)learning and healing these things is part of what makes it queer kinship solidarity for them. "I think the thing that feels really different for me about these relationships beyond how we're working to intentionally structure them and try and completely do something differently than given family." And yet, getting into the complexity and nonlinearity piece a bit more, Concetta expressed that even with all the work

they are doing with these folks, the underlying fear of relational loss, fear of the threat of rejection that they were raised with still looms large, and in new ways, in part because of the authenticity and connectedness Concetta experiences with/in these relationships:

I really care about these relationships, it feels really high stakes for me, but also I think that acts as a deterrent for me from really opening up myself to reveal all the messiness, because I'm scared, I'm scared of what will happen, because it hasn't looked good before.

Concetta also teased out just how challenging this (un)learning is, explaining the very process of unlearning these norms and narratives around authenticity, vulnerability, emotionality, conflict, and family relationships that they have internalized as a white person within white supremacy also involve unlearning white supremacist narratives around how they should learn (on their own) and who they should (experts, read other white people) or shouldn't learn from (People of Color). In fact, part of keeping up the guise of white perfectionism is acting at times as though one knows it all and has nothing to learn, let alone unlearn. And so what Concetta shared demonstrates how valuing and practicing growth relationally for them is about unlearning not only what they think about vulnerability, emotionality, relationality, family relationships, etc., but also how they take up this (un)learning with others and their relationship to how knowledge is created and applied in general. "I'm not always a good student or learner," Concetta said, "I'm not always able to be my best self in certain moments, and even though I do want to learn, my own shit gets in the way too, so, whether it's my own trauma, whether it's white woman socialization and know it all kind of attitude, that shit blocks me from being able to learn from Black and Brown people in my life." So, for Concetta, the learning in growth is "also unlearning ... It's trying to get over myself" in order to take up "learning a different way." Concetta explained that a big part of how they engage in growth is looking to the "people in my life and seeing how they learn from each other" witnessing how they are "showing up as learners and as people who wanna share about themselves or about their experiences." "I take

away a lot,” they added, “from dismantling the white Eurocentric configuration of learning,” and one of the biggest takeaways they have had has been that “a lot more is possible when we’re relational and not being in transactional configurations.”

And so, for Concetta, central to their relationally engaging and experiencing growth is (un)learning and healing around vulnerability, emotionality, conflict, and relationality, which simultaneously involves (un)learning their ways of learning. Even with the challenging, multilayered elements, Concetta expressed a commitment to continuing this work with Parker, Loni, and others, again illustrating the ways in which committing to taking up growth relationally, like many of the other value-practices, means staying in the trying. Concetta said, “this is something that I really want to continue to work on and do very differently.” By sharing this example, Concetta and their queer kin, like the others in this project, make more evident how growth as a value-practice of queer kinship solidarity is embodied, relational, non-linear, and unending.

Similar to what was present in the example from JuJu, Tree, and Green, Concetta shared an understanding and taking up of the value-practice of growth as relational (un)learning for collective healing, including future generations. “If we, Parker and I, have the ability to have a child,” Concetta said, “I really want to do that differently and model the family and community that we surround ourselves with.” “I see all of this what we’re doing now as something that’s going to impact future generations,” they continued, “... not just what’s happening right here in this room.”

Additionally, Concetta emphasized how the (un)learning and healing present in the value-practice of growth is not just always relational but always embodied, saying, “I really want to kinda unclench, (laughing) and take a chance, because people are saying that we’re here for a reason and we’re here for the long haul.”

## **Growth, Compassion, and Interdependence**

Parker later made a point to emphasize his understanding of how hard this work of growth, of learning/unlearning, and healing is for Concetta, himself, Loni, and others. He said, “we’re responding to things from our family of origin with other people, and that’s fucking hard ... instead of like, 30, 40 years, we’ve been at this for like, 5 to 10 years or something.” Parker shared that in his own journey, he has been able to come to a better place of being able to stay in the challenging, nonlinear complexity that is valuing and practicing growth relationally by understanding that “Hard feelings are inevitable, and also they’re going to be intensified because we’re practicing them.” Understanding this has allowed him to frame, with others, the hard moments and hard feelings as “an opportunity.”

He acknowledged that though many of us know this, we can still sometimes be “really hard on each other in chosen family,” and he named compassion and grace as integral to how people support one another’s as well as collective growth within queer kinship. Speaking to Concetta and Loni, he shared more about this, saying:

If I’m able to learn in this configuration and in my life, it’s because somebody has made a commitment to say (to me), “when you show up in your trauma, you’re not your best self; I’m committed to seeing you through that as a person in your process.” That has allowed me to show up next to you in a way that I have not experienced very often.

While this evokes the element of holding space which was mentioned in the value-practice of dignity, the compassion and grace piece has a core component of embodying loving humility as well as carrying the wisdom of interdependence into our relational engagement. Both of these components of knowing and practicing relationality/kinship and situating learning/teaching always within that collectivity come to us from indigenous thinkers (Smith, 2012). Returning to Parker’s point, many of us, because of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-het patriarchy socialization, don’t all start out knowing and practicing these ways of being in all of our relations, *and* it is with/in and through relational support offered to us with both this



understanding as well as compassion and grace offered that we get to different places with each other in living for collective liberation.

And, as Loni shared, the different places that we get to not only spill over into new and different relational configurations but, as already discussed, sometimes go backward toward healing and transforming the dynamics within families of origin:

because of the relationships I've been building here and the capacity that I feel I have expanded for myself by being in relationship with y'all, I feel ... more equipped and more ready to have conversations with my family of origin. To ... show up more fully with them so that they can choose to be in relationship or not with my full self and not the Loni that I packaged to be safe in that space.

Thus, the growth extends outwards to growth with others.

As shared in these stories and real-time focus group experiences from participants, the value-practice of growth encompasses (un)learning and healing. This learning and healing are always about engaging in an ongoing, non-linear, complex, interdependent, embodied and spiritual, relational transformation, one that allows us to experience now and move closer to collective liberation with each other and others. In queer kinship solidarity, it isn't about only "growing" in yourself (how could you ever really?), and it isn't about "sharing" that growth; it is about being within it, witnessing it, supporting it, with compassion, with humility, with deep reverence and love, one that fortifies us in our collective trying for something more for all of us. To quote Parker, "y'all's vulnerability and practice and support and learning those things against all odds, you know, just restores me, to know that, to see everybody transform and keep going fortifies me."

### **Joy**

I love thinking of joy as 'the good mood of the soul' There is definitely something soulful about joy. Based on our research I define joy as an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation. (Brown, 2021, p. 205)

For a long time in my life, I thought joy was something that happened to me or that I happened upon. It felt fleeting in the midst of the busy and the work of life, even when I began moving for and with others for collective liberation. It was a treat I hardly ever let myself savor. However, I have long believed in its importance (for others). I have written, taught, and presented about how important joy is for marginalized people. In a world that tells so many of us that we, that our communities, aren't worthy, that our existence is wrong, deviant, less than, etc., to move with and for joy, to co-create it, and share it, is profoundly political. And so when Alex in our last focus group said to me, "I have a question for you, I looked at all the questions that you sent for every focus group, including this one, and I didn't see any about joy, why is that?" I let them know I appreciated the call-in because clearly, I have more work to do around my looking for and being with joy in social justice work. Furthermore, it came up in every single focus group on its "own." Not just during the saying hello and goodbye before I hit record, but during the questions, in the chat, and in the "off-topic" conversations. Joy could not be ignored, and it could not be stopped.

Folks in this project, within the project, and beyond showed me that queer kinship solidarity relationship values and practices joy in a way that answers brown's (2019) mandate to "Make justice and liberation feel good" (p. 14). They are doing this in several ways: by making time to put down the weight of the world and their work and enjoying everyday moments of pleasure, by affirming each other's desirability and engaging each other as erotic beings, by celebrating new holidays, and being in those celebrations in ways that disrupt narrow and oppressive roles and scripts about how to be in the world and with others, and lastly, by engaging play, pleasure, and fun in the work of social justice as well as seeing it as the "work" of liberation in and of itself.

### **Joy as a Resistant Refuge**

As shared earlier, Tomi and Nicole have been, for over 5 years, focused on, and in some ways consumed by, the responsibility of caretaking for Tomi's aging parents. While they both

were glad to be able to take up the work of caretaking alongside their day jobs and passion projects, all of which they engage in as liberatory work, the sheer magnitude and weight of it all has left them exhausted and spread thin. This has meant they have had little time and energy to take care of their mental, physical, and spiritual well-being as “individuals,” let alone as a couple. Both emphasized during focus groups that they find themselves after 28 years together, in a time of reconnecting to each other, something I will explore more in the final chapter on connection but is important to mention here, in joy, for context. Part of that reconnecting has involved making time to, in Tomi’s words, “put things down, put them away when we need to put them away,” so that they can be in joy with each other, not merely to nourish and sustain them in all that they do, not only to connect them back to each other but because both they and their relationship are deserving of that kind of liberation in the here and now. Tomi shared a story that was a prime example of how she was valuing and practicing joy with Nicole. “It’s Friday,” she began,

and it’s time for her to get off work, so we’re gonna have a drink. Well, in the midst of her making her drink, she starts talking about a honey-do-list. I said, “No honey-do-list. We’re not doing honey-do-list. Relax, put that on the table. We can talk about it later. We’re not doing no honey-do-lists right now. It’s Friday, baby. It’s Friday after work. Let’s unwind, wind down.”

As I said before in authenticity and in curiosity, some of these acts might seem simple, but they are not when we consider the particular socio-historical situatedness most folks who occupy multiple positionalities of marginalization are in. Taking time, co-creating, and experiencing joy together when every day you are denied your humanity, dignity, and fullness because of the socio-historical context and climate, and your place in it is anything but simple and easy. I think of what Love (2019) writes of Black joy in *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*; for her, it is

... joy that originates in resistance, joy that is discovered in making a way out of no way, joy that is uncovered when you know how to love yourself and others, joy that comes from releasing pain, joy that is generated in music and art that puts words and/or images to your life's greatest challenges and pleasures, and joy in teaching from a place of resistance, agitation, purpose, justice, love, and mattering.

As discussed in dignity and in the introduction to this section, to honor themselves and their needs as Black queer women, their need for joy, for relaxation, for pleasure, for connection and love, to honor themselves and their needs and desires as a couple, is inherently political. As Tricia Hersey of the Nap Ministry states, "A Black woman in a rested state is a radical act" (Hersey, 2002, Instagram post). By relaxing, by having a drink together, Tomi and Nicole are valuing and practicing joy as relational resistance in ways that are inherently dignifying and afro-futuristic. By creating joy together in the here and now and taking it in, they are moving toward a future where they and other Black queer folks are joyful, are not tied to imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero patriarchal ideas of productivity and worth, as "individuals" or a family, even when there is meaning for them and love within them for the paid work that they do. They are not simply having a drink to unwind; they are "unraveling from very deep and violent systems via rest" (Hersey, 2021, Instagram post).

Relaxing as a way of valuing and practicing joy was also present in a story Alex shared about Sophie. When talking about their relationship, Alex offered that they saw Sophie's propensity for joy as nourishing and as an act of resistance. Alex shared, "Sophie has always done a really good job of like, 'Please remember that there's happiness in the world. Please remember that we can be light and let go for a minute.'" Later, Alex elaborated more on this, Sophie just laughs. Laughs at herself. And that's really beautiful. (Laughs). That's not something that I do. I don't randomly giggle to myself. But that's also self-care in that in the world that we're living in right now, that is resistance ... that's what it looks like for me, maybe because it's difficult for me to get there.

In experiencing joy as relational value-practice for liberation with Sophie, Alex was called to move more into it themselves with/in their relationship with Sophie, something Sophie also appreciated:

Alex: I know for fact I've been better at it.

Sophie: You have.

Alex: Thank you.

Sophie: That was a struggle, but it's because we both, if I were not a sociologist, I would be like, what the fuck? But I understand, like I get it, I get it, I get it. ... and we've been working 8 hours today reading this shit, and we're living it. It's—let's ... disengage for a night, you know?

As Alex shares here, Sophie's joyfulness and the joy they co-create and share together is not only enriching their relationship but is an act of resistance, one that certainly pours out beyond it. Alex shared how valuing and practicing joy is central not only to the queer kinship solidarity work they were taking up with Sophie and others but to social justice and liberation work in general:

... it's up there in my top three ingredients of what is required for and what sustains social justice work, is being able to have play and joy. And that is so quickly removed ... I mean it's so difficult to access within mainstream society as we know it today. It's difficult to access it in marginalized identities, whatever those may be. But, when you have it, that's what's really gonna pull through. And not only that, but when you think of what is play? Play is literally liberation. When you play, you are creative. When you play, you're not thinking about, "What are the norms? What are the boundaries? What are the rules?" It's literally the one space where we get to imagine what the world's gonna look like. So then, as people that are committed to social justice work, then I have to ask myself, like, "Why don't I make it ... equally as important as-as (laughing) reading the literature, as doing all of these other things." I think we have to highlight that, think about

that, focus on that, support that ... I need to stop talking about the anti-trans sports bills and host trans brunch. You know? Like, I wanna do trans brunch where we don't talk about ... or maybe we do, but then we talk about other things.

Alex hasn't hosted a trans brunch, yet they regularly celebrate queer joy and trans joy through potlucks and chosen family gatherings with other queer and trans kindred. The Trans Joy parties are particularly important to them. They started these with their new partner, their partner's children, some of whom are trans, and another friend/colleague and their trans child. At these parties, they have cakes decorated with trans joy written on them and share food, hang out, talk, and dance. They shared photos of the cakes (see Figure 8) with me and told me about this in follow-up conversations.

**Figure 8. Pictures of Trans Joy Cakes**



They shared some of the pictures from these trans joy parties on their private Instagram for Trans Day of Visibility with a caption that included the following words "... know that trans joy is boundless and budding. Transness is imaginatory. What feels inescapable today is being reconfigured by necessity because people, all people, deserve to live freely with divinity and in expansive joy ..." Hearing about this joy warmed my heart and brought tears to my eyes. All I could think was next year, I am definitely celebrating trans day of visibility as a celebration rather than a day to educate cis folks via social media or teaching. We deserve joy, to be visible, and to be in joyful, loving visibility with each other. We deserve this and so much more.

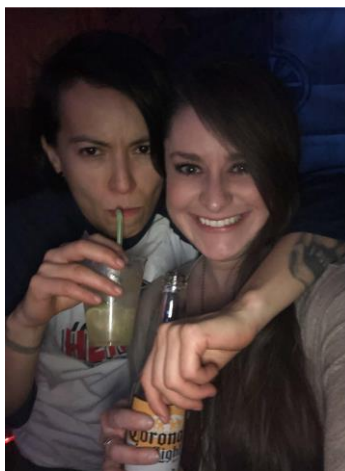
While Alex and Sophie are no longer together romantically, they stay connected in a way only queers can do with their exes which brings us back to the fluidity of queer relationships. A way they continue to value and practice joy in their new kinship configuration is to swap memes about academia and pictures of Bunz, a beloved furry companion they share custody of (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Alex and Sophie's Furry Companion Bunz**



Their joy, while their kinship has shifted, is boundless and abundant. In many ways, the valuing and practicing of joy were present in their relationship from the beginning. Their friendship turned into queer involvement, queer kinship all because of one night at a gay bar drag show (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Alex and Sophie at a Gay Bar's Drag Show from Alex and Sophie's Collage**



“That’s us,” Sophie said, “that was at a gay nightclub bar, and we went to a drag show, and it was a blast.”

### **Joy Out in Public**

As has already been said, Trae and Mani’s relationship began with dancing. Dancing, celebrating, performing, and engaging art continue to be central to their friendship, alongside critical conversations and active listening. Similar to Nicole and Tomi and Alex and Sophie, Trae and Mani, engaging in valuing and practicing joy is about escaping the weight and trauma of the oppressive systems they have to navigate as a Black, queer man and a Brown, queer and non-binary Mexican immigrant. “We go and have fun,” Mani said, looking into their camera at Trae and then at me, “kind of move away from what we’re living and just enjoy ourselves.” But as I shared with Nicole and Tomi and Alex and Sophie, valuing and practicing joy in this way is resistance, particularly with the added element of Trae and Mani seeking out places and nights that center and serve Black and Brown queer and trans folk.

This can be particularly challenging in the South, where the history of overt racism in the form of the segregation of public space has always trickled into private spaces, including private LGBTQ spaces, resulting in a very racially stratified gay nightclub scene. This adds a layer to the resistance they are engaging in when they seek out and dance and enjoy themselves in spaces that are trying to exist for and cater to their communities. What I love about what was shared about these moments in their friendship was that, in real-time, there was joking and play in their remembering. This is apparent in the following dialogue they had about some of these memories:

Mani: I just think about the times that I we have gone to a lot of, so, we only have one queer Latinx bar or club or whatever and there has been a lot of times when there’s been other clubs that have been trying to start in other cities around us that have been trying to have another space for our queer Latinx people and ... Trae has been there



with me to experience those places for the first time, places that we don't know in the middle of nowhere.

Trae: Ooof

Mani: Because I don't know where I'm going, and Trae's just like, "Sure, let's do it!"

\*laughs\* and that to me is also very important because I have someone to live that with  
\*laughs\*

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: \*laughs\* Girl, we might be going out to the woods.

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: Might not come back, but we're there and we're happy ... \*laughs\*

Trae: I love an adventure

Mani: Like the places we've been, in the middle of nowhere, like "Is it here?" "It doesn't look like it."

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: \*laughs\*

Trae: "Is this, this hole in the ground?"

Mani: \*laughs\* "Where is the door?"

That Trae and Mani are sharing and living here calls me to remember the power of co-creating, seeking out, and being in queer spaces, particularly those that intentionally center Black and Brown queer and trans folk. It has always felt like an adventure to find, a challenge to keep (we almost never get to), and when I'm there, I feel like I'm awake in a dream, in a forbidden world that I didn't think was possible but am so grateful is because I feel alive and in relationship with others in ways I mostly don't in the light of day in the "real" world. These co-created spaces of collective radical, multiracial queer, and trans joy act as a world where we get to, with others, be ourselves, be in connection and pleasure, be alive and in our fullness (which sometimes that includes our drunken messiness) with each other.

## Joy as Queer Erotic Engagement

When listening to Mani and Trae talk of these spaces and their experiences going to them and being in them, I thought of what Ahmed (2015) writes about the political nature of queer pleasure in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*,

Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies 'gather' in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks, and homes. The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others. (p. 165)

I could write an entire dissertation just on the ways joking and play showed up in all of the focus groups; it was incredible to experience in real-time the ways that folks were valuing and practicing joy even in the context of a research project which might be one of the last places most folks would expect to be playing and joking around. Mani and Trae, perhaps because they are both my friends, joked around so much and in ways that really spoke to aspects of queer joy that give me glimpses of what liberation can look like, particularly as it relates to the power of the erotic in queer friendships/queer kin sibblingship relationships. You can see this in the two bits of dialogue below that occurred when they were going through the collage Trae made and remembering many of their nights out:

Trae: I got a lot of compliments that night.

Mani: Yeah! That shirt!

Trae: I was like, ah! Thank you! It's one of the few that still fits me right now.

Mani: \*laughs\*

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: I'm sure you're still wearing it anyways.

Trae: You're damn right! \*laughs\*

Mani: You do like those tight clothes

Trae: ... I've got a brand to protect

Mani: \*laughs\*

Mani: ... all I know was that the song Calabria came on it was part of it

Trae: Yess

Mani: I was like, "Oh my God, we missed that song in our first conversation because when that song played, that was like us just like 'Let's go dance, stop whatever you're doing.'"

Trae: Mhmm.

Mani: Yeah, that was one of our favorite songs.

Trae: Yes, that was the hoe alarm.

Mani: Yes, honey.

Trae: \*laughs\*

Mani: That was our hoe alarm, yes \*laughs\* the anthem.

Mani and Trae affirmed each other's desirability a lot and did so in a way that I think cis heterosexual sexual people typically do not. In my opinion (and experience), there is something about how queer people, particularly queer and trans people, will tell each other that we are hot, or "fly," or look good in something, the way we will dance with each other, or touch an arm or someone's hair (with consent) in a flirty way, the way we can talk about or encourage or support each other's sexual escapades or adventures (for those of us who aren't asexual). We can do these things in ways that are about seeing, honoring, celebrating, affirming, and *feeling* each other's power as erotic beings. And not the erotic as always or only sexual, but also not excluding the sexual into the platonic love we have for each other, not always by engaging it directly through acting on it but allowing it to be energetically present and acknowledged. Within this queer platonic intimacy, the sexual isn't just a topic of conversation or something to share tips or compare notes on; it is a flow, an energy, a part of us, and how we are with each other.

This was evident in Tree sharing that they saw Green, Morgan, Holden, and JuJu as “fine as fuck.” In one of our focus groups together, they playfully expressed that when being advised by one of them to talk to another one in the group about strategizing and thinking through the movement organizing related work that they do with each other, “it’s real easy for me, you know what I’m saying? Like, it’s real easy for me to just be like, ‘Oh, hey, I’ll talk to Morgan.’” While they were saying this, everyone on the call was smiling and laughing, and the chat was alive with folk sending winky faces, kissy faces, and fire to each other to convey that their feelings were mutual. Tree went on to share that JuJu had sent them some porn to support them in exploring themselves and their sexuality, in continuing to grow in their journey with pleasure. For Tree, valuing and practicing joy in this way, being in this flow of energy and in their fullness, including recognizing and engaging in sexual energy with Green, Morgan, Holden, and JuJu, was part of “the ... beginning of me intentionally deciding to be fully human ... making the choice to be human and actually practicing it with my queer family as support.” And again, intimacy wasn’t all sexual or about sex, Tree talked about the importance of the laughter they all shared, “... the laughter ... the underlying laughter of all the things. Even when, you know, there’s agitation.” In concluding their thoughts on the role of pleasure, play, and joy, Tree stated, “like even in our messiness, marginalized folks, who are practicing this intimacy and respect and joy together are still the best.”

### **Joy in the Struggle**

This shared commitment to valuing and practicing joy relationally as a part of doing social justice movement organizing work together was also present in what Morgan, Holden, and Green shared about their experiences with/in this queer kinship solidarity relational configuration. Morgan, for example, talked about being re-invigorated by JuJu’s excitement when they were first getting to know JuJu, who was, at the time, first coming into movement organizing space:

I remember a lot of times being in movement spaces, and there was a point where it was just anxiety and what type of shit is about to pop off at this meeting? That I had a lot of edge. And when you come into a space, I think it helped me return to the joy and just excitement and deep curiosity I had coming into movement ... All the things that changed for me individually but also with the people that I've met, I got to see and remember in you a lot of bright-eyed mesmerizing moments that I had coming into movement initially. You reminded me of each time I came into space and just the joy in things that poured into me from it.

Holden shared how much they valued everyone for valuing and practicing joy with each other, particularly in taking up the paid movement work that they do together, saying,

I enjoy being able to play with folks because so much of the work does feel so intense and serious. And so it feels good to be able to have playful, caring, loose relationships that can help to feed into how I can share it with people in the work and not take myself so seriously ... I'm appreciating play more and more as I get older. I love it.

They also made a point to share that the joy they experience and get to practice with others wasn't only limited to the people in the configuration but was also in part because of their children and the children in their lives. Holden made a point to talk about how much joy they experienced from young people who have, often through play, been teachers to them, "... all y'all's babies are so wonderful and have taught me so, so much," Holden said, pausing and reflecting and then sharing a specific memory they had with Green's kid, "she came and went through the trainings and be teaching us dances and all the different bonfires, it was great." For the entire group, relationally valuing and practicing joy was a non-negotiable for working for and living for liberation together; as Green said,

We have a different shared culture, in how we show up with intention and love and joy and to get the work done. And it's not because we're not equipped. It's just because everything that has been given to us, our foundations is set in concrete and we have to

jackhammer it up and then hurry up and lay a new foundation before it rains and if it rains on it, then we gotta restart all over, but that doesn't take away the joy and the emotional vulnerability of that process. We can't skip out on that, right?

### **Joy as Celebrating Each Other**

Laying a new foundation through creating new celebrations and traditions was talked about by Parker, Loni, and Concetta as a key way they value and practice joy with each other, with Parker acting as a, to quote Loni, "mothababa" of their queer kinship configurations traditions and celebrations. Parker had a sense of humor around this, in part because he experienced an abusive childhood in his family of origin and didn't have an experience of good days with family until he moved in with his high school gym teacher and his mother, Parker's first experience of queer kin outside of his twin sister. He said of this:

I think it's so funny because I think that because my childhood was so fucked up that I really loved those very romanticized, idyllic family scenes. I still do love those things. I'm still like, "Ok, \*claps twice\* it's solstice, everybody in their places, we're doing this right now!!" So I still feel like I'm doing that. \*laughs\*

To which Loni replied, "I'm so glad that you do because ... you really do come through as like the house motha, mothababa."

While Parker says with humor that he feels like, in some ways, he is fulfilling roles as seen on TV, that traditionally "a matriarchy" would take up, gathering the family members for celebrations, in his queering and transing of this role, with his radical politics, it looks a bit different which calls to mind Ahmed's (2015) notion of queer deviation as "inhabiting norms differently" (p. 155):

Last year I had to give up New Year's Eve because it's based on a Christian calendar. And I didn't know, of course! \*laughs\* And I was like fuck, now we're giving up New Years! And like I feel like with Christmas we are resurrecting this corpse of Santa. All of these things are fake! So I do think that family are charged to look forward with each

other to other opportunities to make ceremonies and ritual. And so I do think I'm all in that grief process but also I think that I do get excited about that too, it's a balance. Whether they are having Crafternoon or a solstice celebration together, gathering for Thursday night dinners or planning cabin trips or celebrating each other buying homes and land, Parker, Concetta, and Loni are committed to centering and valuing and practicing joy as a part of the queer kinship solidarity liberation praxis with each other. As Parker reminds us, these co-created moments of joy and celebrating them are revolutionary acts, again, especially considering context and how folks are situated socio-historically, as queer and trans People of color, as a queer and trans interracial couple, as neurodivergent, mentally ill, and disabled people, etc.:

Recognizing them is meaningful. This is not an inevitability; it is not an inevitability that I would own land an hour away from where my family was enslaved. The fact that I have that ability and Loni just bought a house and land, it just feels so important.

As was shared in the other examples given, this valuing and practicing of joy in this configuration was never confined only to these folks:

... it does mean something when other people are also going through different milestones. People are really living into their dreams, and it's, "Oh, we got this dream, and it's not what I thought it was, and I need to pivot," but it's still meaningful to me that even in the midst of it all, people are still accomplishing things ... it's really impressive.

From having a drink or going out dancing to making soup and watching TV, from telling jokes and picking on each other playfully to flirting and sharing porn, from making sure organizing work and spaces are joyful and juicy, to celebrating holidays and each other's milestones, folks in this project are my teachers around how to live this value and practice joy more, with them and with others. The queer kin pairings and groups in this project show us that valuing and practicing joy with each other and others isn't only what sustains us but can be how we bring into the here and now the more collectively liberatory world(s) we want to see. I'm left

with Alex's words as another mandate I am trying to take up in all the spaces where I am living and moving in relation with others for liberation, "Move towards joy. Create that joy ... just start creating what we want the world to look like."

### **Conclusion**

While these value-practices of authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy will come up again in the chapters ahead, woven through them like nonlinear undercurrents, I think foregrounding them as I have here is helpful since they were articulated and demonstrated by participants as foundational to their ways of being and moving with/in relation with each other including how they experienced and engaged: trust, solidarity, care, and connection. I would be remiss if I didn't say that I could make vulnerability, compassion, and healing (at least) their "own" value-practices. But I chose the selection I did and discussed them in the ways above because I believe that what differentiates what participants shared and expressed with regard to these value-practices offered something I did not see in the literature. What the queer kinship solidarity pairings and groups in this project make evident is that authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy are relational. I believe that many people, because of the ideologies circulated by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-het patriarchy, still conceptualize these values and practices as "occurring" relationally or being relational experiences that exist because of individual values and practices that "come together" rather than something that is valued and practiced interdependently and collectively. From/with participants and in my living and learning with others I've come to know and take them up more fully as interdependent, intermeshed, relational value-practices and wanted to share that in more depth here.

As I stated earlier, you will see how these undergird the ways in which participants experience and engage trust, solidarity, care, and connection with/in and through their relationships in the chapters ahead. Though I separate out trust, solidarity, care, and connection to do deep dives into them in the chapters to follow, they aren't parsed out in real life. Like the value-practices, these dynamic elements are mutually informing and deeply intertwined.



I also want to close this discussion of value-practices by saying this: these are things I heard and witnessed folks committing to in a living sense. As I wrote in the “Learning from the Trying” section and as was shared in participant experiences and reflections as well as my own, we aren’t “perfect” or “the best” at these things; we are never done trying to live them with each other more intentionally, fully, dynamically. I do not want folks to read this chapter or the chapters that follow and think, “so this is about best practices” and “these folks are *the* exemplars.” That isn’t how they think of or name themselves. They are embodying and living this work, which goes back to growth and the humility piece within it. These value-practices and what participants shared and showed me and each other (and themselves) about them are being shared here in that spirit of humility, the spirit of Freirean (2000, 2001) unfinishedness. They are teacher-learners and learner-teachers (Freire, 2001).

Just as committing to these value-practices and taking them up is about being in unending being and learning with; this project is about inviting those who read it to be and learn with what is at work and working within queer kinship solidarity as a liberation praxis in the ways these queer kin pairs and groups are taking it up. I write of and share these value-practices I heard and saw folks committing to with/in their relationships with each other, knowing that I will never fully do it all justice *and* that these are only “beginning” conclusions around this or present places of concluding for now about what I’ve learned and am learning from, with/in, and through these relationships. I am inviting you to do what we are doing, to commit to a practice of staying in the trying because that is where “we are going to keep learning together” (brown, 2019, p. 12) in the chapters that follow and way beyond them.

## CHAPTER VIII: DYNAMIC ELEMENTS

As I wrote in the literature review, in the desire to make things accessible, oftentimes in what I'm reading, there is an omission of the nuances present within relationships living for/working toward liberation. As I've been examining and witnessing what participants shared with me, I'm seeing them trying, experiencing, and engaging the both / and the complexity of four dynamic elements:

- Trust (as both knowing and believing)
- Solidarity (as both strategic and visionary)
- Care (as both support and struggle)
- Connection (as both holding on and letting go)

### **Dynamic (Relational) Elements**

I name them dynamic elements, inspired by brown's (2017) use of elements.<sup>15</sup> They are dynamic and elemental as opposed to values and practices in my view and experience because, for one, I see them as existing, living, and moving with/in and beyond relationships in ways that are even more relationally embedded than relationally held and practiced values and practices. We can be authentic, have dignity, stay curious, engage in growth, and experience joy "individually" or in ways where we are primarily focused on ourselves and our behavior, and, while we can, technically, trust ourselves and care for ourselves, I see trust, solidarity, care, and connection as much more difficult to try and take up within only ourselves, I see them as less as interdependent values and practices and more as intermeshed relational elements that can be experienced and engaged.

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<sup>15</sup> In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* adrienne maree brown (2017) lays out what she sees as principles and elements of emergent strategy. In reading her work I found this framing and approach helpful. The principles, she explains briefly, undergird the elements of the practice, and the elements function as alive, dynamic aspects of the engagement. I believe this framing and her use of both works against reducing the complexities of the things she is talking about and simultaneously makes the work accessible to folks like myself wanting to adopt it as a philosophy and practice it. So, inspired by her framing, I humbly take up something similar with a related, specific focus I see as in community with and deeply informed by her work.

I also, as you see in the list, see them as dynamic because of the both/and that are at work within them as they are experienced and engaged in queer kinship solidarity relationships and relational liberation praxis. While there exist multiplicities and complexities within the value-practices, I think that there is a different kind of flow, current, electricity at work within the dynamic elements that I still am trying to put into language, but I think words fail. My witnessing, experiencing of, and understanding them is informed by the importance of the more than human present in decolonial and indigenous understandings, and the liminality, postmodern ways of knowing and being present in queer and trans studies frameworks. While I can't find the words to touch it, I will say that I name them as elements because of how they move and how we are moved by them in a way that I see as different from values and practices. There is something more dynamically complex, energetically, about them.

I witness and experience these dynamic elements as something that we value and practice, something we live into relationally. But I also see them as, at times, at work on us and working through us. We can tap into them and take them up, *and* they can sometimes sweep us up and move us. In other words, much the same way that I see and experience relationships as being more than the sum of their parts, I see these elements as always bigger than the relationships that experience and engage them. So, while I believe that they exist as elements of our relationships and our lives that can grow and nourish, I believe these elements also always have "a life of their own" and gather us up if we welcome them.

### **A Note on the Order**

Each of these dynamic elements, like brown's (2017), while "distinct," are "totally connected to every other element" (p. 44). And while I realize the order could be read conventionally as in "you start from trust, fortify it through solidarity and care and get to the 'goal' of deep and lasting connection," my hope is, once you move with/in and through what is shared by the queer kin participant pairs and groups you will see how their interrelatedness and intermeshedness with more complexity than that. I do see connection, the final element, as in

some ways a bit encompassing of the previous three, but not always. I think there are ways that, through community and just being alive (for some time) on this planet, we are all always in a state of connection with each other. Not connection as in always closely connected, or moving in loving harmony, but connected nonetheless. And I am sure some readers know from experience that some relationships begin with care and move to trust or begin with an act of solidarity that leads to trust, which leads to care, or, through just being connected in one way or another, through groups we are a part of or places where we are in time or space of things we are doing or not doing together we can come into trust, solidarity, or care with each other. This is easy to see and understand once you allow yourself to be taken with the stories and experiences shared on the pages that follow.

I am still only in my beginning of thinking and being with the complexities and nuances of these elements as they are experienced and engaged by participants and myself with/in and through queer kinship solidarity. I've been thinking a lot about how we will never cease learning about and exploring the many ways we can take them up, move with and through as they are taken with, move with/in, and through us in our living for liberation through relational praxis. My hope is that the insights shared on the following pages invite us all into more learning about how these dynamic elements can enliven our collective being and move with each other for more collectively liberatory worlds.

## CHAPTER IX: TRUST

... we need to feel trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust.  
(Brown, 2012, p. 47)

In talking about the relationship between trust and vulnerability, Brené Brown (2012) asserts that the most complex aspect of it is that “we need to feel trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust” (Brown, 2012, p. 47). Brown (2012) defines trust as a “slow-building, layered process that happens over time” (p. 47). In *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Ways We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brown (2012) tells a story about when she and her daughter had a conversation about friendships, trust, and betrayal, that led to Brown (2012) coining what she and her family now call “marble jar friends” (p. 48). She explains this term was inspired by her daughter Ellen’s teacher, who “had a large, clear glass vase that she and the kids referred to as ‘the marble jar’ that the teacher would put marbles in when the kids were ‘collectively making good choices’” (Brown, 2012, p. 47). She shares that, in talking to Ellen after a friendship betrayal Ellen had experienced, Brown encouraged her “to think about her friendships as marble jars” and so, “whenever someone supports you, or is kind to you, or sticks up for you, or honors what you share with them as private you put marbles in the jar” and “when people are mean, or disrespectful, or share your secrets, marbles come out” (p. 48). Both Brown (2012) and her daughter share examples of how trust is built in “the very small moments,” that it is built “one marble at a time,” and that it requires a “leap that people in the relationship have to make before the building process ever begins” (p. 49).

Some of what Brown (2012) and the existing literature put forth resonates with what participant pairs and groups shared in this project with regard to how trust is experienced as a dynamic element at work/working with/in and through queer kinship solidarity relationships. Other components of it, however, are expanded. Queer kin pairings and groups in this project

carry an understanding and take up an engagement of trust in ways that are shaped by anti-capitalist and decolonial frameworks. Their experiences of and approaches to trust shed light on the importance of verbalized intent and commitment, interdependence and community knowing, varied spaces and experiences, and joy. What they share also expands on what we think of when we think of trusting others and challenge conventional notions of the speed of trust.

Additionally, what is missing from Brown's (2012) work and, as I stated in the literature review, from studies in the areas of alliance (Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Lawless, 2016; Ostrove & Brown, 2018) are detailed discussions of the complexities alive in building trust across lines of difference. And so, while what participants share does, at a baseline, resonate with what Brown (2012) puts forward in terms of experiencing and engaging trust as a dynamic element that lives as a both knowing, from experiencing, and believing, from extending in faith, what participants share and demonstrate about the complexities and challenges within this are often under-discussed.

### **Trusting is Knowing**

This experience of building and sustaining trust is present in much of the existing literature and in our common understanding of what it takes to build strong relationships, whether we are talking about kinship, alliance, solidarity, coalitional relationships, critical friendship, or critical community building. The understanding is that trust is built between people through each person in a relational configuration experiencing the other as trustworthy. Meaning that, as the person shows up in support of the other, in particular, if they show up in a way where they hold and care for the person around deeply vulnerable or challenging life moments, trust grows.

While participants shared understandings of trust that were in alignment with this *how*, they experienced and engaged trust as a dynamic element of queer kinship solidarity relationships. The liberation praxis they are taking up with/in and through them brings interesting insights to the fore. What participants shared in this project about the ways they are

experiencing and engaging with trust challenges ideas about the role of verbalized commitments, other people and spaces, and joy.

### **Rough Starts and Strong Words: The Importance of Verbalized Commitments**

When Tomi and Nicole were first getting together, they were coming from different experiences of having had their trust broken by people they loved. For Nicole, this went back to family of origin rejection and abandonment. For Tomi, it had been mostly in romantic relationships. Nicole said of this, “it’s been hard for me based on how I was raised and the relationships that developed with family members to be trusting of people. So, I’m more trusting than I was when we first got together.” Because of their past experiences, family trauma and relational heartbreak, being able to trust one another’s commitment to each other and the relationship was critical. As Nicole explained, knowing that Nicole would “not quit” when things got hard was one of the things that was most critical to Tomi. This was in part because of what she had experienced in past relationships she had been in. And so Nicole made a point, early on, to verbalize her commitment to build the relationship and be in it for the long haul. Nicole said of this, “*I told her, I assured her* that I was not that way. And I think me showing her that, that’s what has sustained us this long.”

The importance of stating a serious commitment to be in relationship with each other deeply, with a commitment that was for the long haul, was also emphasized by Tomi. Tomi explained that she “didn’t want to play no games” and that she saw that Nicole “wasn’t playing no games.” For Tomi, this was particularly evident when Nicole *initiated* a conversation about moving in together, and then, when that was decided upon, Nicole found them a place. Nicole’s words, followed by her actions, allowed Tomi to feel secure and trust in what they were building together. “I was never made to feel like I had to worry about her having my back,” Tomi explained, “I never had to feel like I had to worry about that.”

After some time together of living into these words with each other, more words of commitment were spoken, but by Tomi to Nicole this time, a verbalized commitment from her

that they were continuing toward a life together. It was on Nicole's graduation day in 1997. Which, Nicole explained, "happened to be her (Tomi's) birthday too." It was on this day that Tomi said to Nicole, "Okay, well, you can be my wife now." And so they moved into their first apartment together and have been "together lockstep progressing since."

These significant moments of meeting and coming together for Nicole and Tomi took place on and around the campus of the private HBCU for women that Nicole was graduating from, a place that wasn't, at the time, welcoming to Black lesbian students and their girlfriends. In fact, the girlfriend Nicole had before Tomi was a classmate of hers at the college, which led to Nicole "having to go before the judicial board (laughs) and be interrogated because of my relationship with another woman." Nicole explained that this, among other things, was why she to this day has a "love-hate relationship" with her alma mater. The college enforced a respectability political dress code, requiring that the students wear dresses in the chapel, which Nicole also resisted. So while Nicole was "always a 4.0 student," she was also always "on somebody's list" for doing something that violated the conservative, heterosexist, and cissexist tradition of the college. Nicole could not "fall in line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 103); she deviated, she "pushed boundaries constantly" while a student there.

Tomi, who comes from a family of women who graduated from that college, added, "there's lesbians that have been going there for years ... But they were, they had to fall in line with that Southern belle tradition." Knowing this about the college was the reason that, despite her family's wishes, Tomi decided not to go because falling in line with the narrow gender roles and homophobia would be too much for her, and the fight was not something she wanted. And yet, it was on the outskirts of this campus where she met and fell in love with Nicole. Outside of that very conservative chapel, after Nicole's graduation, is the place where the two made a commitment to each other, one that made way for them to trust each other and build a trusting life together.



Evident in this sharing is the significance of words in the memory of how trust grew and the significance of context. This isn't to say that the actions would be nothing without the words, but I think there is something around how the words and context get mentioned and emphasized in a particular way in telling the story. This was also the case in Alex and Sophie's telling of their beginning.

For Alex and Sophie, this speaking of a commitment into the relationship, a commitment, followed up by action, was also significant in the building of trust, as was the context. When Alex and Sophie met, Alex was exiting a relationship that "involved domestic violence," a relationship that "dragged on," leading to Alex having to get a lawyer involved. Alex was not only scared for their safety at the time because "this person knew where I lived," but they were also scared for Sophie because "this person found out where Sophie lived and there was an overlap in the timeframe." This living and being in fear for both of their safety, unfortunately for Alex, "was ... central in a nasty way to that point in my life." They explained that "it was just a lot. You know, there was just a lot going on."

And so Alex tried to end the relationship out of concern that it was a lot to ask of someone to experience and endure so early on. They shared that at one point, they said to Sophie, "I was like, 'Maybe it's not the time, maybe we shouldn't, maybe in some other life,' I told her, I just felt bad dragging her along for this ride." But Sophie didn't take the offer of an exit. Recalling this, Sophie said, "Oh, they tried to push me away using multiple, 'Oh, well, I also this ...' I'm like, 'Give me your best and your worst, whatever.'" For Alex, Sophie's verbalized commitment to stay through hardship and her supporting those words with her show up meant a great deal. It provided a foundation of trust and care for Alex that called them to work through some of the reservations they had around Sophie being white and Sophie having, up until that point, identified as heterosexual and having only dated cisgender men. Alex said of this, "that definitely made me ... dig deeper to get past the white issues and barriers that I had set up. All these things happening when they did helped to direct the work that I needed to do at that time."

This beginning through Alex's hardship was all in a time of political tumult that informed both of their experiences of these and other moments. Sophie made a point to mention that "Trump was happening," which, as was mentioned earlier, led her to leave her circle of white, cis, heterosexual friends in Georgia. But what Sophie also made a point to mention was that meeting and beginning her relationship with Alex also came right after Sophie had left a toxic heterosexual relationship with a Trump-supporting boyfriend. So Sophie was committing to her relationship with Alex in that context as well. Additionally, Alex made a point to mention that, for them, something that was particularly memorable about when they and Sophie first committed to a relationship with each other was that Colombia had just gotten a new, right-wing president, which, according to them, "was not surprising, because we kind of expected it to happen after Trump was elected" but was nonetheless something that felt hard for them thinking about where they come from and their family and friends who live there.

For Alex and Sophie, coming into this relationship, making explicit verbalized commitments, and following through with them, were all situated in their world(s) becoming so much less liveable for them. They were choosing each other and choosing joy in a world interpersonally and internationally on fire. And that is something I saw across groups: With Green, Holden, Morgan, Tree, and JuJu meeting and building in organizing spaces in the midst of state and national violence against Black people and Black queer and trans people; with Parker meeting Loni through grassroots organizing space meant to affirm and hold Black and Brown queer and trans people and support them in being family to each other and Parker meeting Concetta at Trans Lobby Day; with Trae and Mani unfolding into a friendship over the years, in the face of national and state wide violence against them and their communities. So, while I agree that promises and commitments relationally are only given full weight by the actions that follow them, there is a way of saying this and perpetuating this understanding of words and actions in the name of trust that make it seem like the words matter much less. What I think is so powerful about Tomi and Nicole, and Alex and Sophie's stories are that both

couples made it a point to mention the words that preceded the actions, indicating how they were significant in setting the stage for trust. When thinking about the complexities of being socio-historical beings always situated within a context, I think there is something worth digging into about this.

I believe that in a world where queer love is invalidated, where it is seen as deviant and depraved, and where queer and trans people of color are not seen as worthy of public expressions of love, these declarations of “I’m in this” is profoundly powerful and healing because it communicates to the person and the relationship the worth, the value, of being within love together. As stated earlier, for some queer and trans folks, being and living in our truths, in our fullness, means relational loss and rejection. Additionally, for some of us, the expressions of “acceptance” and declarations of love or commitment that we do receive from the cis-straight given family, friends, and communities we have can come in the form of erasing, ignoring, or down-playing who we are, the relationships we have, and our community. When folks say to us, “I’ll love you *no matter* what” or “I love you *anyway*,” when they say “you’ll always be my \_\_\_\_\_” or “you are *still my* \_\_\_\_\_” or “who you love or how you ‘look’ *isn’t* what is important to me, *you* are important to me,” we get the message that being queer and trans is unlovable and that we can only be in relationship with these folks if we relent to a downplaying, sidelining, ignoring, a leaving at the door of our queerness and transness. In this scenario, to go back to what I included in the introduction about imperialist white supremacist capitalist notions of relating as ownership and relationship as possession, through these verbalized “acceptances,” we become their possessions, who we are is who they desire and want us to be first and foremost and the rest either “doesn’t matter” or “isn’t important.” This supports and perpetuates the way the larger society, at best, excludes us and, at worst, criminalizes us, some of us more than others. In this setup, the declarations of commitment are inherently about owning those societally conforming projections they place on us while simultaneously disavowing our wholeness and the communities of which we are a part.

What Tomi and Nicole and Alex and Sophie share through their stories were explicit, verbal commitments to be with/in queer love and family for the long haul are made in the face and midst of hardship and violent contexts is similar to the example from Tomi and Nicole caring for themselves and others in the section on dignity as a relational value-practice: it is a deeply healing act of relational political resistance. To just live the actions together, without spoken words, would be missing, I think, a vital piece that is important for many marginalized peoples, particularly queer and trans folk. For these reasons, I think that, in the experience and engagement of trust by folk taking up queer kinship solidarity as a relational liberation praxis, the words matter as much as the actions that follow them.

### **With Others Across Spaces**

Queer kin pairings and groups in this project also spoke to the ways in which valuing and practicing interdependence informed their experiences and engagement with building and sustaining trust deeply. While I think the importance of “other people” in how we come to build and maintain trust with others is present in the literature and other works about trust, it is not emphasized or held up as prominently as it was by participants. Furthermore, the focus is usually, unsurprisingly, still on individual experiences of a singular other person being trustworthy in a one-to-one relationship. Participants in this project shared that they experience and engage trust development as something that takes place both in one-to-one relationships and experiences and through witnessing how each other shows up with others and across spaces, with what those others say and experience with regard to a person or groups being trustworthy as significant. Many participants described that they develop trust in and begin deciding to move into being with/in relation with each other through seeing how folks showed up in community with others. As Concetta stated, “seeing how people show up over time, watching how people move is informative.” Green also talked about approaching trust development as a process of “holding and seeing what people do.”

Returning to the story about Tree finding and deciding to move into community with Green and Holden, which I shared under the value-practice of authenticity, what was most striking was the way Green and Holden were with each other and others that called Tree to see them as their “folk” and to want to build deep, authentic, trusting relationships with them. As Tree shared in that story, how Holden held healing space for community members and how Green and Holden were with other folks at a convergence Tree attended led Tree to trust them with the intimacy of their relational connection. At the convergence, Tree saw folks “interacting with other people with the same care and love that they bring to their interactions with me, and one another.” Tree elaborated on this, saying, “I didn’t see a distinction between the hugs, and the kikis,<sup>16</sup> and all the things that were happening between Green and folks ... Holden and all the community members.” Everyone in the space was getting “this juicy, full, holistic connection” that Tree felt. They also got to witness Green be “in struggle with folks,” seeing Green and these folks have “tension because of disagreements on how things should go or how to do things.” And yet, in the struggle, they also saw Green and these folks engage with each other in ways where “there was still that, ‘I’ma send you some healing tools. I’ma send you some love. I’ma hold space for you as a human being, and I’m pissed, I’m so frustrated with you right now, right?’”

Seeing Green and Holden move and be in relationships with others in this way allowed Tree to trust in and feel safe in the relationships they were forming with them and pursue, within that, movement comrade organizing relationships with them. This being able to see tension alongside play and love and alongside an ability to stay in the work in a way that was relationally dignifying, appreciative, and committed to the long haul of the relationship and the work was important to their ability to trust Green and be in trusting relationship with them, Holden, and others as well. They explained that this made them feel safe because, at that point, Green and

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<sup>16</sup> Kiki is Black LGBTQ+ vernacular for “a social gathering, usually for the purpose of casually ‘kicking back,’ gossiping, and sharing stories” (Kiki, 2018).

Tree had experienced the most interactions, having been in physical space together the most, and thus, Tree had experienced tension with them as well as intimacy. And so, to see Green have all of these kinds of interactions with other people too, and in an organizing space, made them feel safe, allowed them to see “that it is okay ... that does not erase that we can get things done, that we can still love each other.” Seeing Holden and Green, “you know, tease each other,” and Juju and Green “have tension with each other, and then go into kin space, and loving each other” allowed Tree to trust in all of the relationships in ways that made the convergence “a big turning point” for them.

Holden also emphasized this appreciation of Green, Morgan, Tree, and JuJu being consistent in how they showed up with Holden and with others across spaces, specifically talking about local, regional, and national organizing spaces. For Holden, consistency wasn’t just about time; it was about space, specifically spaces that involved being with other people and different power dynamics at play. They said, “I appreciate when people don’t switch up on you. Let me say it like that,” and later, “I can’t trust everybody’s politic, and not everybody shows up the same way that they do in national spaces as they do at home, and it shows.” Though Holden emphasizes *their* not being able to trust folks’ politics, I think their use of *you* is interesting because, to me, they are talking about both their experiences of people switching it up and the impact that this has on the larger community of folks Holden considers queer and trans chosen family/kin and movement family.

This leaning on others and their experiences of people being trustworthy was echoed by Parker, who talked about how his ability to lean into trusting or at least being open to building trusting relationships with white folks is always informed by what other Black and Brown queer and trans folks that he knows experience of the person or people in question. He talked about how in his chosen family, including the configuration participating in this project alongside him, there is an intentional centering of Black and Brown folks because of the historical and current experiences he and other Black and Brown queer and trans folks have of harm, trauma, and

challenges with trusting and being with/in relationship with white folks. And so, for Parker and other Black and Brown queer and trans folks that he is in chosen family with, white folks who usually come into their intimate home spaces or gatherings are often only present after having been “vetted” or experienced as trustworthy and committed to sustaining that trust by other Black and Brown queer and trans folks.

The complexities emphasized here, as they relate to the importance of witnessing and experiencing people with/in other relational configurations and various spaces as well as collective or community knowing as a part of trust being from knowing from experience are important to hold. All too often, conversations around trust and our conceptualizations of it are collapsed into individual one-to-one experiences even when we know, from our everyday lives, that often isn't all there is. This is especially the case when considering the complexities present in building and moving with/in relationships, groups, and communities committed to living and working for solidarity and collective liberation together.

What I especially love about what Tree, Holden, and Parker share is that seeing people be trustworthy to other people, be in deep connection, and living shared values makes them more trustworthy to us personally. Simultaneously these ways of being are held as special and important because they are giving the relational gift of being able to be trusted to others. There can be a tendency, in our individualistic culture, to only care about folks being trustworthy to others because of what it tells us about how they will be to us, and so while the understanding of interdependence and the relational is there, the focus comes back to an individual being most concerned about their needs. By focusing and valuing trust being shared by others, I heard participants desiring a trusting community for all, which included but did not remain centered on themselves. In sum, I heard and witnessed queer kin pairings and groups in this project trusting the collective with their individual discernments *and* wanting the collective to have trust with each other.

## **The Best of It and Worst of It**

People often talk about how trusting relationships are born or deepened through experiencing hardship. I agree with Birdsong's (2020) contention that "Hardship is very clarifying" in that "it shows us who will show up and how" (p. 154). In many ways, trust is built through hardship because it is through experiencing it with/in a relationship or sharing it with another that we are able to see which relationships "can withstand real life" (p. 154). For many of us, "it's the people who don't run away when shit gets real who get to be our kin" (Birdsong, 2020, p. 154). Participant queer kin pairings and groups shared experiences that supported this. This was in many ways the case for Tomi and Nicole and Alex and Sophie.

Parker also shared that it was in experiencing and facing together the challenges of life that trust was built and fortified in his queer kinship with Loni and Concetta. The group had experienced divorce, breakups, car trouble, and moving. Looking at Loni and Concetta and then into the camera at me, he said, "I feel like when things go down, that's the difference ... like when I think about who's gonna be there for the best of it and worst of it and the in betweenness, that's it." For Parker, Loni, and Concetta, being with and seeing each other and the group collectively through hard times mattered. Being with each other through, as Parker says, "shit and shine" allowed them to trust each other and feel more deeply connected in their relations.

Additionally, Parker and Concetta shared that, in their experiences of and engagement with trust with/in queer kinship solidarity, to go back to the value-practices of authenticity, dignity, and growth, in particular, it also mattered that they could trust Loni with their vulnerability and mess in terms of their partnership. It mattered to them both that Loni and other queer kin could witness, hold, and be in with them when they were in conflict or struggling. Concetta said that having and being held in open conflicts with Parker within queer kinship with others "teaches me something." This bit of dialogue between Concetta and Parker, with Loni beside



them, makes this shared experience of having trust deepened by being witnessed and held in relational struggle really evident:

Concetta: We have disagreements.

Parker: Yeah, we definitely (do).

Concetta: There's irritation and frustration.

Parker: We actively allow people to see us ... this is not made for TV.

Concetta: Talking about some of the struggles in our partnership openly with our, our fam makes me feel fortified in these relationships and increases my ability to trust and believe that people are going to show up and live into their values.

As touched on already, in mainstream U.S. culture, there is often a hierarchy of relationships that usually maintains a separation of romantic and "familial" (meaning blood or in a nuclear family set that mimics blood family configuration with parents and children) relationships from platonic "friend" ones. Furthermore, as Birdsong (2020) talked about, there is a way in which individualism leads to an isolationist way of operating as a family where the goal is to be a single family that sustains itself without the support of "others" (maybe extended family but even then, not too much).

What Concetta and Parker share here demonstrates how building and fortifying trust within queer kinship solidarity directly bucks this romantic couple and family "unit" individualism while also simultaneously pushing back on the notion that conflict and hardship within a romantic relationship should only be confined to that relationship, or shared verbally and in a controlled manner after a real-time conflict with trusted confidants and/or a therapist. Instead of seeing what happens between them as necessarily shameful or something to be hidden from folks, in the spirit of authenticity, dignity, growth, and interdependence, it is shared. Through sharing hardships, with it being held and struggled with collectively, trust is built, not in the sense of keeping the secret of the rupture or the "imperfection" of the relationship private, but in the sense of holding folks accountable and holding their humanity as they move through life,

including conflict, together. This queer, trans, interracial couple is, by having open conflict and believing it is generative and can be engaged in community, disrupting white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021) and engaging in abolitionist and transformative justice practices (brown, 2020; Dixon & Piepzna-Samarashinha, 2020; Kaba, 2021).

Participants also shared and demonstrated that trust wasn't only built and sustained through hardship and conflict. Returning to the value-practice of joy, Alex made an interesting point to emphasize that part of the reason they came to trust Sophie so deeply was because of Sophie's ability to break the ice with joking and laughter. Alex saw Sophie's ability to "laugh at something small, seemingly insignificant ..." as doing a lot to "hold, create or foster a trust bond" to deepen connections and relationships. Specifically, Alex saw Sophie's valuing and practicing joy as directly linked to being able to do "heavier work in conversations."

Alex wasn't the only person who situated playfulness and joyfulness as fertile ground within which deep, trusting relationships grow. As was stated earlier, Holden and Green and JuJu being loving and playful with each other and others was significant to Tree. Seeing joy as integral to the deepening of intimacy alongside challenging conversations also was emphasized by Mani and Trae. One of the things Mani kept repeating in each focus group was the range of things that Trae and Mani could talk about and the depth with which they could talk about them, whether it is talking about the intensity of the political climate and their sense of safety and that of their communities, dissecting grinder, or "it can just be us talking shit like about anything." This positioning of joy, joking, fun, and play as integral to trust often gets overlooked but is important. I see this emphasis on joy and linking it with trust and the depth and intimacy of connection as telling us a great deal about what it means to build, be, and move with/in relationships for collective liberation.

For one, to prioritize joy, to engage it as much or alongside seriousness and play allows marginalized folks to not only survive but thrive, which, as I've already written, is a revolutionary act. Additionally, to engage this as important relational work, one that makes trust possible, is

because, I believe, it inherently pushes back on dehumanizing and separating aspects of white supremacy culture that, despite our analysis and all of our critique and deconstruction, still shows up. Moreover, imperialist, white supremacist cis-hetero capitalisms' valuing of urgency and objectivity are disrupted when white people, taking up a commitment to dismantling racism, engage in playfulness within the context of mutually desired relationships with Black and Brown people.

In the case of Alex and Sophie, Sophie, as a white person, being playful with Alex and others can be seen as disrupting Sophie's position with/in white supremacy. Through play, we are silly and can, in the words of Lugones (2003), be open to being the fool rather than the serious, removed expert who knows best. This can allow those of us who are positioned as white to be more real, human, dimensional, and thus more connected and less removed in ways that disrupt institutionally supported ideological and cultural superiority. Much the same way that Parker expressed not being able to trust white people who didn't "show their shit," I think that when people withhold play or privilege, serious conversation and the "serious business" of social justice work over playfulness and joking, a deeper trust may be inhibited because folks are not able to bring and be their whole selves with/in the relationship.

### **Trusting is Believing**

While participants shared things that were in alignment with trust coming from experience and taking time and action, they also shared that they experience and engage trust from a place of believing in and moving toward relationships and worlds not yet seen or experienced. This was evident in Concetta sharing that for them, "there is some faith" when it comes to extending trust, a faith that the people they are in community with "want to show up for each other and want to extend support in the ways that they can when they can."

I heard and witnessed Concetta and other participants experiencing trust as a part of queer kinship solidarity as a liberation praxis wherein they are engaging trust as believing, as faith. Brené Brown (2012) calls the vulnerability and trust dynamic a "chicken-or-the-egg

dilemma” and, as I stated earlier, makes a point to talk about “the investment and leap that people in relationships have to make before the building process ever begins” (p. 49). While I heard participants sharing that they engage and experience trust as believing, as extending in faith, they did so in ways different from what Brené Brown (2012) describes. I think of what JuJu shared after listening to how Green, Holden, Tree, and Morgan came to know and begin building deep queer kin relationships with each other: “I’m hearing intimacy. I’m hearing patience. I’m hearing intuition ...” A lot of what I heard in stories of coming together and coming into trusting relationship with each other echoed adrienne maree brown’s (2017) “Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy)” principle of emergent strategy (p. 42). Rather than see it as an investment (capitalist language) that they will hopefully have a return on, participants demonstrated offering and extending trust as part of their believing in and moving in the direction of the world they want to co-create with others. And they often moved toward each other because they were listening to a faith that came from their intuition and them feeling good about the person(s) and relationship(s), which, as adrienne maree brown (2017) states, “pleasure invites us to move, to open, to grow” (p. 21).

The queer kin pairings and groupings in this project shared stories and demonstrated a living of this faith component of the dynamic element of trust as part of their resisting the messaging that comes from a “scarcity-based economy that denies and destroys the abundant world we actually live in” and instead moves toward extending trust in faith from a heart-centered, mindbodyspirit place of abundance thinking (brown, 2017, p. 48). This isn’t to say folk don’t take care of themselves; they do when they value and practice dignity, often through the use of boundaries and directly communicating needs and wants, but they move toward each other from a place of practicing hope as a discipline, where it is “practiced every day ... practiced all the time” (Kaba, 2021, pp. 26–28), toward building trusting kinship in a way that embodies abundance.

## **Invitation and Moving Toward**

I heard this believing in trust and moving toward trusting relationships with each other most in two stories in particular, one shared by Green about Tree and another shared by Loni about Parker.

### ***Green and Tree***

It was in the thick of the Charlotte Uprising. Green had showed up to a location in Charlotte with some other folks for a community meeting, “but nobody was there to let us in,” Green explained. Tree was there, and when no one came to open the space, Green said that Tree turned to them and the folks they were with and said, “Come on, y’all can go to my house.” Green and Tree laughed as Green recounted this to the group and me. “And they had their curly hair, and their hiking boots on, some leggings on” Green was smiling so big, sharing the image of Tree that was permanently etched in their mind, the moment they met, a moment where Tree, moving out of trust as faith, offered their home to people they barely knew. “It was just like ... and we sat in there, in Tree’s house, having this meeting and organizing,” Green said with humor at how it all just happened upon them.

This may not seem like much—a person offering their home space to folk they didn’t know well but knew had a shared politic and commitment to the movement. But if you know anything about movement, then maybe you’ve heard of COINTELPRO? “the FBI’s counterintelligence program of the 1960s and 70s that targeted a wide range of activists, including the Black freedom movement” (Wolfe-Rocca, n.d., para. 4). Inviting people into your home and/or being invited into someone’s home that you do not know is a risk in organizing. The person at the meeting, at the action, adding you on social media, if you have been really involved in movement and, in particular, moments like the Charlotte Uprising, might be a cop helping the state to build a case against you. And COINTELPRO aside, the more folks become involved other than just singularly attending events, the more they are at risk for charges should the state want to shut down mounting pressure and mobilization. During the Uprising, folk who

were identified as leaders or integral to the actions we had carried out were snatched out of Uber and Lyfts in the middle of the day going to meet friends for brunch, days after actions, on trumped-up charges. I know many folks whose false charges took forever to be dropped, all the while they were unable to secure jobs which had consequences on their housing and quality of life.

Forged in the fire of movement, with a trust out of faith and feeling, Tree and Green came together as queer kin. For Tree, it was intuition, seeing Green and Holden be in space with others and the way they felt in their presence. For Green, it was Tree moving with trust and extending trust that moved them into relationship. Gut feelings. Risk. A belief that they could be kin, kin living and working together, taking up what adrienne maree brown (2017) describes as a “time-travel exercise for the heart” toward a future where “no one sees Black people as murders” (p. 19) toward a future where “Keith Lamont Scott picks up his children from school” (Frisbie-Fulton, 2020, para. 12).

### ***Loni and Parker***

In reflecting on how they came to be in relationship with Parker, Loni said, laughing to themselves, “Parker really does kind of act like an anchor, he almost pulls you into relationship.” Concetta laughed, and so did Parker, who was a little taken aback by this visual being applied to how he moves, “Oh my God!” he said, sounding a little insulted. “I mean! You’re consensual about it, too!” Loni replied, explaining that while Parker is “not gonna force nobody” into relationship, he shows up in a way that “invites.” They said of their own experience of this with Parker, “I know I felt invited into showing up and being vulnerable because of how transparent you are about healing work and ... centering that in so many ways.”

Loni then shared a story about how they found themselves, early in their relationship with Parker, being vulnerable emotionally with him in ways that took them by surprise. They recounted that this “not so flowery moment” took place at Parker’s cabin, where they had come to hang out with Parker and then found themselves “just like bawling ... bawling in the middle of

the street that led to your cabin” about some hard things they were going through at the time. “We were going on a walk,” Loni continued, “and I was having a moment.” They explained that they attributed being able to have this moment, this raw, vulnerable, break-down moment of trusting Parker with their big emotions and vulnerability because of Parker’s invitation and pull into relationship. They added that though the two hadn’t “really been hanging out hard that long at that point” because of how Parker showed up and invited the relationship, “it just felt safe.”

This feeling safe with Parker, able to be broken-down and emotionally raw, continues for Loni to this day. The invitation and the feeling of being pulled in and grounded by Parker’s openness and desire to build trusting connection, then, over time, was supported by getting to know and experience more and more the intention and consistency of Parker’s show-up. “The way that you, the amount of intention that you put into how you show up and consistently showing up,” Loni said, looking directly at Parker, sitting across from them on the couch, “makes it feels safe for my traumatized ass to show up and be vulnerable.”

Similar to the importance of words in the stories of Tomi and Nicole and Alex and Sophie, in both of these stories, the extension of trust in faith through invitation, to being with and holding space, literally and emotionally, was significant to queer kin pairings and groupings experiences and engagement with trust. Taking a risk, extending an offer, inviting and pulling in came from a belief and desire for liberatory community, came from a wanting to build something folk are living and working for, for all of us, and the actions that followed, the acceptance and the relational practices of continuously extending and fortifying trust (even after a rupture which I will explore in later chapters) made this trusting as believing different from what I’ve read. The risk was never only about the individuals involved and the times they were facing; it was also always about living into the moment in ways that bring us closer to the futures of which we dream.

## **Expansions on Trust**

In addition to offering expansive insights into the importance of verbalized commitments and engaging and experiencing trust as believing or extending in faith, participants also challenged and expanded ideas of what it means to trust and how trust is built in two ways. One, they experienced and engaged trust not only as having trust in a person with their vulnerability and hardship, but also trusting folks to give them honest feedback, to hold them accountable for their actions being in alignment with their values, and pushing them to grow in their solidarity and liberation work. Two, they shared stories and experiences of building deeply with each other that, thinking back to the value-practice of growth, in particular, pushes back on conventionally accepted ideas about the time it takes to build trust.

### **Trust as Interdependent Accountability**

Participants not only talked about trusting folks to hold their vulnerability or to show up for them in particular ways, but they also talked about trusting folks to be honest with them, holding them to being and moving in ways that are in alignment with their values. Experiencing and engaging trust was invoked when folks talked about relational accountability. Both Mani and Trae and Tree and Green shared experiences where trust was evoked as trusting their queer kin *to* hold them accountable in their show up within the relationship and beyond. As was shared in the section on authenticity as a value-practice, something that plays a critical role in Mani's queer kinship solidarity relationship with Trae is Trae's ability to be honest with Mani, particularly as it relates to having hard conversations about anti-Blackness, and Mani's being accountable to their commitment to being in solidarity with Black people.

Mani shared that, as a non-Black Latinx person who speaks English, they sometimes feel they have access to power and privilege that Black folk and Black and Brown Latinx folks don't. They shared that experiencing these moments of privilege in interactions with white folks is palpable to them, "I hear it in the tone of voice sometimes, I feel it when I'm interacting with someone or the fact that I'm able to speak the language ... just different ways that I've noticed



it.” Because Mani and Trae have, as I shared earlier, “dissected so many things together,” Mani explained that it feels “very natural” to them to reach out and talk to Trae about it because “I know I can trust ... I trust Trae to give me honest feedback.” And so they turn to Trae to unpack these interactions and their engagement within them to see how they can continuously work on disrupting anti-Blackness. For Mani, trusting Trae then isn’t only about trusting Trae with their vulnerability or being able to trust that Trae will show up for them in solidarity and with care. Trusting Trae to be a consistent presence in Mani’s life also entails trusting Trae to hold Mani accountable and to be honest with them about how they are showing up when it comes to their solidarity work.

Green and Tree similarly evoked this trusting each other and folks in the configuration to hold them in honest, loving relational accountability. In one of our focus groups, Green shared that in talking to their partner about a decision they made for themselves that honored what they needed, their partner helped them to realize that it “didn’t actually lean into or honor the commitment that I made for Tree.” Rather than be devastated by this realization and spiral in guilt around it, because of the kind of trust they have in Tree to hold them accountable, they said they felt called to go to Tree with their realization because “the accountability will be there.” This trusting that the other person will be honest and hold them in loving accountability, they explained, helps them to “practice what is interconnectedness and interdependence and how it shows up.” Green then moves with/in relationship to Tree, Holden, Morgan, and JuJu in a way where they get to “trust that, if I don’t show up in my best self that day, if I hurt someone that I could turn around ... and address the thing without feeling an immense amount of guilt.”

Tree shared a similar experience of and engagement with trust when talking about how they feel more intimately connected and safe in their relationships with Green as well as Holden, Morgan, and JuJu because they can trust each of them and the group collectively to hold them accountable in how they move in the community organizing liberation work that they take up together. Through trusting folks to keep them accountable to the values and commitments that

they share in working for the liberation of all Black people, Tree said that they “feel safer in practicing the personal intimacy and the personal support” because they know that if what they are asking for folks to support them on is out of alignment with the values they share around the liberation work that they do they will be “called in on that, or at least, you know, folks won’t just follow me off the cliff.” Tree sees this as a loving accountability, one that allows them to be more deeply connected because folks in their kin group are clear and grounded in values and purpose and will practice authenticity, dignity, and growth with Tree as needed. For Tree, the trust they have that Green, Holden, Morgan, and JuJu helps them to recognize when they, as a flawed human, are calling folks into things for them personally that are “not necessarily as clear as the values that are the foundation of all of those yearnings that I have.”

Though I think this way of practicing accountability relationally is getting more traction in recent years as a result of people learning more from transformative justice practices and the language of calling-in (Ross, 2021; Tran, 2013) becoming more mainstream, I believe that what participants are sharing here about experiencing and engaging trust as a trusting folk to hold them accountable, push, and challenge them (something I also saw come up in the ways folk evoked care) is significant when thinking about engaging in relational liberation praxis.

While I don’t think it is intentional, there is a way that trust and trusting folks get individualized and objectified, with moments or experiences discussed in our mainstream culture as if they are quantifiable objects (like marbles). I think that again, while it is likely unconscious, this can lead to a viewing of people and relationships as objects to be ranked and sorted, valued hierarchically in comparison to and in competition with each other. Trust then becomes a transaction, I trust you with my vulnerability, needs, and wants, and if you show up, you get points and vice versa. As I will discuss more in the chapter on connection as holding on and letting go, this can lead to a kind of intimacy and connection as reward and distance and disconnection as a punitive dynamic.

What participants share here about trusting folks to hold them accountable does involve being vulnerable, but it is different from the vulnerability typically discussed when folks write about and talk about trust, which is the vulnerability of trusting others to show up, through action, in support of us. Trusting folks to hold us accountable, to give us honest feedback, to push us is about trusting folks to witness us and call *us* into action. And this action could be, as was the case with Green, an action that directly concerns and pertains to the relationship. Or the action could be, as in the cases of Mani and Tree, actions that go beyond one-to-one or one-to-small group relationships. This element of trust, trusting folks to witness and give feedback, to call in, to hold folk accountable through honest conversation, was a significant component of engaging and experiencing trust with/in queer kinship solidarity.

### **A Decolonial Queering of Time in Trust Building**

Trust development, as is seen in the example given from Brené Brown's (2012) work earlier, frequently gets talked about as slow-moving. And while this was present in what participants shared, there was also, as you already read in Alex and Sophie, Tree and Green, and Loni and Parker's stories in this section, an experience of trust moving more quickly than expected. Some of this was because of the context and conditions: Sophie and Alex had to navigate Alex's violent ex, Tree and Green met during the Uprising, which was traumatizing for both of them as it was for many Black people. But when I think back to all of the focus groups, there was an open (and running) joke about lesbians dating each other and the L word, where folks were evoking the idea of U-Hauling, the ongoing mainstream joke about lesbians moving into relationship too quickly, specifically the joke goes that they move in together after the first date. When Loni says that they and Parker "weren't hanging out that hard at that point," they are getting at this.

I think of what Birdsong (2020) shares of her relationship with her friend Teddy, explaining that she met him at an introductory dinner for an advisory board that they both sat on and that she just "felt drawn to him" (p. 70). She recounts that the next time she saw him, she

“behaved as if our close relationship was a foregone conclusion. I’d claimed him as one of my people” (p. 70). She explains that the relationship they forged from that moment forward involved a practicing of a “kind of reckless vulnerability and honesty” fortified by their “unproven but mutual trust” (p. 70). To quote Birdsong (2020),

It’s like we met and immediately became high-flying trapeze partners. He made a commitment to our friendship early on when I expressed apprehension about all the leaps of faith. That commitment from him, reciprocated by me, gave us room to mess up even though we each worried about disappointing the other. But we approach each other with the benefit of the doubt and a spirit of inquiry. The care and solidarity with which we’ve handled the great emotional risk we entrusted each other with established not just safety and trust but a practice of talking about the things that make us feel most vulnerable and embarrassed or unsure.

What Birdsong (2020) shares here strikes me as so similar to so many of the queer kin friendships/siblingships I’ve witnessed and forged myself. I heard similar stories of coming into deep community quickly shared in both romantic and platonic coming to kinship among folks in this project. The only difference is there wasn’t as much apprehension expressed. I think this is in part because as queer and trans people, though we know we’ve always existed, as have our communities, despite imperialist, white supremacist capitalist cis-het patriarchy’s efforts to eradicate and erase us, many of us weren’t raised knowing this and weren’t raised with or around our elders and communities. We had to “find” ourselves and each other. And because, for some of us, that came later and harder, some of the messaging we received from given family and society is that these relationships weren’t as “real,” that these folks didn’t know us as well.

Even today, people tell queer and trans young people that they are being influenced by a fad and that their identities, relationships, chosen families, and communities lack substance, in part because of how “new” they are in the eyes of these folks. There is a way where, in our

society, long-term, one-off relationships are considered successful and strong, “tried and true” when that isn’t always the case. Sure, you sometimes hear cis straight people say they felt like they knew a friend or a partner in a past life, something even BirdSong (2020) expresses about Teddy, or you will hear them say they became “fast friends,” but in the larger culture these relationships aren’t seen as worthy of the same trust as family and childhood friends/relationships, something that, if we are talking about authentic, close, respectful, loving relationships, for many of us who are queer and trans is not only not our experience but wasn’t always possible.

As Ahmed (2006) states, “To make things queer is to disturb the order of things” (p. 161). By having trust come “before” it should, co-creating a trusted friendship or a trusting romantic relationship between “strangers” (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 141–142), queer kin pairings and groups in this project queer trust in kinship. I see this trust and intimacy U-hauling, much like in the nonlinearity piece with regard to growth, challenging imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-hetero patriarchal notions of being “smart” and “cautious.” Specifically, by honoring intuition, valuing interdependence, and moving with abundance, participant pairings and groups are experiencing and engaging in a decolonial queering of trust. By moving into trust “quickly” because of intuition, because of interdependent and community experience, knowing, and witnessing, because of invitation, and by “fast-forwarding” trust and intimacy, I think participants in this project are practicing abundance thinking and are practicing future together differently in the here and now (brown, 2017). They are practicing a future where we find each other, love each other, celebrate each other without reservation; where we hold each other in showing up in right relation (TallBear, 2019a) with each other and the world around us without the pretense of proving, through transactional engagements and exchanges of quantifiable, objectified, “gifts” of trust over an “appropriate” amount of linear time.

As participant pairings and groups in this project attest to, our experience of time and, relatedly, our experience of knowing and being able to trust a relationship is more often shaped

by what the years hold rather than only the number of them. In sharing their appreciation for the queer kinship they have and practice with Green, Morgan, Tree, and JuJu, I think of how Holden expressed being especially grateful for the ability to “practice genuine community and connection in a real way” with folks they had “only known them for 6 or 7 years.” This quick trust and deep trust practice element feels particularly special to folks like Holden because it offers ways of being and moving in relation where people are authentic and vulnerable and honest in the “real-time experience” of being “in a struggle towards us being better people and being bigger people” together. This is, for most folks, so healing and powerful because it is often so different from what they grew up with or what they were raised to value and practice when it came to trust, relationship, community, and world-building.

This isn't to say that relationships that have spanned many years aren't valuable. Or that trust that has taken time to build is less “special.” This is just to say that, as I've said about other things, reducing how we take up relational work as liberation work into a singular how-to list can be reductive and can collapse possibility, keeping us from seeing the many paths and many worlds waiting for us. When adrienne maree brown (2017) says to move at the speed of trust, some folks can read this as meaning slow. I read this as ‘it depends,’ based on the varying experiences shared with me by participants. Moreover, what I hope folks can take away from this is that fast trust isn't always less reliable, weaker, or even less “tried” than slow trust; it can be radically loving and revolutionary, and it can be a way of living into the present moment the world we want to see, one where people are trusting and trusted.

### **Conclusion**

Queer kin pairings and groups in this project shared and demonstrated ways of experiencing and engaging trust as a dynamic element that brought new insights, challenges, and expansions. What participants shared in these narratives can enrich and enliven how we understand and take up building and sustaining trusting relationships that we live and work with/in and through for a more liberatory world(s). In terms of trust being engaged and

experienced as something that comes from knowing, from experience, they illustrated how under-discussed and under-analyzed aspects of trust development are significant, including the role played by verbalized commitments, joy and play, other relationships and spaces. With regard to trust being engaged and experienced as something that comes from believing through extension, from faith, they revealed the significance of inviting and moving toward folks as a way of living into and enacting, somatically, abundance thinking and liberation work. Lastly, by evoking trust as trusting *to* hold me accountable and by challenging ideas about trust being a slow process that is quantified over linear time, I see the queer pairings and groups in this project experiencing and engaging trust as a radically loving, queer, decolonial, anti-capitalist, abolitionist, transformative justice informed liberation praxis.

## CHAPTER X: SOLIDARITY

Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.

Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7)

I understand solidarity to primarily referring to people in relationships across lines of power difference (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, ability, religion, etc.) where those involved are working collectively for a more liberatory world, taking up “the struggle of trying to escape various forms of oppression” (Freire et al., 2014, p. 77). One is acting/moving in solidarity with others when one is working to disrupt and dismantle the very systems of power and oppression that advantage them at the expense of those others. I also view solidarity as something that can be taken up among people who share multiple social locations or positionalities (for example, race, gender, sexual orientation, class) but where there are points of difference among those people (for example, age, educational status, job title/position) that, in particular circumstances or contexts, make a significant difference in how they experience and navigate systems of privilege and oppression (racism, cissexism, heterosexism). While it was a recruitment requirement of this project that folks see solidarity as playing a central role in their queer kinship relationships, I didn’t dictate what that meant but shared the above definitions. As a result, how folks experienced this and engaged it with/in and through their relationships varied.

The studies that I reviewed on solidarity relationships were described by researchers and participants in ways that were similar to the conceptualizations of alliance relationships, with an emphasis on the ability to recognize and respect similarities and differences in cultures, histories, and lived experiences of systems of privilege and oppression (Luna, 2016; Ng, 2012) and a willingness to take collective action (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012; Subasic et al., 2011). As



is the case in these studies and existing writing on political solidarity and solidarity relationships, participants in the queer kin pairings and groups in this project understand solidarity as a practice of leveraging the power they had to disrupt business as usual in ways that both centered and benefited those more marginalized/minoritized. To quote Parker, “I think (what) I’m hearing from other folks in this group is how we leverage what it is that we already have to give feels like solidarity.” But what they have to leverage, how they leverage it, where, and with whom brings interesting complexities to the fore not often discussed in existing works.

First and foremost, participant pairings and groups in this project shared experiences and engagements with solidarity, with solidarity being both strategic and visionary. While more nuanced conversations are taking place around social justice movement work beyond this either/or strategic or visionary binary, I think that there is still often a reduction in how we understand and categorize solidarity efforts as well as conceptualize their potential and actual impact. Acts of solidarity are considered strategic if they appear to be playing by the rules of “the game” or working within the confines of the existing system with the aim of achieving a more socially just and equitable result. A critique of these efforts is that they function as bandages or “harm reduction” to the larger problem, leaving it unaddressed while also reifying the very systems and structures folks are hoping to transform or dismantle through participating in them. Visionary solidarity work often refers to work where the approaches are radical, meaning that within the very effort is a challenge to the existing order of things or a creating of alternatives that operate “outside” or more on the margins of society rather than participating in the existing systems and structures. A critique of visionary efforts is that they are “out of touch,” “unrealistic,” and that any “success” garnered from them will only be felt on a very small scale.

Queer kin pairings and groups shared stories about how they engage and experience solidarity with/in and through their relationships in ways that hold how solidarity can be both strategic and visionary. Furthermore, through the stories that they share, queer kin pairings and groups demonstrate the ways in which relational solidarity is deeply embodied, resourceful, and

creative. While I think that experiences and engagements of solidarity in existing literature and works on political solidarity sometimes include these components, I do think they are often missing a deeper examination of these aspects and are often reductive in terms of how they explore and analyze the worlds being presently created and called into being through what folks are doing. The focus usually goes back to current material realities, often as if they are static, and the “real” world “measurable” impact they have on a “larger,” usually “public,” scale. What participants shared in the stories they told with each other demonstrates how they are living the belief that Parker asserted about solidarity work when he said, “everybody has a place, a role to play in the solidarity economy ... Everybody has a gift to share.” What’s more, they demonstrate, through their experiences and reflections, that we do not (and sometimes cannot) play the same role or offer the same gift each time, nor should we.

Lastly, as I shared in the literature review, much of the research on alliance, solidarity, and coalitional relationships reduces solidarity relationships to flat, one-to-one binaries (white people in solidarity with people of color, straight people in solidarity with gay people, non-indigenous folks in solidarity with indigenous folks, etc.). While we know some identities are and become more salient than others in particular contexts, what participants shared in their experiences of and engagement with solidarity really spoke to how the multiplicities of our positionalities are always present.

I organize this chapter a little differently, dividing it into three large sections where I focus on solidarity experiences and engagements taken up by one group or pair. Within each section, I hone in on aspects of the stories that demonstrate how solidarity can be both strategic and visionary. I also explore the ways in which the multiplicity of sociohistorical situatedness and our ever-changing contexts make how we live and move with/in solidarity relationships with each other all the more complex. Through telling the stories more fully, my hope is that the nuances within them will be more alive, calling us all to consider how we might take up and experience solidarity with more depth, flexibility, and attunement.

### **No Heroes, No Burdens: Concetta, Parker, and Loni's Strategic/Visionary Solidarity**

As was shared earlier, Concetta went to law school, passed the bar, and has been using their law degree in the non-profit sector. But the messaging from society around what makes someone a “real” lawyer, always informed and shaped by “a lot of white perfectionism,” often gets in their way. In part, this is because of the ways Concetta is using the knowledge they have from their law degree at their current job.

I don't work with any other lawyers unless we are consulting with outside counsel at my job, and so I haven't, since I graduated and passed the bar, been mentored in regular contact on a daily basis, so I have a lot of feels about “Oh my God, where are my skills at, what am I capable of?” like, what does it mean to have a law degree, how am I practicing or not practicing.

This all surfaced in a real way when they, Parker, and Loni were called on by a Brown queer genderqueer community member in a moment of crisis. At the beginning of the pandemic, this person's landlord was threatening them with eviction, despite there being a moratorium on evictions. In a group text, they asked Concetta, Parker, and Loni for help. They knew that these folks wouldn't direct them to an overburdened non-profit or encourage them to involve law enforcement because of their shared commitment to abolition. This was especially critical in the situation since their landlord is a Person of Color, as is the community member, and despite experiencing hostility from the landlord, the person did not want to involve the police or the government as it would likely not be helpful and could also be potentially harmful to both of them.

### **The People's Lawyer and a Strongly Worded Letter**

For Concetta, this being called to support, as scary as it was, was about being held to account around their commitment to solidarity in community as a white person with educational privilege, knowledge, and access to power through their law degree. It was also a moment of being trusted with great vulnerability around economic disparity (the threat of eviction was

because of rent being late), something Concetta and Parker do not experience because of Concetta's job. Concetta, Parker, and Loni were all, as this person's community, being trusted to act with Concetta as someone holding multiple positionalities of privilege (whiteness, higher education, and class), being called to act in ways that could make or break the situation. Concetta shared that they "appreciated the trust of being called on to support in that moment and having the opportunity to engage in a really scary and vulnerable situation with our friend" around "someone fucking with their housing and using positionality and power to try and intimidate."

Concetta, deeply wanting to show up in support, had to face down their fears. And while this was the most recent example, it was neither the first nor would it be the last time that the people in Concetta's community would call on them for support. This being called on by the queer and trans predominantly Black and Brown community members, around their knowledge and skills as a lawyer requires Concetta to move through white perfectionism to act in solidarity. They said of this,

when people I love come and ask a question or have something come up where a lawyer's ... knowledge might be helpful, I definitely sometimes can approach it with fear for that reason, I think that plays a lot into the white perfectionism.

Concetta shared how the recent call by this community member facing the threat of eviction during the pandemic had them move through their white perfectionism and fear and scarcity thinking into solidarity in significant ways. Their first thought was, "I had never written a letter to a landlord like that before," and this fact of inexperience, coupled with their feelings around their legitimacy as a lawyer, made the ask feel daunting. But they told me that they took a moment and reminded themselves that they had the knowledge and skills to fulfill the ask, "I was just like 'Alright, I know how to look up a statute, I know how to write a strongly worded letter, I know how to talk through some stuff with some people.'" They also reminded themselves and the group that there was a moratorium on evictions at the time, and so what the

landlord was saying about “how he was going to evict them” was “totally bullshit.” In processing through this moment, Concetta recognized the complexity of what they were holding and working through in their body to show up in solidarity with this community member, “I think it’s both/and, I have these fears kind of come up but at the same time, what’s most important and what deserves the attention and to be centered is the person who is experiencing harm in that moment.”

### **Collective Process for Collective Liberation: Being Strategic in Visionary Ways**

The community member of Concetta, Parker, and Loni’s, because of their queer kinship network, had fight in them because they had people who would fight with them, not for them. This was a call to be in solidarity, not a call for charity. The community member turned to Concetta, Parker, and Loni for support, to come up with a solution as a collective, a solution that centered their needs and desires around the situation as the person most harmed. Concetta shared that the group process around this crisis involved “multiple phone calls and a group drafting a letter with our friend leading the way of what felt right and comfortable for them.” For Concetta, being a part of a group process that honored and centered the person “whose housing was on the line” and “had to interface” with a hostile landlord was significant. While Concetta and others offered their insight and expertise, ultimately, the person being harmed got to “decide what was conveyed in the letter.”

By engaging solidarity in this way, Concetta and the others disrupted the systems and structures that disempowered the community member, making this act both strategic and visionary in that the solution wasn’t crafted by others to save this person but from with/in a collective process in community with this person at the center and in a way that honored and empowered them. This collective process that centered and fortified the agency of the person most vulnerable was significant to Concetta “it was, I think, a really good experience to interface in our queer fam group in that way in this moment of crisis and be able to show up despite the situation being really shitty.” And so, while on the surface, this act of solidarity might look like it

is primarily strategic, the way Concetta highlights how it called them to work through their white perfectionism and how Concetta engaged with others to act reveal how something that on the surface appears strategic can make also be visionary. Concetta, when called on, after working through their pause to assist because they might not be qualified, good, or perfect enough, didn't do what can sometimes happen when folks with multiple positionalities of privilege in a situation act. They didn't take over, lead the effort, or call the shots; they listened and honored, alongside others, what the person experiencing the harm wanted and needed.

Being called to action by this person, alongside Loni and Parker, allowed Concetta to disrupt the ways in which white supremacy culture and white woman socialization might otherwise have them isolate and retreat from the situation: not my business and/or I'm not good enough to help, or boss around and control it (superiority and individualism). Taking up either of these responses would have had Concetta move in ways that were complicit with power, as either scenario would have left imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-het patriarchy unchecked. But instead, being emotionally supported by Parker and Loni and others, Concetta took up a solidarity act that entailed unlearning the lies white supremacy and white woman socialization taught them, about work, about learning, about who handles situations, and how. Through engaging as they did in this community solidarity effort, Concetta was able to both support others, work collectively with/in and through their queer kin relationships to change conditions for a community member, take up an unlearning around what it means to show up in solidarity as a white person and experience personal growth as they move through fears.

And, while it might seem obvious to some, this solidarity act wasn't only visionary for Concetta. By engaging in this collective solidarity effort that valued and practiced curiosity, dignity, growth, and interdependence, the community member, Parker, Loni, and Concetta created a more liberatory world for all involved inside of that crisis. Together, through this engaging in and experiencing solidarity as both strategic and visionary, they co-created a world where QTIBIPOC people and white anti-racist trans comrades not only hold each other in facing

down oppressive systems but do so in ways outside of the imagination of the systems they are engaging. By both centering and honoring the needs and wants of the most harmed and by engaging collectively in a collaborative process that allowed the community member to move out at the pace that suited their needs, the group created a more liberatory world within an unjust and oppressive situation.

### **Leveraging What We Have, How We Can: Disability, Intersectionality, and Solidarity**

When the community member finally did move out, on their own terms and timeline, they moved in with Loni. Loni, Parker, and Concetta assisted with the move. This was something Concetta made a point to talk about, highlighting how, as a disabled person who lives with chronic back pain, there are ways that they cannot be of support. “Parker and I have supported folk in moving a couple of times,” Concetta explained, “and in those times ... because it is necessary for me to take care of myself, I can’t carry hella heavy shit, you know?” Concetta does what they can, picking up and moving lighter items, organizing and packing them, cleaning, but they shared that, even though they know these things are helpful, “sometimes I can feel really small and like I’m just in the way.” But, the queer kinship that they’ve built with Parker, Loni, and others often makes it so they don’t have to feel small about what they can do, and they can be cared for by showing up in solidarity in the ways that they can in those moments.

Concetta expressed appreciation about how folks honor and value the ways they can show up rather than asking them not to at all or conveying frustration at the ways that they can’t. They explained that when folks have “thoughtfulness and care” around their body needs and limitations and are respectful of that, “it makes me feel more like I can show up as myself.” Being able to show up in solidarity with folks navigating racial and economic injustice as their full self, with their disability considered and accommodated for, has been significant to how they take up and are in queer kinship solidarity relationships with Parker and others. Furthermore, they made a point to talk about the ways in which Parker, Loni, and others not experiencing the

same kinds of physical pain and disability have shown up in solidarity with them daily through check-ins and acts of care. Concetta described these care acts as a way folks were taking up a tuned-in solidarity, explaining that folk will be attuned to where they are sitting, asking, “did I need a pillow, did I need something with a back on it, did I need to not sit on the floor.” They explained that they “just feel a lot of gratitude in those moments” because even if there isn’t something that they need, “just to be asked” lets them know that folks are “thinking about me and thinking about my experience ... just thinking about me as a person in that moment.”

This experience of Concetta’s is significant in that it brings to the fore how the complexity of multiple positionalities shapes how folks are able to show up and not show up in solidarity with others. Most of us occupy both positionalities of privilege and marginalization that differently shape our access to resources which informs the kinds of solidarity we can take up and the kinds of solidarity we need. There is no one right way to show up, and the kinds of support the very same people can offer (and need to receive) can vary greatly depending on the situation and context involved.

Parker surfaced these complexities when talking about how he and Concetta work together as a couple by engaging in solidarity. He explained that within the current unjust system, Concetta has “the highest earning potential of any of us period.” Parker said of this, “it has been strategic around getting money for our people and ourselves.” As Parker shared, because of Concetta’s salary and their upward class mobility as a couple, Parker has been able to “write tens of thousands of hours of billable services to QTBIPOC people.” Additionally, Parker explained that since moving up with regard to income and buying a home, he and Concetta set out to live into their solidarity practice as a family in new ways because of the resources they have. Parker said of this:

... since we moved into this house ... we cared for two different people during their top surgeries as their primary care people, we’ve housed lots of different people ... between



housing and monies and just showing up with our physical bodies I feel like it is a deep practice of ours.

Parker also shared that Concetta's job working as legal counsel for a healthcare non-profit is very demanding with a pace, intellectual and energetic demand, and sedentary nature that take a toll on Concetta's body. As I wrote in the growth section, Concetta and Parker are interested in having a child together, with Concetta being the gestational parent, and so that will require shifts in the shape and pace of their life and work. This is why taking up solidarity in visionary ways with/in the larger queer kinship community is important. Similar to the situation with the community member, there is an understanding that the whole can hold things, that folks can shift, and that things can be shifted and reevaluated. What I see in Concetta and Parker holding these complexities, in queer kin with Loni and others, and figuring out how to navigate them, is that there are no heroes or burdens and that liberation looks like working together, leveraging what it is we have and engaging in continuous reevaluation and renegotiation.

Through leveraging their various access to privilege collectively, Parker, Loni, and Concetta have, in one sense, played by the rules of current systems, but in the way that they have played and with the aims that they have, they are being visionary. They have experienced and engaged solidarity as an active channeling of resources and energies in directions not intended by the structures in place in ways that foster and sustain QTBIPOC people living not only livable but more full lives. They do so knowing that every situation, every moment calls on them differently and that they can always shift together to be in solidarity with each other in ways that are attuned to and able to lovingly hold everyone in all of their complexities and multitudes.

## The World's a Stage: Mani & Trae's Visionary/Strategic Solidarity

Figure 11. Valeria/Mani at Orgullo Latinx from Trae and Mani's Collage



“Do you want to introduce your alter ego?” We had been going through the collage that Trae made for this project, one that told the story of his and Mani’s friendship, and he was directing our attention to one of the most prominent pictures he had in it, one of Mani as Valeria, Mani’s drag persona. Mani smiled and said, “That’s Valeria at the very last Orgullo Latinx, Pride Latinx, that was the second annual celebration. Trae has been at both celebrations as my assistant, who also has an alter ego or persona, Tina.” Through assisting Mani as Tina, Trae gets to have fun with gender and support their friend in executing their performances. He said that he didn’t realize it would be so much fun helping to “glue on somebody’s lashes” and “brush wigs,” “it’s like playing dress-up, but I’m not dressing up, somebody else is, and I like being behind the camera, that’s fun for me.” Trae got especially playful talking about being Tina that day, remembering that when he was tying Mani into their corset, he joked, “yes, it’s too tight, and you’re gonna thank me for it too.” But before creating and taking on “Tina,” Trae had been an assistant to Mani/Valeria before. In addition to regularly going out dancing with Mani at bars and clubs catering to LGBTQ Latinx people (before COVID), Trae had, as one of Mani’s closest friends, been an assistant to and a supporter of their drag performances. Mani said of this, “I’m

just so lucky to have Trae. I remember asking him the first time, 'Hey, I'm doing this, can you help me?' and Trae was like, 'Sure let's do it, when is it?'"

### **Valeria y El Padrino: Visionary Solidarity in Art Activism**

This photo of Valeria, as Mani explained, is from the second annual Orgullo Latinx, where Valeria "did a quinceañera show." A traditional quinceañera, Mani explained, "is all about this submissive young girl becoming a woman and ready to pursue a relationship finding the men of her life, you know, all of that horrible stuff." But Valeria's quinceañera was very different. For one, Valeria wore a crown that said, "Put a Bitch" and through the outfits, music selection, and dance numbers, Valeria expressed herself, to quote Mani, as "a hoe basically." In this performance, Mani used the art of drag to push back on the sexism or "machismo" and, relatedly, "marianismo," or the cultural expectation that women should be "submissive like the Virgin Mary who's pure" that can be present in conservative Latino culture. "My drag," Mani explained, "addresses that and also just women being comfortable with enjoying sex ... just for themselves, for pleasure."

What's more, Valeria's liberated quinceañera didn't only challenge sexism in the community. In a traditional quinceañera, Mani explained, there is the "giving of the last doll," where a significant man in the life of the young girl serves as one of her godfathers and gives her her last doll, a marker of her passing innocence, "because you are transitioning from being a little girl to a woman." Mani decided that Valeria would receive a Frida Kahlo doll as her last doll, which was yet another way that Mani pushed back on the sexism and heterosexism present in the quinceañera as Frida Kahlo, the famous artist, was, among many things, a non-monogamous bisexual. But the doll, the crown, the music selection, and dancing weren't the only aspects of the performance that Mani used to symbolically challenge the ways their community can perpetuate systems of oppression. Since the godfather who gives the last doll is a "big deal," Mani cast none other than Trae to be the padrino. By having Trae play such a prominent figure in Valeria's liberated quinceañera, Mani was also calling out anti-Blackness in

their community and bringing to life a world without it. Mani said of Trae's role in the performance, "Trae was not just there helping make everything run. Trae was actually a part of the performance. And that was my way of addressing anti-Blackness in our community."

In this engagement and experience of solidarity, Mani and Trae are working together in ways that are both visionary and strategic. Though on the surface, this performance could be seen as only bringing to life a liberatory vision of a quinceañera, by utilizing this form of art activism at a festival where all LGBTQ+ Latinx people, including Afro-Latinx people and their allies, are in attendance, Mani/Valeria was able to engage their own community *and* in a way that prioritized joy and play. Thinking back to the story I shared at the beginning about the action Mani, I, and others participated in at Pride, it can be scary to hold a marginalized community that you are a part of accountable for the ways in which it perpetuates other systems of oppression. It can be even scarier to engage the political in a time and space where people "just want to have fun."

Mani/Valeria was strategic in the planning and execution of the performance and used joy and creativity to meet people where they were in the moment *and* were unapologetic in a lot of their overt messaging (i.e., Puta) and more subtly symbolic (with Trae as el padrino) in others. In fact, this incorporation of Trae was so subtle that even Trae didn't realize how significant it was until Mani discussed the performance more at length in the focus group. Some might argue that maybe the audience wouldn't think too much about it either, but maybe that is the point. Mani/Valeria wasn't inviting people to think; they were inviting people to experience, to wonder, to play, and to imagine not only a different quinceañera but a different kind of Orgullo Latinx, a different kind of thinking about and being with/in community.

### **Planting a Seed: Organizing Community and Family**

For Mani, working in solidarity with Trae and other Black folk against racism and anti-Blackness does not stop at the art activism they take up through drag. Mani acts in solidarity as part of the organizing work they take up within the immigrants' rights organization they are a

part of. In their work with this organization, they have been involved in efforts to be sure the organization is inclusive of the experience of Afro-Latinx folks, as well as efforts to take up solidarity work alongside Black Lives Matter organizations. In talking about their work with the organization and in general, Mani said, “to me it’s the right thing to do, to fight for social justice period ... racism is just wrong ... we all have a responsibility to use our voices for right that’s what I try to do.”

This doesn’t go unnoticed by Trae. Another photo Trae displayed in the collage was one of Mani with the immigrant rights organization they organize with, holding a banner with other people that read “Latinx for Black Lives” (See Figure 12<sup>17</sup>).

**Figure 12. “Latinxs for Black Lives” Banner from Mani and Trae’s Collage**



Trae stated that he chose the photo for the collage because Mani’s solidarity is especially meaningful to him. As Trae explained, Mani has “a number of marginalized identities” and “the world is not very kind to people” who show up the way that they do, and so the fact that Mani is able to somehow “see outside of that” and still be “in solidarity with me and my people” means a great deal to him. For Mani, their solidarity work is informed by their constant learning from Trae and others. Whether they “attend protests” or address something through their organizing work or their social media, Mani sees themselves as just “trying to do my piece.” They made a point to say that while they are “constantly thinking of the Black community in general,” they are also thinking of Trae, their “chosen family,” their “Black family.” Trae echoed this sentiment, saying, “standing up for people feels differently if you’re not thinking of it as a cause, if it’s more like these are the people I need to protect because I care about them.”

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<sup>17</sup> Trae cropped this photo to be just the banner because he didn’t have consent from everyone in it.

Similarly, knowing Mani personally has deeply informed Trae's solidarity, leading him to be more mindful of how he shows up for and with immigrant Latinx folks. He shared that it was through being friends with Mani along Mani's citizenship journey that he really learned the barriers undocumented folks face. Trae recalled Mani breaking down for him what people who are undocumented and living in the United States have to do to survive. At one point over the course of their friendship, Mani returned to Mexico because they could not access higher education here in the United States as an undocumented person, which stood out to Trae because Mani and Trae met while Trae was attending college. Trae shared that of the many conversations he and Mani had about Mani's experiences, a conversation where Mani shared what it was like for them to come back to the United States really stuck with him: "I could probably recite some of that conversation word for word," Trae said, "it's different having a face and a connection to someone who's had to be on the receiving end of this country's cruelty in that way."

Through witnessing Mani's experience, Trae has had "a window" into what undocumented Latinx folks have to go through in navigating this country's immigration system. Being in solidarity with Mani and the Latinx community has looked like Trae doing his "own homework" to add to the "little bit of foreknowledge" Trae has. It also shapes how Trae moves in the world with others around these issues, doing what he can to support folks who are experiencing what Mani did in the places and spaces that he can, specifically at work and in conversations with his family and other Black folks. He said he is "more quick to call out people who are speaking ignorantly about undocumented people," sharing that when he hears someone say something that is "just blatantly incorrect," he will interject. He said of this, "I'm like, 'Well, let's just go ahead and disabuse you of this notion and help you understand why this is wrong, why these are allies, and how there's a concerted campaign to pit us against each other.'" Trae sees it as his responsibility to "try and ... plant an idea or say, 'this isn't right' or 'why do you think this way?'" Mani also viewed having educational conversations with family

and community about anti-Blackness as another way they engaged in solidarity with Trae and other Black folks. They explained that they talk to everyone in their family, including their “nephew and niece,” sharing not only what they have learned from Trae but from other Black folks and in doing their own learning and work.

Though Mani and Trae are taking up many of these family and community conversations “solo,” they never see themselves as operating, to quote Trae, in a “singular way.” Both Trae and Mani shared that they not only think of each other in those moments of educating and challenging friends, family, and community members but, as stated earlier, they bring these experiences back to the space of their friendship to get each other’s feedback and to be accountable to one another. As Mani explained this learning from each other and sharing that learning with others, continuously, in an effort to be in solidarity is a significant part of their friendship: “We both want to learn from those differences from each other and learn how we can play a part or help or be there for one another, I see that as a big part of the relationship.” “It feels good,” Trae said, “to have this learning bridge between the two of us.” In Trae’s view, the teaching and learning that they engage in and experience with each other is central and foundational to how they move in solidarity with each other and each other’s communities. Through acting as a learning bridge with one another, they are able to, to quote Trae, “mobilize in a way that would really help out both of our communities,” communities in which “historically we’ve been pitted against each other, on several different fronts.” Even though they are a “community of two,” both Trae and Mani see the accountability they have to each other, the commitment to valuing and practicing growth and authenticity that they share as “important,” even “essential,” to the ways that they move in solidarity with each other and each other’s community.

Though different in tone and approach, I see Mani and Trae’s everyday education and organizing with community and family as operating in both visionary and strategic ways. These acts are visionary in that they are bringing to life, within their family and community spaces, a

call to unity that centers an understanding and appreciation of difference that isn't initiated in an overtly political way but rather is rooted in authentic, deep relationality. And it is strategic in that they know, as in the example from Orgullo Latinx, that people are likely to listen to "their own," particularly in the case of being a marginalized group who has been socialized that others are against them or not as oppressed as them. By being with and moving with/in relationship to their families and communities, by bringing to the attention of folks who they know and love the ways in which they and others in their community are perpetuating anti-Blackness or anti-immigrant attitudes and oppression, Mani and Trae are engaging and experiencing solidarity in visionary and strategic ways.

### **We Keep Us Safe(r): Solidarity in the Streets and Bars**

The interpersonal and relational solidarity Trae and Mani take up together is not only evident in the performances they bring to life together or the community and family organizing and public education they take up interdependently, but it is also always alive in how they move in relation to each other when spending time together, particularly when going out at night. In remembering the many drag performances Trae has assisted them with, Mani talked at length about how Trae shows up for them by looking out for their safety before and after performances. Mani explained that their Mom, who is always concerned about Mani going out "dressed like this," feels relief when Mani answers, "Trae's gonna be there."

"Trae is not just there to help me physically move things ... help me get ready," Mani stated, "he is also protecting me." For Mani, this form of solidarity is palpable, tangible, and critical. They notice all of the little things Trae does through his embodied presence and in his helping with the logistics at the event or location. "Trae will not let me go to the car and leave things or carry things back," Mani explained, "Trae is like, 'You stay here, and I'll take that,' helping protect from what could happen." As a Brown Latinx non-binary person who is femme presenting, it is often not easy for Mani to navigate public space, especially at night and especially traveling to and from performances. As Mani shared, "when I'm in drag, we have



been a lot in the streets or walking from A to B, and we know that the more exposure, the more things that could happen.”

For Mani and many other Black and Brown trans and non-binary people, while the spaces of nightclubs and drag performances can be so liberating, the night, bars, and the streets can also be deadly. This has long been a part of our existence and history as queer people, particularly for Black, Brown, and poor white gender non-conforming and non-assimilationist queer folks (Mogul et al., 2011). As in the case with Mani and Trae, the folks who can most consistently be counted on to keep Black and Brown trans, non-binary, and queer people safe are usually other Black and Brown trans, non-binary people, and queer people. Additionally, while reports suggest that bias-motivated crimes targeting transgender individuals are increasing, even when Black and Brown trans, non-binary, and queer people “narrowly escape violence,” they are reluctant to report to police. This is because Black and Brown trans, non-binary, and queer people are historically criminalized by police and thus don’t report “for fear of revictimization” at the hands of law enforcement or because they know that law enforcement officers, by not valuing their lives or safety, will “fail to document and respond to violence” (Human Rights Watch, 2021, “Summary,” para. 3). As Human Rights Watch (2021) aptly states, this means that “estimates almost certainly undercount the scope and prevalence of these crimes” (“Summary,” para. 3).

But Trae isn’t the only one showing up in solidarity around the issue of safety from violence. At the exact same time that Trae is practicing this, Mani is as well in a different way. Mani’s commitment to disrupting anti-Blackness doesn’t stop at including Trae in their performances, engaging in organizing, or talking with their family and community. Driving in the car with Trae or out at bars, Mani is always thinking about the ways in which Trae could be a target for police brutality. Mani explained that while they knew about police brutality against Black people before, now that it’s “being talked about,” documented, and “made more public,” Mani is even more thoughtful about how they drive with Trae in the car. Part of solidarity for

Mani then entails critical reflexivity in the form of “constantly thinking about ... what am I gonna do if we’re ever pulled over ... how am I gonna protect my Black family.” For Mani, this awareness and critical reflexivity doesn’t only involve thinking about and preparing for a “what if” situation. Similar to Trae’s managing of Mani’s drag logistics, Mani proactively drives in ways to try and prevent the “if” of being pulled over. This entails taking extra caution when driving with Trae in the car, making sure not to “drive reckless(ly)” so as to not “bring any attention” to their car. While this isn’t new for them as it is something that they had also practiced when driving before they were documented, and while Mani understands that they are also at risk when driving as a Brown Latinx person, despite having citizenship, they said, “I guess, I’m target in a way, but I feel like there are others that are more vulnerable than me in that position.”

**Figure 13. Mani and Trae in the Car From Trae and Mani’s Collage**



**Figure 14. Mani and Trae Out in the Street from Trae and Mani’s Collage**



For Mani, being in solidarity with Trae around Trae’s safety doesn’t stop at driving in the car. Mani also talked about always being prepared to disrupt anti-Black discrimination and

hostility that can take place in the bars and clubs they go to and perform in. In talking about this aspect of their solidarity, they gave an example of when a friend of theirs who came to watch one of their performances experienced a racist interaction at the bar while Trae and Mani were backstage getting ready. Mani said of this experience, “I was all over the place and trying to get ready and running and wasn’t there for her.” You could tell Mani felt heavy recounting this, feeling as though they let their friend down because they weren’t beside her and thus were unable to act in solidarity with her in the moment. They talked about how, since this incident, they have heard from other people that that wasn’t the first time a Black person experienced racism at that bar. While COVID-19 has meant they haven’t performed or been out to bars and clubs the way they were, they shared that this incident will inform their future choices of where to go out dancing, where they will perform, and also how to be in the spaces they do choose to go to so as “to be ready” to act “when that happens.”

These pro-active acts and preparations to react taken up by both Trae and Mani are simultaneously visionary and strategic. These folks occupy an intersection of social locations that puts them at heightened risk for violence at the hands of others, specifically the police. And yet they work together, when driving, when out at night in the streets, in bars and nightclubs, to keep each other safe(r). They use the points of privilege they have, whether that is light-skin privilege (in the case of Mani) or cisgender privilege (in the case of Trae), as best they can. But they are both always also at risk because of not being a born American citizen, being Brown and Latinx, being non-binary and femme presenting, and because of being Black and queer. Unlike Concetta, their marginalized positionalities are salient across many scenarios. They remain committed, however, to use what they can as best they can to try and keep harm and violence in the current climate and structures at bay. They keep going out and keep finding joy while keeping a close watch on each other and the world.

## **It's Not Just Me: It's We**

In talking a bit more about what Mani's solidarity felt like to Trae, he shared a description that helped to flesh out his experience of his and Mani's relational solidarity. He said,

it's not safety necessarily or not completely 'cause when Mani and I are out together, my head's still on a swivel. But it's like if you're walking through a park where there's a bunch of vampires, and it's me by myself, but then when I met Mani, it's like walking through a park with a bunch of vampires, and I have a wooden stake. So I feel there's a confidence that I can handle things if and when the danger comes, so I think that's a little bit different from safety, it's just like a confidence, like, "Ok, we, we got this. It's not just me, it's we.

Trae and Mani try and live, with/in and through their relationship, a Black and Latinx solidarity that is queer and trans, in a way that holds space for all their complexities and differences and invites their communities to come along with them. While, on the surface, much of what they do with/in and through their relationship, from activism, to community and family organizing and education, to embodied solidarity, appear only visionary, I see all these efforts as also strategic in their own ways. For one, using art lends itself to a kind of freedom *and* accessibility that allows you to reach folks that you might otherwise not and in ways you might otherwise not. Doing educational organizing work with communities you are a part of and people who you share identities and are in authentic, mutually loving relationships with can be meaningful and powerful. In my own experiences in organizing and in what I've witnessed with/in these kinds of relationships, folks are more likely to be receptive to and care what each other has to say. Because of the care and connection present, there is usually more energy and capacity for the challenging and long-haul nature of learning with and staying in struggle. This makes me think of adrienne maree brown's (2017) assertion in *Emergent Strategy*, "birds will coast when they can" (p. 72). This isn't to say that community and family organizing is easy (I know my experiences with it are far from that), but tuning into what relationships and ways of teaching

and learning are authentic and holistic allows us all to be more connected, respected, and in turn, heard and valued in our growth and moving together toward liberation. By doing deep work with each other, with others, and showing up for each other's safety and joy, Mani and Trae are engaged in "inch wide, mile deep" organizing (brown, 2017, p. 20).

Lastly, they are always pivoting, and while these shifts are in many ways different from Concetta, Parker, and Loni, they are similarly moving in ways where they are attuned to each other, to context, to the tools that they have collectively, and to the power they can leverage for each other, themselves, and others. As Mani shared, they both work to recognize "those moments when one is in a position of (more) vulnerability" than the other so that they can stand up, and because of how varied things are moment to moment, they are always "taking turns." It is this embodiment, presence, living, and moving within ever-changing moments and ways that make the solidarity Mani and Trae are engaging and experiencing with each other and each other's communities, both strategic and visionary.

### **Leveraging Position & Embodied Solidarity: Where Do You Want/Need Me?**

One could read these stories above, of Concetta, Parker, Loni, and the community member who reached out to them and of Trae and Mani and think only elements of them are embodied. This is what white western culture has done to many of us; have us think that embodiment is only about when we are "using" our bodies to move, to perform, to keep each other safe. But we are always embodied. As I sit here writing this, I am embodied. My brain cannot think (let alone write) without the whole of my body. I sit with this laptop on my lap, legs crossed, on my couch, back straight (mostly straight), looking at this screen with my eyes to see what I've written with my fingers, to keep going.

Concetta, Parker, and Loni used their bodies to send group texts, to write a letter, to move the community member into Loni's house. Loni and Parker use their bodies to honor Concetta's capacity, to care for them, and to respect what Concetta has to give and wants to give with their body. Mani and Trae use their whole bodies with each other and their families

and friends, from performing, to driving, to talking and listening. Solidarity is always embodied. Additionally, as in the case of all of these examples, this embodiment is never an individual choice or move; it is always with/in relation. How we move or sit or stand or position ourselves in relation to each other when facing off with systems of oppression and the structures they occupy and move through matters.

In *The Politics of Trauma*, Haines (2019) describes an exercise where folks practice what solidarity in social justice work can look like through taking up various positions in relation to a person to see what kind of solidarity, what kind of embodied support, feels helpful and good. Green, Holden, and Parker have all been through a training led by Black social justice organizing leaders for Black social justice organizing leaders. Green recounted the experience, “we do this activity where folks stand to your front, stand to your side, and stand to your back ... and you feeling your body, which thing feels the best to you.” They went on to explain how valuable the exercise was in calling you to think about and make an embodied decision around how you want someone to show up because “sometimes it’s someone protecting you, sometimes it’s knowing that someone is right beside you, and sometimes it’s knowing that somebody’s just always had your back.” This is what we are figuring out in relational solidarity; as Green stated, we are asking the person or people, “Where do you need me to be?” and moving into that position, if we can.

While solidarity can be conceptualized and written about differently, as I wrote earlier and as was present in the alliance research, in particular, there is a way where we focus on how people show up across lines of the “greatest” power differences (race, sexual orientation, gender, class) and ignore the ways in which folks who share multiple positionalities of marginalization also engage in solidarity amongst each other because some of them, through educational level or professional position or title within a particular organization, have greater access to power than others. This was evident in the stories told by Green, Tree, Morgan, Holden, and JuJu, who also talked most explicitly about adopting this somatically informed

approach to solidarity. Green, Tree, Morgan, Holden, and JuJu are all Black, trans and non-binary, queer/non-straight folks. As I've already shared, they are queer kin and movement family to each other, building interpersonally and through professional, paid, movement work that they take up in community with each other. But Green, because of the number of years of experience they have and their position in the organization they work in, tends to have access to more institutional power in the spaces that they are in. And so Green, in many instances, has leveraged the power they have to show up in solidarity with others and, as Morgan and Holden have come up in their own organizing work, they have done the same, for each other and for Tree and JuJu.

Talking about solidarity, Green, Tree, and Holden shared stories that made evident how this somatic engagement and experience of relational solidarity is alive and at work in their queer kinship solidarity with each other, particularly in navigating the various contexts they are in with regard to paid organizing and movement work. Whether facing pushback from funders/fiscal sponsors, navigating interpersonal or organizational fallouts and deterioration, or experiencing burnout and the need for support, they all call on each other and engage in this approach. Green and Tree shared an instance where funders and folks on a development team were asking so many questions of JuJu about a project in a way that was "exhausting them" that they stepped in and Green, who has more power in the organization, took the lead. Green shared that while Tree showed up in a way that was standing "beside" JuJu, Green, because their power as a "staff person" leveraged their position and stood "in the front to be like 'actually no' and to absorb." Holden attested to having experienced embodied relational solidarity from Green and from Morgan, as touched on earlier in the section on authenticity and trust. Holden shared that the experiences that have stood out the most to them when it comes to this have been National organizing spaces, where they have felt embodied, relational solidarity from both Green and Morgan in the form of them having their back and being "a place to land that feels

like home in the midst of something that might feel unfamiliar, like a homespace, or like a comfort zone.”

But my favorite was a story Tree told of a moment where this engagement and experience of embodied relational solidarity was at work and working through several folks in the group during a meeting with funders/fiscal sponsors for a project presentation. Tree recounted,

I just remember this moment of everybody speaking. It was this synergy. The funder was asking questions and ... I think I had written up something. And I had been spending a lot of time with Green. So it was no shock that I was almost feeling like every word that Green was saying was part of my mentality. And then Juju came with this really beautiful offering of poetry and grounding the space, it was a moment where I could see that solidarity in action.

For Tree, how folks had been moving and being with/in relationship up to the meeting, around preparation for the meeting, and in the meeting exemplified to them “what’s possible through practicing solidarity.” Their experience made clear to Tree that “ease is possible in a stressful situation” because of the power in being tuned in to each other and moving in response to each other’s needs, with the capacities and power they each have access to, to be in solidarity with each other fully. That solidarity made it possible that they all could, together, show up fully and be their most powerful with regard to the work they had done and the vision they were asking folks to fund. Tree felt that they learned through this moment of embodied relational solidarity that “community is possible without even verbal communication.” When I asked them to share more on this, they stated, “there was communication that was happening, that I was not aware of,” and that communication led to people, the funders, being moved. “The material effects of that solidarity,” Tree explained, “served as a magnet for others.”



**Figure 15. Black Lives Matter Protests Summer 2020 from Alex and Sophie's Collage**



We don't always have these magical synergistic moments where the choreography of somatics informed embodied relational solidarity falls into place. This was something Alex and Sophie spoke about when reflecting on efforts Sophie had taken up to show up in solidarity with Alex where they had misstepped or miscalculated what kind of show up would be helpful. One such example was when Sophie hugged Alex at a Black Lives Matter protest, hoping that a hug from her, their white partner, might feel helpful, grounding, loving, and connecting, when instead, it felt out of touch, erasing, and distracting from the seriousness and uneven experience they have of white supremacy. Similarly, Nicole, in talking about how folks often take advantage of Tomi and steal and take credit for her brilliance, talked about being ready to defend Tomi. She said, "If they send for her, I'm coming for them." While Tomi expressed that she, more often than not, doesn't want or need that from Nicole, although she joked that it is entertaining to get asked by these folks, "Is Nicole mad at me?" Asking where folks want us, being open and ready to shift *and* recognizing that sometimes we may not be the person folks really need "in position" is all a part of the un-ending, ever-shifting work of embodied, relational solidarity. It is a dance. One that is strategic and visionary, visionary and strategic, and, again, always embodied.

## **Conclusion**

Asking where folks want us, being open and ready to shift, *and* recognizing that sometimes we may not be the person folks really need “in position” is all a part of the un-ending, ever-shifting work of embodied, relational solidarity. It is a dance. One that is strategic and visionary, visionary and strategic, and, again, always embodied.

## CHAPTER XII: CARE

I don't believe in the self in the way that people determine it here in this capitalist society that we live in. I don't believe in self-care, I believe in collective care, collectivizing our care, and thinking more about how we can help each other. (Kaba, 2021, p. 28)

If I'm honest, it was hard for me to do solidarity and care as separate chapters. At present, the distinction I decided on was to have examples that would be viewed by folks engaging in them and those experiencing them as solidarity and care, respectively. Still, I feel in some ways like I'm being complicit with the public and private binary when it comes to social justice movements and relational liberation work through presenting the data in this way. These days, in my day-to-day life and in the times we are in, it is becoming harder for me to separate solidarity from care. I think that solidarity is often care work, and care work can often be solidarity work. But I hear the push back; I hear people saying, "you make it sound like everything is liberation work, that everything is political work," and all I can say is I'm learning from QTBIPOC folks that when it is among folks taking care of each other in the face of great inequity and injustice, it is.

### **Wouldn't Everything be Social Justice/Liberation Work, Then?**

There is a concern under this critique that if we think of "every little thing" we do as potentially political work, if we pay attention to how we are taking it up, knowing that we will always fall short and be complicit because of how systems are designed (thinking of consumer capitalism here especially) it will all be "too much" and folks will give up. There is also a concern that if we politicize everything, if we put "serious" large scale, mass movement organizing efforts alongside "everyday," smaller scale, "personal" work, it will keep folks from pushing themselves to do the former, to act in "bigger" ways. The concern is that this will lead to folks being comfortable doing what they want to do, where they want to do it, and never extending beyond their comfort zone or interests. The concern is also that this will especially be the case for those

closest to privilege and power access. And I can see that. There are already people doing this, people who are doing the smallest amount of social justice work that they can, the work that is convenient to them, and are satisfied with their contribution.

Ultimately, I think this goes back to the depth of the solidarity and criticality with/in the kinship community folks are a part of. If folks are in deep relational community, learning from and moving for the good of the whole with/in and beyond the relationship, which includes but doesn't stop at them personally, I don't see how folks could be satisfied with always only doing the "easiest" "smallest" amount of social justice work that they can. I think that this fear about people doing as little as possible and staying in comfort is, in part, based in reality. Those with the most privilege and power have the most to lose. And so, despite their best intentions and commitments to others, the default, the grooves within them and within the society make it easier for them to slide back into place. Following the lines drawn can be what feels good and works for them.

But I also think that this fear is based in a scarcity mentality and an underestimation of the ways that being complicit with oppressive systems takes on more dominantly positioned folks and the relationships they share with others (Birdsong, 2020; Segrest, 1994). I think that this scarcity mentality can lead to, particularly among white folks taking up social movement work, an urge to police, compete, rank and sort, and weigh and measure the value and worth of the folks showing up, the very things we say we are trying to do away with when it comes to white supremacy, capitalism, etc. Lastly, I think that devaluing "small" everyday acts of care work and refusing to count interpersonal relational organizing as a part of social justice and liberation movement work is ableist, sexist, and classist, among other things.

All of that said, I still made a choice to divide the chapters. In the solidarity chapter, I included examples where folks were most obviously engaged in leveraging power to try and combat and disrupt oppressive systems. This chapter on care focuses on efforts that I also still see as disruptive to systems of oppression, but it could be argued that they are less about

leveraging power and more about how folks are being with each other in ways that combat the impact of systems and challenging each other in ways to further that work. I see these things as tethered to each other in the real-life living of queer kinship solidarity, but I do think that separating them out in this context allows for a deeper dive into the nuances and complexities of each. This deep dive enables me to discuss the powerful, political aspects of care work that participants shared, aspects that are largely absent from kinship, social movement, and social justice education research.

As I shared in the literature review, a great deal of attention is paid to how LGBTQ+ chosen families offer care in the forms of chosen-family members acting as trusted confidants, tending to each other's physical, mental, and emotional well-being, sharing and providing resources, offering guidance and support, showing nurturance and care, etc. (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2011; Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011; Shange, 2019; Traies, 2015; Weinstock, 2000; Weston, 1997). This kind of care has been evident across many of the stories I've already shared. But in this section, I want to look at how queer kin groups articulated experiencing care in two particular ways. First, as support, specifically supporting each other's wellness and joy, and struggle, in the form of challenging one's perspectives and how one is showing up (or not) with regard to issues of power and privilege.

Many of the participants, when sharing stories of support, politicized them. I see this articulating and situating of care work as liberation work as an important contribution to the bodies of literature just named, specifically the sub-bodies of LGBTQ+ chosen family/queer kinship research, alliance/solidarity/coalition research, and critical friendship/critical community building research. Though the recognition that care can be political is present in some of the existing works that I've reviewed, I do not think it is as emphasized and discussed in detail, from lived experience, as it was by participants in this project. Additionally, while being in struggle through critical conversations and accountability is present in movement literature and in

Bettez's (2011a, 2011b) work on critical community building, I think the more interpersonal daily nature of care as struggle evident in participant conversations and interactions are under-discussed. Lastly, only two of the studies that I reviewed (Quijada, 2009; Hunt & Holmes, 2015) engaged participant relationships in ways that examined interactions from their lived experiences within existing alliance/solidarity/coalition relationships in enough detail to capture the complexities of the efforts at mutuality made and the challenges experienced.

In the subsections of this chapter, I include story-vignettes from participants that share everyday acts of care and how and why they are significant to the folks involved. In this sense, the organization of this chapter will be a bit of a hybrid between the style of trust and solidarity. Situating these stories in this way, I hope to create a montage text for readers that invites an embodied witnessing and being with how participants engage and experience care as support and struggle. Lastly, in the remainder of this introductory piece and in concluding sections, similar to the chapter on trust, I will explore what I see as some expansions participant pairings and groups are offering with regard to how we think about and engage care in the forms of support and challenge. I believe that what participants share here calls us to consider the multiple ways people can take up liberation work with each other. Their stories also show the significance of cultivating and sustaining liberatory kinship and communities that engage and experience care in the varied ways that they do.

### **Not Out Of Lack: Queer Kinship Care as a Site for Abundant Possibilities**

In some of the existing works on queer kinship, the care offered by queer kin/chosen family in the form of support is often depoliticized or only seen as political because its existence is thought to be in the absence of that of given family or family of origin. Thus, it is situated as political because the LGBTQ folks in question need it and are unable to have access to it through the "normal," "expected," or "correct" site of given family/family of origin. While some of the participants in this project do not have relationships with some or all of their family of origin/given family, many participants do, and many of them still are in active, loving

relationships with them. For myriad reasons, some of which involve differences in worldview around queerness and transness, not all of these folks turn to or rely on given family or family of origin for support.

However, the creating of queer kinship and chosen family and turning to each other for care is not always from a place of desperation or lack. In fact, as is evident in many of the stories already shared, participants are taking up a “queer deviation” toward queer kinship because they experience something more expansive and open within these relationships and ways of being, including how care is taken up. This expansiveness, for many folks, is not present in the structure and engagements within family of origin and normative friendships. As shared earlier by Trae, Parker, Concetta, and others, many folks feel that these configurations just cannot offer the same liberatory possibilities to the relationships involved because of the norms and roles at work within them. This isn’t to say that all create an inverted hierarchy, where queer kinship is seen as “better” than given family or family of origin. But I do think something is lost when folks assume that queer spaces are “making up for” lost family of origin spaces, that folks are taking what they can get when that isn’t always, or in the case of the folks in this project, isn’t often the case. Even in the cases where participants in this project were not in relationship with their families of origin/given families, they did not merely see the support that they received as political because it was given to them after abandonment or rejection; *how* the giving and receiving of care that took place and the purpose of it was what made it liberatory.

Parker, for instance, does not have a relationship with his biological parents and was taken in as a teen by his high school gym teacher, also a part of the LGBTQ+ community, so that Parker could escape an emotionally and physically abusive home with his mother. And while Parker acknowledges that queerness is what made that leaving possible, he talks about how the queer parenting and family that he got to be a part of with his queer chosen Pa (Parker’s high school gym teacher/chosen Dad) gave him so much more than refuge or a replacement family. He explained how that new home was a possibility model and a large part

of his healing journey not only because it saved him but also because it showed him another way. This was what showed him that another world was possible outside of the narrow gender roles and relational scripts of the isolated nuclear family. “I did have a butch trans Dad,” Parker said, reflecting, one that explored life outside of the “very rigid dyad nuclear family.” At the time of taking him in, Parker’s butch Dad was “single and living in an intergenerational home for a very long time” with his mother. His Pa was nurturing and caring figure for him growing up (and still today), not only to Parker but to another gender non-conforming LGBTQ+ person that he took in after Parker.

Having this generational piece, taking up what Parker describes as “these culturally specific practices of care” of looking out for and taking in LGBTQ+ kids AND doing so in a way that does not assimilate or replicate cis-hetero nuclear family norms, inspires Parker to be “one of the butch trans Dads of my community.” Parker, in this role, serves as a “Baba” to his community, in the way Loni described earlier, through caring for, mentoring, celebrating, and looking out for folks. Because of his Pa, Parker grounds a lot of his world-making in “raising people up, training, making sure that the babies know my name, knowing ... that my elders are taken care of and can feel me in their days.” Parker sees this engaging in relational care work as fortifying him not only because giving care does something for the giver, or as Birdsong (2020) explains, because “our best self gets a positive feeling from supporting others” (p. 16) but also because care giving and receiving in queer kinship solidarity is never about charity, it is always about mutual aid (Spade, 2020).

Mutual aid, unlike charity, is a more “integrated part of our lives rather than a pet cause” and cultivates “a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem” connecting people “to social movements that can address these causes” (pp. 28–29). Rather than seeing struggles as individual or positioning people in crisis as “just needing a leg up” in order to get on their feet and make it on their own in the current structure, mutual aid recognizes that micro- and meso-level struggles are often tied to system-level problems. And so, while mutual aid efforts help



meet people's immediate needs regarding the challenges they are experiencing, they also simultaneously serve as a way to plug folks into organizing efforts working to disrupt and dismantle the systems and structures creating the conditions, to begin with. In mutual aid, giving and receiving care is about moving in the world with each other in a way that fills all of us. It is about living for a world where we move "in right relation" to each other (TallBear, 2019a), where we "co-create opportunities to care and be there for one another" (Birdsong, 2020, pp. 16-17).

For Parker, caregiving youth and younger folks who are "walking around NC fucking shit up" and elders "who have been influential to me" allows him to be in growth, in healing, and learning with both. He credited the mutual aid he is engaged in with these folks as being what allows him to "play excitedly in the gray space, in the both/and, in the mess" in his living for liberation with others. This dynamic element of care alive between Parker, the youth, and elders allow them all to live and move within relationships in ways where they not only have what they need, but where they get to, together, rest, move, play, love, and be in the world in ways beyond what they could have imagined.

### **Care as Support: Looking Out for Each Other's Wellness and Joy**

Participants in the queer kin pairings and groups shared stories about engaging and experiencing support as care through looking out for each other's wellness and joy. In these stories, I heard them supporting each other's joy and wellness through acts of care that took place in the everyday, in difficult times, and around social justice/liberation work.

#### **Everyday Support of/for Wellness**

Writing about her relationship with her friend Mariah who lives with diabetes, Birdsong (2020) talks about how while she realized that "much of Mariah's time, mental energy, income, and other resources are directed at managing her diabetes," she didn't realize "how little I knew about how significant of a resource drain it is" (p. 51). She explains that in thinking about how she could help care for Mariah in a dire situation when insulin isn't as readily available, she realized that she needed to shift how she was in relationship with Mariah in order to "be better

prepared to care for Mariah now” (p. 51). Thinking about how difficult it is to bring things up in a moment of need, let alone prior to it, Birdsong (2020) approached her friend and made a date for them to sit down together so that she could have all the necessary, important health care information to be a better support person to her. Birdsong (2020) understands these preparatory care acts, the “small adjustments” she makes to have apps on her phone, information at the ready, the things that she does to support Mariah’s care as “the kinds of little shifts in attention that happen when you make someone family” (p. 52). I see the ways Sophie and Alex and Concetta, Parker, and Loni are engaging and experiencing support as a form of care within their queer kin groups and beyond them in the stories that follow as a way of, like Birdsong (2020), expanding what it means to be in family, community. And I believe that through these expansions, they are bringing to life a more liberatory world with/in their relationships and beyond them, for each other and others.

### ***Soup and Mouth Guard***

In going through the images they included in their relational collage, Alex landed on an image of soup (see Figure 16). “I mean everybody’s gonna tell you, ‘Oh I love somebody who cooks for me,’” they said, “But I fucking love when somebody like makes me soup ... it’s like a pinnacle for me.” Alex explained that Sophie didn’t always enjoy cooking but would make Alex soup. We all smiled at this very simple share. It seemed such a small thing but was featured on their collage. I thought to myself, what does it mean to extend yourself, where you can, to express love for someone in a way that doesn’t come naturally to you but gives them such joy and comfort.

**Figure 16. Soup from Alex and Sophie's Collage**



Later on, in our conversation, I asked them both to share any breakthrough moments of connection or things about their relationship that made it strong. They had both spoken a great deal about challenges they faced together but hadn't spoken much, outside of some of the memories from their collage of the night that they met, this detail about soup, and traveling together, of joy. Sophie proceeded to share about how she saw Alex's coming out as trans and the two of them learning about what that meant for Alex together as something that "really brought them closer." She shared that it had, in her opinion, allowed the two of them to heal some past tensions that stemmed from Alex doubting the "realness" of Sophie's queerness early on because now Alex was experiencing moving into a knowing about themselves that, in retrospect, was present long before this moment of coming out, was "new" which did not make it any less of a significant part of them. Sophie also shared that through working together as a couple to support Alex in accessing gender-affirming care, the two were experiencing a special and connecting journey together.

After listening to Sophie share this, Alex nodded in agreement, then paused and said, "for the sake of full transparency and honesty, the first thought that came to mind when you asked this question was last night when you would not let me fall asleep until I put the mouth guard in." Sophie, a little surprised, asked me to repeat the question being asked. Alex looked at me, "The moments of how you know that the relationship is strong?" to which I nodded. Alex continued, "I grind my teeth in my sleep," they explained, "it's stress-induced, and so I haven't stopped doing it in the past 4 years"; they were making a point of the political climate we were in

and its effects on them and their health. At the time of the focus group, Alex was living alone but shared that when Sophie came to stay with them, she would “always remind them to put it on.” Alex said they are always reluctant to put it in front of other people because “it’s a retainer to sleep, so it’s not very attractive.” Because of feeling insecure about wearing this in front of someone who they especially want to view them as attractive, they usually “try not to put it on until like the seconds before I fall asleep,” which often means that they forget, will grind their teeth all night, and be in pain the next day.

“Last night, I was so exhausted, and Sophie,” they said, turning to her, “I don’t know how long you told me to put it on, it sounded like 7 minutes, but you did not let me fall asleep until I put it on.” Another person might not be so insistent, Alex argued, they would see Alex’s mouthguard as Alex’s responsibility, but Sophie “goes out of her way” to make sure Alex puts it in. It is Sophie’s attention to this thing that doesn’t really matter in the moment, but it makes a world of difference for how Alex will experience their body and their day 12 hours from that point; that means so much to them. They explained that, at this point of their life, they feel like it is these little acts of care, of everyday support, of Sophie putting Alex’s mouthguard out every night on their nightstand and harassing them until they put it in that makes a difference. They said of this:

I’m at the point right now where I feel like it’s those little things that will ... it sounds so stupid to say out loud ‘cause I don’t believe it half the time. But it’s the little things that will change the world.

Sophie joked that she would get everyone everywhere to wear a mouth guard. I joked that we could all change the world one mouth at a time. But Alex held to this, and we knew and agreed with what they were saying. It’s the little things, like the soup, the “little things too small to notice,” that make a difference in how we are living, not fighting, but how we are *living* for social justice (which, in turn, have a direct bearing on our ability and capacity to fight, organize, etc.).

While we know that marginalized people experience higher levels of stress because of racism, ethnocentrism, cissexism, etc., I think we often forget the “little” ways this manifests, these chronic conditions of bodily stress, and the toll they take. Alex’s teeth grinding is one such example. And so the care around it that Sophie exhibited while they were in a romantic partnership, the practice of making that easier for Alex and encouraging them, however forcefully, to take care of themselves, is significant. This again exemplifies the both/and of relational care as a political/liberatory act, with everyday support as both what sustains us in living and working for a more collectively liberatory world AND being the kind of being with each other that, in and of itself, brings to life a glimpse and experience of that world, where people care enough about marginalized peoples and their health and wellness to notice their needs and support them being met, where care is always collective care.

### ***Other People’s Lives and Quality of Life is Your, is Our Business***

Concetta similarly talked about the significance of extending care through everyday support. As I have already shared, Concetta is a disabled person who lives with chronic pain. Moving from a place of knowing how debilitating and isolating their own pain days can be, one of the ways Concetta engages in collective care through everyday support is to make “love offerings” of tasks that they can assist with to people in their life they know are in a difficult or stressful time. “I know what it is like to not be able to take care of oneself,” they stated, “and what it feels like to also, on top of that, have to think about who you can ask for help and what all to ask for.”

Rather than saying, “let me know if you need anything,” or asking, “can I be of support?” or “what would be helpful?” Concetta offers ideas that are in line with their own capacity to try and alleviate the difficulty of both approaching with an ask and coming up with something to ask for. They will reach out to someone navigating limited mobility from physical or mental health struggles and say, “would it be helpful if I came over and vacuumed for you, cooked or brought food, did dishes?” Concetta, Parker, and Loni, separately and together, regularly reach out to

people in their community who are “going through it” with these offers of support. They have done everything from bringing folks food to taking night shifts with newborns to checking in on cats and taking out dogs. Parker echoed how this practice of engaging in the care of folks is central to how he, Concetta, and Loni practice this with each other and others. He said of this in one focus group, “Other people—it’s your business,” he said, “other people’s lives and quality of life is your, is our business.”

For Parker, Concetta, and Loni, the quality of people’s lives isn’t only your business when they are in crisis or struggling; they are your business every day and in ways that call you to shift your life at times. He explained that they engage in a “prioritizing of each other” that is “intentional and deliberate,” giving an example of how, during the protests over the summer in 2020, since folks that they were podding with had asthma, he, Concetta, and Loni made a decision to not take to the streets as they have in the past. “We’re just not gonna do those things even if we would have before,” he explained, “we’re making certain decisions and adjustments in our lives, in our days, in our houses, and our resources, everything with each other in mind.” In alignment with what adrienne maree brown (2017) argues in *Emergent Strategy*, Parker asserted that “we are also each other’s resistance” and in being that with each other and living for social justice, “the how of it is just as important as the what we are engaged in.” And so Parker, Concetta, and Loni didn’t take to the streets in order to protect the people they were podding with. Instead, they, alongside another community member, made herbal medicine for front-line activists and people in their community in general who they knew were hurting in the midst of the pandemic and the aftermath of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade.

In an interview with Kim Wilson and Brian Sonenstein, Mariam Kaba (2021) asked the following questions:

How can we collectivize care so that when we’re sick and we’re not feeling ourselves, we’ve got a crew of people who are not just our prayer warriors but our action warriors

who are thinking through this with us? Like, I'm just not going to be able to cook this week, and you have a whole bunch of folks there who are just putting a list together for you and bringing food every day that week, and you're doing the same for your community, too.

I see the everyday support offered by Sophie to Alex, by Concetta, Parker, and Loni to each other and others as being living answers to the questions Kaba (2021) posed. I see them as being living examples of everyday relational support as mutual aid, as radical care, as bringing into the here and now a world where folks are more well and more cared for one bowl of soup, one nudge to put in a mouth guard, one chore, one dose of medicine at a time.

### **Everyday Support of/for Joy**

I've already written quite a bit about the significance of joy, how it is revolutionary and what it makes possible when engaged and experienced relationally (which it always is if we are being inclusive of relationships between people and the non-human and more than human). And I've already shared quite a few stories about everyday moments of joy and how pivotal they are to forging, sustaining, and birthing new possibilities with/in and through queer kinship solidarity. But why not write about it some more. I mean, is there ever enough joy? In this section, I share some more stories of joy among participant pairings and groups, only this time with attention to how folks are engaging and experiencing care through being supported in accessing and experiencing joy in the everyday.

### ***Real Housewife Support Person***

In *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, adrienne maree brown (2019) writes that accessing and expressing her love of Beyonce, similar to her love of Octavia Butler, "actually enhances my wholeness and opens possibilities" (p. 319). brown (2019) states that claiming Beyonce publicly "was a key step in the process of coming out as a pleasure activist" (p. 320). She defines a pleasure activist as someone who, among other things, "asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this" (brown, 2019, p.

13). Pleasure activists, according to brown (2019), believe that through “tapping into the potential goodness in each of us we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists” (p. 13). Moreover, pleasure activists prioritize “the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression” (brown, 2017, p. 13).

brown (2019) is considered by many in liberatory movement organizing and “academic” feminist social justice circles as a powerful thinker and teacher of our time. This makes brown (2019) claiming Beyonce in this way and positioning her love for Beyonce as enhancing who she is and how she moves in the world that much more significant. In many ways, I see this as a big “fuck you” to the seriousness and ideological purity among some social movement scholars and organizers. brown (2019) unapologetically embraces and revels in how her love of Beyonce allows her to access her fullness and complexity (for one, loving Beyonce makes her an anti-capitalist loving/admiring someone who is unapologetically capitalist). She sees loving and sharing her love of Beyonce with others as part of being in alignment with her living and moving for liberation, not opposed to it.

As I have already argued, being joy-full within ourselves and within our relationships, particularly for folks occupying multiple positions of marginalization, is an act of resistance. AND, in what participants shared with me in this project, it was made even more apparent to me how everyday support that allows us to access and experience joy more fully is a key way folks experience and engage care within and through queer kinship solidarity. I saw this, particularly in how Trae came to see and understand himself, as being a part of movement outside of his day job and art activism over the course of the project.

In listening to a podcast about the movie *Selma* (yes, Trae listens to a lot of podcasts, he is that kind of nerd), Trae’s attention was piqued when he heard Ava Duvernay explain why they decided to title the film *Selma* instead of Martin Luther King, Jr. He explained that she said that they named the film *Selma* “because activist movements are made up of lots of different



people.” And so, while there are these “top figures that we deify,” those figures are “within this ecosystem.” It is that ecosystem, made up of “a lot of different kinds of people,” that makes real change and movements happen.

While Trae had always understood this, it was Duvernay’s talking about the character that she included, “Richie Jean Jackson,” that really called him to think differently about himself and his role in relation to movement. “Richie Jean Jackson,” Trae began, was a character in the film who “fed and clothed the men of the movement.” Thinking of Duvernay’s assertion about the ecosystem, and specifically thinking about Richie Jean Jackson’s role in the film, Trae said that while listening to the podcast, he had an ah-ha moment, saying to himself, “Oh, I’m a support person!” “I don’t have any use for the spotlight,” Trae continued, waving his hands and shaking his head “no” in front of the camera, “but I have a lot of friends who are big movers and shakers,” many of whom, he explained, are involved in a lot of front-line, direct action, and grassroots organizing work.

Trae shared that a lot of the time, these friends of his “don’t necessarily want to process their trauma” even though “there’s a lot of that, especially from their work.” He finds instead that they turn to him to feel whole and human, to have joy and experience life outside of the hardness of their community work. And so he is there for them, extending care through supporting their joy in this way. In speaking specifically about his relationship to Mani regarding this support work that he takes up, Trae said,

I see Mani doing a lot more on the ground work ... I wish that was my ministry but it isn’t, but any time that I can help them have fun and let loose and really enjoy themselves and be a full person and be silly ... it’s important to me if I can do that.

to which Mani replied, “it’s very important.”

No, Trae isn’t clothing or feeding Mani per se, but he is, to go back to the quote I used in authenticity, serving as a dressing room for Mani to try on the most authentic versions of themselves and versions where they can be both an organizer and a pop culture fan. Trae is the

one who they can talk to about “the Real Housewives”; he is the one that allows them to have “an innocuous conversation about who is the best girl group or why Kelly is better than Beyonce, at least in terms of singing.” And part of the reason why this matters is that Mani knows Trae’s lens, Trae’s commitment, and the various behind-the-scenes ways Trae takes up liberation work, and he knows theirs. They can be full and complex together, and, as was shared in the section about joy, they can put down the weight of the world with each other and have joy, *and* because of the weight and intensity of the work Mani takes up, Trae is happy to care for Mani through supporting their joy in the ways that he does.

### ***Teamwork Makes the Dream Work***

In talking about her romantic partnership with Tomi, Nicole smiled and said to me, “Tomi just sustains me in so many ways. You know, she helps me to believe in myself even when I can’t ... she’s like, ‘Well, you still can be, and you still can have.’” This support, Nicole explained, is “unwavering.” And that came to be evident for her when she was completing an arduous Ph.D. program that was social justice education-focused, which is her life’s passion and work. To say the academy can be unwelcoming to marginalized people, especially people seeking to be more liberatory, creative, and radical in their work, would be an understatement. Nagbe (2019), in their thorough review and analysis of empirical and conceptual research on Black doctoral students’ socialization experiences at PWIs, found that “the environment, structures, relationships, policies, and practices that fashioned their socialization experiences were plagued with racialized hostility, barriers, and marginalization” (p. 7). It is no wonder that folks find themselves at a point, like Nicole was once, where they want to say “Fuck it” when they feel “so done.”

When Nicole got to this point, Tomi was there to hold and push Nicole, “she was like ‘No,’” Nicole said, laughing, “We paid all this money. We are getting this Ph.D.” Tomi, Nicole shared, would lovingly tell Nicole, “Go sit your ass down for this amount of time and write,” and Nicole wrote, and Nicole did finish; they got that Ph.D.

“There’s a lot of dynamics around our relationship,” Nicole continued, “we’ve had to be each other’s rallying cry, be each other’s get it done, open the door and hold it, whatever you need.” I know what you are thinking; this doesn’t sound like joy. I’m writing this thinking the same thing. Maybe because I’m writing my dissertation and being told to sit my ass down and write for this amount of time (which my partner all but said to me this morning) is not joyful. But it was what Nicole shared about *how* she gets to write *with* Tomi in the house deejaying; that’s where the care, the support through offering joy comes in.

I can see it like I’m watching the opening scene of a movie. I don’t know what their house looks like, but I can see Nicole in front of the bookshelf she and Tomi sat in front of on Zoom with me for our focus groups. I see her sitting in front of her computer, hands on the keys. I can hear house music playing loudly, billowing through every room. I can see Tomi in the zone in front of her tables as I’ve seen her back in the days when I went to clubs and in the pictures I’ve seen on social media since. But maybe they are in their loungewear because they are in their home space. Maybe it’s nighttime, and Nicole is working late on a passion project. Maybe it’s early afternoon on a weekend day when Tomi doesn’t have a gig to travel to. But I can see it. “I can sit and I can write,” Nicole tells me, “based on how she deejays now, her deejay style, and what she selects as her songs in her particular mixes, a lot of it is very healing, very inspiring.” These moments, Nicole explains, “are the best moments” when they are “in the flow, in the house” where they are supporting each other in moving in their work with joy, having “ah-ha” moments, sustaining each other.

While it is great, and as a writer and thinker for social justice, I am grateful that what Tomi does allows Nicole to get “a lot of work done,” I love more the flow, the embodied support, the energetic exchange of inspiration, of joy. I can see them and feel them because I saw and felt it in their faces when Nicole described these moments as “when we’re at our best connection.” It isn’t ever only about what we are doing, and it also isn’t ever only about who we

are doing it with; to return again to brown (2017), the how we are doing it is so significant; it makes all the difference in living and moving for liberation relationally.

The importance of the *how* of getting to do meaningful social justice work and being supported in accessing joy while doing it was also present in a moment between Holden, Green, and Morgan. In one of the focus groups, Holden made it a point to express their appreciation to Green and Morgan, in particular, for supporting them in their journey to move more towards doing more healing and creative work in movement. “I appreciate the ways that they have supported me,” Holden explained, “in just being able to show up into spaces and create healing and care spaces that have been a really great opportunity for me to move into.” For Holden, “these moments and times where folks saw something in me, saw that this is something I do and love to offer and created more opportunity for me to do that” have allowed them to “expand on my own possibilities of what that can look like in the work that I do.”

Having these opportunities to move into movement leadership work that is more in alignment with what they want to be doing, with what brings them joy in the struggle, has meant a lot to Holden. Being cared for in this way, Holden not only feels supported but also, going back to the importance of authenticity, dignity, curiosity, and growth, they feel seen and like folks are flowing with them on their journey, seeing how they are evolving, how they want to move, and honoring and valuing that. With Green and Morgan supporting Holden by creating opportunities for them to do more healing and care-centered organizing work, Holden gets to feel “less of a disconnect” and more whole, authentic, and joyful in the movement work they take up.

In this same focus group Green, who does so much supporting of others, particularly in the form of leveraging the power and resources they have, shared how they knew they could call on Tree, JuJu, Morgan, and Holden to support them in accessing joy not only in meetings together or while doing movement work but also beyond it, even in the midst of the pandemic, even after yet another traumatic summer of Black death at the hands of police and white supremacist vigilantes. They shared that while they had been down recently, feeling stuck and

out of community in their apartment, they knew their queer kin are always there for them, at the ready, to support them in experiencing joy. The way they described how they could get to each person and what they knew they could do with them made evident how the dynamic element of care within their queer kinship in the form of supporting joy can operate like an energetic walkway that folks just have to hop on to experience and engage care.

“Tree is right across the street,” Green said, pointing ahead as Tree smiled. “I can drive to skate with Juju” (see Figure 17). “You know? And to go by Morgan’s and see them too,” Green added, while JuJu and Morgan both nodded enthusiastically in response. “I can get my ass up and go sit on Holden’s porch,” Green continued, “I still know how to go to Holden’s old spot, that’s how much I frequented that place” Holden nodded, grinning. “Like, I know once I hit the highway,” Green said, looking into the camera at me, “I know how to show up at that spot.”

**Figure 17. Skate from JuJu’s Collage**



I think of hooks’s (2006) “Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations” and her assertion in it that “we are able to experience joy in the struggle” when “working within community” (p. 296). I see this in what Trae and Mani shared about pop culture and enjoying life outside of the struggle. I see it in what Nicole shared about Tomi’s support and their flow. I see it in what Holden shared about the support they receive from Green and Morgan to take up more meaningful and joyful movement work. And I see it in Green knowing the support for joy is always there, they might just have to walk across the street or ride across the state, but it is there. I agree with hooks that this “joy needs to be documented” because “if we only focus on

the pain, the difficulties which are surely real in any process of transformation, we only show a partial picture” (hooks, 2006, p. 249). In showing this partial picture, we keep ourselves from seeing how we are bringing into the here and now, through these moments of care in the form of supporting each other in experiencing wellness and joy in our days and in our movement work, a more liberatory world for all of us.

### **Care as Struggle: Challenging Each Other’s Critical Lens and Show Up**

As I spoke to some in the section on curiosity, taking up critical questioning with each other or engaging in critical conversations around our various understandings and lived experiences of systems of power and oppression isn’t always something we can embody with an open, playful curiosity. There are real, painful, weighty aspects of thinking about, talking about, and trying to move for a different, more just, and liberatory world. And, as already discussed, the heaviness of this weight falls unevenly (Oliviero, 2016). Anti-oppressive scholars and organizers who occupy one or many positionalities of privilege have written a great deal about how sometimes, because of our places closer to center, we just can’t see the structural barriers faced by the marginalized (Delpit, 2006). Even in the age of social media and phone documentation, we are sometimes still kept (and can keep ourselves) from seeing the more obvious inequity and violence that they experience. For folks on the margins, this is not only frustrating but gas-lighting. As Black feminist scholars have written about at length, this lived experience of hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility works in such a way that folks are simultaneously greatly harmed and ignored (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; G. T. Hull et al., 1982).

For all of the above reasons, lifting the veil for each other through challenging, critical conversations, even, and sometimes especially, in our close(r) relationships, can be scary. What if the person doesn’t want to see/listen/think differently? What if they meet what I’m sharing with them in denial or refusal or flip things around to blame the oppressed/me? What if they look and listen but never really learn or change from the interaction or only change when in my presence so as not to “offend” me?

I think of Lugones (2003) stating that she, as a Woman of Color, reserved “sympathetic and empathetic thinking” toward white/Anglo women “for the rarity of deep friendship” (p. 43). Trae echoed a similar sentiment when talking about why he feels the energy to have hard, critical conversations with Mani as opposed to how he often feels with other non-Black folks, like his co-workers. He said of this, “I can spend all day talking to my ignorant coworkers and giving them all my good words and all of my grace for them to just go off and not do anything with it” but with Mani, “that kind of energy feels better spent” since Trae knows that Mani is committed to “making the world around you better,” including within their relationship. This trusting to engage in critical conversations and be open to growth and transformation, as already spoken to in authenticity, growth, and trust, was present across participant pairings and groups.

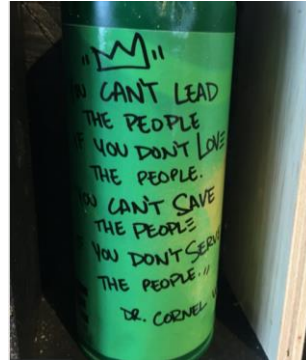
In the stories that follow, participants share moments of struggle in the form of critical conversations and experiences that they had with their queer kin (and sometimes those they were connected to). Folks shared these narratives with me in focus groups as memories that really “stood out” or “stayed” with them, defining moments in their queer kinship solidarity relationships with each other. As you will read in the stories, people took up these conversations and experiences as part of how they were being with and caring for each other and the relationship. As such, they position struggle through critical conversation and engagement as a place to learn, heal, and transform interdependently.

### **You’ll Be the Only White Person There**

One of the major ways that Alex and Sophie experienced joy during their romantic partnership and before COVID was through traveling. Going through their collage, Alex explained that a photo of a sticker on a can of some kind with the Cornel West quote, “You can’t lead the people if you don’t love the people. You can’t save the people if you don’t serve the people,” was significant because those are words they try to live by as a couple in their commitment to social justice (see Figure 18). Alex then mentioned that the item was displayed “in an art installation in New Orleans” that they went to with Sophie and a group of their friends.

These friends of Alex's are also Latine, and so, on this trip, Sophie "was the only white person there." Alex shared that they had "many conversations" with their friends about the trip, before they were able to extend an invitation to Sophie to join them. Alex explained that "There was a conversation of, 'Hey, can you keep your girlfriend in check when she's here?'"

**Figure 18. Art with Cornel West Quote from Alex and Sophie's Collage**



For Alex, this trip was special and important because it was an opportunity for Sophie to get to know their friends and also to challenge herself around her comfort and ability to build relationships across racial and cultural differences, especially as the only white person in a space. While Sophie had met one of Alex's friends and her girlfriend prior to the trip, Sophie shared that that didn't make going on the trip and being the only white person in a space any less new or daunting for them. She shared that the experience called her to sit with and more critically consider "how people of color feel all of the time in white spaces." Sophie also felt that the trip was special, and because of the discomfort she had to move through and the critical reflection she was called to take up as a result, she also experienced the trip as "humbling, very humbling."

This wasn't the only humbling and challenging experience Sophie and Alex talked about regarding Sophie having to move through white fragility and discomfort in their partnership. They talked about one of the first times they hung out with all of Alex's Latine friends prior to the trip at one of the friend's homes. Just as with the trip, Sophie had met one of Alex's friends already; however, unlike the trip, there were other white people at this home hang-out, but these



other white folks spoke Spanish, and Sophie did not, at least not well, at the time. Sophie recalled being so out of her comfort zone. Though she is typically an extrovert, Sophie spent most of her time at this gathering, as Alex described, “physically on the couch ... scrunched back.” “I did,” Sophie agreed, “I held back.”

Sophie recalled Alex talking to them after the gathering, “Alex was like, ‘How does it feel?’ you know? And I just was like, ‘Fuck, I’m getting it’” Sophie said that these were some of the moments they were really challenged, that they were called to be in struggle around their “white fragility” and to think more critically about the daily experiences of People of Color in white spaces. “I can preach it,” she said, referencing the fact that she, as a sociology doctoral student and scholar, reads, writes, and teaches about racism, ethnocentrism, and white supremacy, “but ... putting myself in that space” it was different. “It all goes back to us pushing each other’s boundaries and pulling each other back in,” Sophie said, “whether that be with my own whiteness, together navigating my very hetero, white, Southern family” they took up loving struggle together so that they could move differently together and with others and make new communities, new ways of being, new world(s) possible.

### **Hard to be Soft**

These moments of care as struggle through challenging critical conversations and engagements did not only take place between people who were in direct queer kinship solidarity relationships with each other. As has already been talked about, most evident in the example from Tree, Morgan, and JuJu earlier around parenting but also visible in some of the other stories, this care as struggle spilled over into relationships between people and the family/friends/community members of their queer kin. One example I was most moved by was one that JuJu shared, of a moment of struggle JuJu witnessed and appreciated that took place between Green and JuJu’s child.

**Figure 19. Baby Bottle From JuJu’s Collage**



JuJu, their child, Green, and some other folks were having a sweet day together, swimming and playing in a river. “My kid was trying to knock over some stones that were stacked,” JuJu recalled, “and Green was like, ‘Oh, that’s machismo, huh, oh, okay.’” JuJu felt that in saying this to their kid, Green was “calling it out a little bit,” calling out JuJu’s little cis boy’s gender socialization by society, socialization that encourages him to destroy things and be “tough” as his primary way of engaging in the world. Green then said something to JuJu’s child that JuJu has since repeated back to him; they said, “it’s easy to be hard, but it’s hard to be gentle.” JuJu saw Green, as a Black non-binary masc of center person, saying this to their son as a way of “trying to encourage him to be gentle,” which is particularly meaningful for JuJu as a Black non-binary queer parent who wants to raise their Black cisgender son in a way where he, as a young Black boy can express and experience gentleness, love, nurturance, and care.

By challenging JuJu’s son, in this “what you doing?” way, and offering up an alternative in alignment with the values JuJu and Green share around supporting masculinity that embraces showing up as loving and gentle, JuJu felt cared for and felt their son was being cared for too through this loving challenge. JuJu expressed that “raising a little cisgender boy” in this way can be hard because of narrow and harmful racist and sexist stereotypes and societal messaging and how often other people their son is surrounded by perpetuates them. JuJu experienced this moment of their son being called out/in and challenged, put forth by Green as care for their son and care for them. They didn’t get defensive about how their son was being perceived, or view their child as only theirs to parent/raise. To go back to the introduction, they

instead felt held and supported in community with Green in this moment, as Green, playing with their son in a river, reminded him that being gentle, that being soft, could also be so powerful.

### **Cartoons and Criticality**

“We got tickled this morning, because I was watching cartoons,” Tomi started off with one of her great stories. Throughout our focus groups, Tomi could be counted on to tell at least one detailed story she felt helped to illustrate the dynamics of her and Nicole’s queer kinship. Tomi loves cartoons, the old-school Bugs Bunny ones, and has always watched them. She told me this and then said Nicole, throughout their relationship, has sometimes joined her to watch. “We used to just sit there and—I think she was just appeasing me at the time,” Tomi said, telling me how this watching of cartoons together dates back to their first apartment with a “TV stand with this little bitty TV.” And so this morning took Tomi back there, back to the Saturday mornings in their old place where over coffee and cartoons, “we got some good laughs.”

But this watching of cartoons led to an interesting discussion, Tomi explained, one that exemplified for her the ways in which her and Nicole’s queer kinship is also always about being challenged to think differently and consider different perspectives. There is “cross-dressing,” Tomi said, “that a lot of cartoon characters in the Looney Tunes do.” And so, while watching cartoons this morning, because that was present in the cartoon they were watching, a critical conversation emerged between Nicole and Tomi later in the day. Tomi told me that she said to Nicole, “Baby, I don’t understand how anyone who grew up watching Looney Tunes can be a person that hates on trans people, on queer people.” “I told her,” Tomi continued, “that I just don’t understand that.” Tomi explained that Nicole replied to this, “Well, you have to realize that everybody’s take, everybody’s lens is not the same as your lens when they’re watching.” Tomi explained that Nicole elaborated on this by saying that while for Tomi as a gender-non-conforming person, it may be funny as in playful, as in playing with and expanding gender, and thus might feel even affirming to see characters do this, for somebody else it might be different, funny as in the action the character is doing and thus the character itself is a “joke.” Through

this lens, the cross-dressing or gender non-conformity/fluidity is viewed as something that is right to do, and thus the message they are receiving and/or perpetuating through their read of the cartoon to others could be “don’t you dare do that.” Tomi looked at me in the camera and said, “I never thought of it that way.”

As a pleasure activist myself, one who seeks to “understand and learn from the politics and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good” (brown, 2019, p. 13), I’ve received a lot of pushback from partners and friends over the years. I’m not alone in this; as shared earlier, Alex experienced Sophie and others telling them to turn their “critical lens off” in order to enjoy things. Even after telling this story, Nicole and Tomi joked together that sometimes Tomi asks Nicole to leave her critical commentary for after the show or movie they are watching together. But what I love about this example is how this moment felt like an important one of struggle as care where, through critical conversation, Nicole supported Tom through challenging her thinking in a way that made possible more thinking and wonder, multiple lenses and ideas, and experiences around cartoons, representation, gender fluidity, young people, etc. It wasn’t just a joke, and it also wasn’t only one kind of funny. This moment, therefore, entailed a living of struggle as care in the form of challenge that combined pleasure activism and critical and queer pedagogy.

### **But if You Were Their Kid ...**

In recalling significant moments where each was challenged by and learned from the other, Mani shared a conversation that they had with Trae that has always stuck with them, one that has called them to more deeply engage critical reflexivity around how they engage with their Black women co-workers. “I particularly remember one conversation that I had with you, Trae,” Mani recounted, “that was probably early on,” about how “at work, a lot of Black women were very nice to me as a queer person.” Mani explained that the conversation came up in the context of them talking about how they each navigate being queer at work and with their families.

In this conversation, Mani shared having experienced Black women, despite sometimes engaging them in a very patronizing and stereotypical “Oh hey girl!” manner, as very nice and friendly to them as a queer person. Mani recalled that after sharing this with Trae, the two began dissecting the whole experience of being exoticized and made into caricatures by straight people. But Mani kept trying to explain that they nonetheless were grateful that the Black women with whom they work were still “friendly” to them. Mani said that after listening a bit more, Trae said to them, matter of factly, “Oh, Black women can be like that only if it’s not their child, but once it’s their child, like not everybody of course but, they can be very like homophobic at times.” Trae’s response has stuck with Mani ever since.

“That was a way of me learning with you,” Mani explained, a way of learning about their different experiences of “what being queer with our family” and community can be. This learning has since called Mani to think and move differently in solidarity with Trae and other Black queer people with/in and through Mani’s relationship to their Black women co-workers. Mani has taken what Trae shared with them “to work with them.” Mani shared that since the challenge, “any time that I would hear something, instead of just letting it go because they were so nice with me ... anything that I thought needed to be addressed, I would always grab that topic and talk with them.” Through being engaged in struggle as care with Trae, with Trae sharing his lived experience as a way to push back on and challenge Mani, Mani was called to think and act differently, to take up solidarity differently in a way they hadn’t before. Mani experienced this moment and many other moments of challenging critical conversation as care. Mani experiences Trae challenging them, being in struggle with them, as caring. As I wrote in the section on trust, they state, “I trust Trae to give me honest feedback so, to me, that is a way of healing from experiences.”

### **Expansions on Care**

Like trust, participants offer expansive insights into what engaging and experiencing care can look like, in addition to care being both support and struggle. In what participants shared

with me, I see an expansion of how care is experienced and engaged in two ways. One, they experienced and engaged care as centering the uncommon between them and those they were in connection to, their difference in lived experience and perspectives as they relate to systems and structures of power and oppression. Relatedly, what they share in their stories of experiencing and engaging care pushes back on conventionally accepted ideas of mutuality and reciprocity in relationships. As with trust, I see both of these expansions as in alignment with decolonial, queer, anti-capitalist, intersectional feminist frameworks.

### **Care as Struggle: Challenge as an Everyday form of Queer and Critical Education for Liberation**

As I shared in the literature review, in the research on LGBTQ+ chosen family and kinship research, with few exceptions (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, Beyer, et al., 2013; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015; Soler et al., 2018; Weston, 1997), little attention is paid to the ways in which people are challenged to grow, encounter differences in social location, life experience, or perspective. What's more, even when inclusive of diverse participants (K. E. Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Soler et al., 2018; Stacey, 2005; Weston, 1997) with regard to social locations and attentive to the presence and importance of conflict and dissent within chosen family relations (Greene, 2019; Kubicek, McNeeley, et al., 2013; Levitt et al., 2015), most studies did not take up a detailed examination of the being with and learning from difference within relations studied. Therefore, not only did few studies really get into the nitty-gritty of such challenging conversations, but even fewer did so in ways that centered the relationships themselves.

I see this as related to the fear of open conflict within white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021), already discussed by Concetta and me in previous chapters. I see not rocking the boat, going-along-to-get-along, keeping the peace, or agreeing to disagree as a micro-level manifestation of fearing open conflict, which I see also a part of what Lorde (2007) names the "institutionalized rejection of difference," the institutionalized, cultural-political socialization that

depends on all people being “programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing” (p. 115). Lorde contends that part of internalizing the “fear and loathing” default approach to the differences “between us” involves learning to “handle” difference in “one of three ways: ignore it, if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant or destroy it if we think it is subordinate” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115). In this way, when we avoid challenging someone’s perspectives and/or actions that we find problematic, we proactively prevent the growth and transformation made possible by engaging dissent and difference.

I do see folks, myself included, trying to actively unlearn this and do something different with each other and others. From what I heard and witnessed from participants in this project, people are engaging, even embracing struggle in the form of challenge as care. Through challenging each other’s lived experiences, perspectives, and actions, queer kin are inviting each other into deeper, more complex, relational thinking, learning, and moving for collective liberation, and in no singular direction. Their challenging each other brings to life an everyday queer, liberatory pedagogy and critical community building practice that is about engaging and experiencing care. Challenge is care because it is out of a belief in and desire for being with and moving more fully together for collective liberation and because by taking it up in ways that are informed by the value-practices of authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, as well as joy.

### **Difference as Enriching**

As Gadelha (2018) states, often when talking about friendships (though I would argue extends to include any relationship), we tell a story of people showing “their differences to each other” as a moment of “proof” as “the ritual moment in which friendship can survive or not-overcoming difference” (p. 11). I agree with Gadelha’s (2018) contention that this is problematic because in telling this story, “we still insist on an imagery that regulates ... affective bounds by the principle of the *uno*, the ‘common’: the overcoming of what is trouble-making by the disruption of difference” (p. 11). But rather than position difference as something to “survive” or

“overcome,” participants position and engage difference in the way Lorde (2007) called us to— as “a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening” (p. 45).

I think of what Trae said about how different he and Mani are. Alex said similar things about Sophie. While Parker talked about some of the shared experiences he, Concetta, and Loni have as assigned female-at-birth firstborns, all three emphasized an understanding of and attentiveness to their differences in positionality and lived experiences with regard to race, gender, and ability to name a few. Green, Tree, Holden, Morgan, and JuJu, despite sharing a number of socio-historical positionalities/locations as Black queer and trans people, also expressed an appreciation for their differences in where they grew up (rural Northern, Southern, urban Northern), their ages, their being parents or not, etc., talked at length about how they learned from them. This was similarly the case for Nicole and Tomi, who emphasized their different family experiences and how they each understood and expressed their gender.

I see this centering and valuing of difference evident in all the chapters, but I think there is something significant about how it shows up in care. How folks show up for and with each other, through care, around their differing needs in terms of support *and* in terms of struggle has a direct bearing on the possibilities that come through that care. Caring for and with each other in a way that is attentive to difference, not as a problem or barrier, not as a void to be filled or a problem to be fixed or a playing field to be leveled, brings folks to interdependent relational work that is a more fertile ground for collective liberation.

Rather than a charitable helping out or a collective care that requires that those similarly positioned all feel, care for, and need in the exactly the same way with each other, a reverence for and an attentiveness to difference allows folk to be show up/receive support and challenge distinct, shifting, and ranging ways. Through centering and learning from and with each other’s differences, folk see what world(s) exist presently in ways that offer insights into how they might move in multiple interdependent ways, together and with others, to bring into life and travel to other world(s). For this reason, I see the strength and possibility of care experienced and



engaged with/in and through these relationships, then hinging on this centering of and reverence for difference.

### **Reciprocity and Mutuality as Uneven**

Relatedly, folks expressed an understanding of interdependence that resonated with brown's (2017), one where "interdependence is not about the equality of offers in real time" (p. 95). In talking about interdependence, brown (2017) shares her experience healing from an ectopic pregnancy with the support of community. In recounting this experience, brown (2017) states that she, during her healing process, had to ask for support from folk who she "wouldn't be able to offer anything to in the foreseeable future" (p. 95). She explained that she ended up being able to ask for that support by learning to "trust in that karma-ish idea that the support I've offered in the past, or will offer in the future, would balance this scale, which felt so me-tilted" (brown, 2017, p. 95). She shared that it was through repeatedly offering up "my small self," she was "held in big ways" (brown, 2017, p. 95).

In the same chapter on interdependence, brown (2017) poses two powerful questions for reflection: "Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?" and "Are you actively practicing generosity and vulnerability in order to make the connections between you and others clear, open, available and durable?" In what participants share about how they are engaging and experiencing care as support and struggle, I see them answering both of these questions with a resounding yes, particularly in how they allow for unevenness when it comes to reciprocity, which, in a way, is a relational form of difference.

Parker shared this recognition of differences in lived experiences and capacities informing expectations around mutuality and reciprocity. In one focus group, in talking about how he and Concetta navigate care with each other and others, he said,

I appreciate the ways that we've been able to structure things within our relationship, knowing that at some point, somebody's going to have a 25th hour in the day depending

on what is going on in our lives and world and that it's not about reciprocity, being that it's not going to be, the idea is that the need is hopefully going to be met somewhere and that it's not going to be 100% or 50% of the person 100% of the time. So having that understanding and knowing how disability and neurodivergence are going to inform our capacity and being able to extend that kind of empathy.

Green expressed something similar when talking about supporting Holden, Tree, Morgan, and JuJu when they are feeling over-extended or just don't have the capacity, explaining that they feel good about tagging in on the work and figuring out among the group and with others how folks can tap in because they believe in the abundance of the whole and can trust that "that when I need to tap out, that will allow folks to show up for me more fully." For them, this practice of trusting the long-haul and the group and larger community to shift and hold each other and what is needed is about moving out of scarcity into abundant thinking. "I'm pouring in and ... It's reciprocal pouring," they explained, "Like, here's a little bit. Here's a little bit. You know? Let's stay on it."

Concetta also expressed this not expecting folks to offer support "back" or show up equally in real-time or linearly and said that, for them, it was about not holding each other to "unreasonable standards" because folks are existing and moving in an inequitable societal set up that falls on folks differently. Reciprocity, a balanced mutuality when it comes to care offerings, they continued, "sometimes doesn't happen" in real-time or in the same way it was "given" over the course of certain relationships. They linked this to an understanding of the unevenness of the impact of systems of oppression and privilege. "It's important to keep system-level problems in mind, especially in interpersonal relationships," they explained. As already discussed at length in solidarity, for Concetta as a white person and a person who is read in the world as cis and has a lot of privilege and access, their offering acts of care is informed by a critical reflexive relational practice wherein they often think about and pay attention to "what my loved ones are negotiating, especially as people of color, as Black people,

as people who are having very different days and experiences than me.” This makes me think about Relational Uprising’s (n.d.) contention that we have larger ecosystems of relationality so that folks are all getting their needs met without expecting each relationship to be able to give them all their needs or have an “exact” balanced one-to-one reciprocity. In systems as inequitable as ours, I believe we are both challenged to reconceive what reciprocity and mutuality are and look like while also co-creating kin groups, communities, and networks large enough where we can really care for each other.

For Concetta, Green, Parker, and others, recognizing how the quality of one’s days and experiences “seriously impacts how someone can show up” was foundational to engaging and experiencing care particularly as it related to differences in being able to offer support and needing to receive. Even in relationships where folks shared multiple positionalities, this understanding of reciprocity not always being possible in real time or at all was shared by Nicole and Green. Nicole said of her partnership with Tomi, “there’s a reciprocity, right, and, reciprocity is not always an equivalence, it’s not necessarily a parallel equivalence. It’s not, in terms of what one brings to the fold or to the table, a 50-50.”

By pushing back on reciprocity as always an even and balanced exchange, I see participants as disrupting imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero patriarchal ableist notions that shape our ideas around mutuality in relationships, offering instead a queer, critical, decolonial, feminist understanding, where acts aren’t always (nor should they be) measurable, time is not linear, and relationships are always more than a “site” or point of meeting for singular individuals to exchange acts with each other. Simply put, care doesn’t have to be “even” for a relationship to be mutually beneficial, nor should it. If anything, care as mutual aid and not charity, care as engaged and experienced through support and struggle, is about grounding ourselves in an understanding that our liberation is always bound up in each other’s which, makes supporting and struggling with/in and through our relationships always about the good of the whole, which, always, also includes us.

I see the embracing of and learning from difference and the valuing of unevenness as a way of understanding and embodying a queer, decolonial, anti-capitalist, anti-ableist (among other things) living into abundance, where the “more” that we co-create with one another isn’t the presence of more measurable, evenly disbursed relational inter-actions. Instead, I see the abundance brought to life through queer kinship solidarity relationship as a liberation praxis as one that is about living and moving in right relation(s) with each other, others, and the world in varied, multiple, complex, interdependent ways. And as I’ve said before, I see this abundance as something we co-create, cultivate, foster, bring to life, and tap into all at once—abundance alive in us, between us, and also larger than us.

### **Conclusion**

Participant pairings and groups engaged and experienced care as both support and struggle. In terms of care as support, participant pairings and groups shared narratives about their engagement and experiences of supporting each other’s wellness and joy. With regard to care as struggle, folks shared narratives around experiencing or engaging challenge, with folks challenging each other’s world views, perspectives, and show-ups with regard to systems of power and oppression. Present in the politicizing of care was push back on the all-too-common narrative that care, as it exists in queer kinship, is only political if it is born from a place of absence or lack in the given families of those in queer kinship together. Instead, as evident in the narratives, the care at work and working with/in queer kinship is political because of the possibilities made possible through it. Lastly, participant pairings and groups offer expansions to commonly held ideas about care and commonality and care and reciprocity that are in alignment with queer, decolonial, anti-capitalist, and critical disability frameworks. Through centering and valuing difference and the uncommon as well as the unevenness in reciprocity and mutuality, participants give and receive care in varied, multiple, dimensional, ever-shifting, nonlinear ways, which allow for a living with/in and through relationship in a way that embodies abundant interdependence.

## CHAPTER XII: CONNECTION

Liberated relationships are one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, the understanding that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging, to be in our dignity, and to be safe in community. (brown, 2019, p. 403)

Birdsong (2020), in *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*, offers an important caveat with regard to the relationships featured in the text and the insights they offer. She writes, “As with all things centered on people and relationships, nothing we create together with our whole selves, our baggage and damage, our dreams and passions is going to be clear or static or definitive” (p. 23). She adds, “Not only are there not limited ways of creating family and community but there are not limited ways of staying family and community. It’s all mutable and evolving” (p. 23). This is true of the participant queer kin pairings and groupings of this project as well. While some of them remain in the configurations they were in during focus groups, others have shifted and transformed. Folks have experienced everything from reconnecting, returning to, and retaining each other in new ways, to letting go of each other and/or shifting their relationship(s). Much of these shifts happened in the time between the last focus groups and my beginning writing and analysis. Some folks shared updates and details with me during follow-up conversations, giving me consent to include them in the project, while others did not.

While I have already shared some of these updates and will discuss them in some more detail here, this chapter focuses mostly on what participants shared during focus groups. In this chapter, using a hybrid of vignettes and perspectives shared and thus falling somewhere in between the formats of the care and trust chapters, I flesh out how participants experience and engage connection with/in and through queer kinship as both a holding on and letting go.

## **Connection as Holding On and Letting Go**

Connection is complex. And yet, as I've discussed in other portions of this dissertation, the privileging of linear time, quantifiable relational exchange, and real-time physical presence, interaction, and verbal communication has a strong hold on our conventional conceptualizations of "successful" relational connections. When it comes to chosen family and alliance/solidarity/coalition relationships (Black et al., 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Van Dyke & Amos, 2017), we only consider relationships "successful" if they are "active," "reciprocal," "productive," and "long-lasting." Sometimes exceptions are made if the relationship has at least some of these components. For example, if a relationship has been shorter in length or duration but has been particularly powerful in what folks have done and are doing with/in and through it, it could be viewed as successful. Similarly, if a relationship hasn't "done" a great deal, it might still be considered successful if the connection remains active and has lasted over a long period of time because the promise of future productivity is still there. But if/when a relationship ends, except in the case of someone dying, while folks might value what was "done" with/in and through it, the relationship itself is usually deemed a failure.

The participant kin pairings and groups in this project challenge these narrow ideas about what makes a relationship strong and worth learning from/with regard to living relationally for liberation by sharing the complex and varied ways they are staying in and shifting in connection with each other. Through holding on through reconnection, retaining, and returning to each other after accountability *and* letting go through releasing and reconfiguring their relations, I witness participant kin pairings and groupings challenging conventional ideas around connection. I see them pushing back on and expanding the ways we think about relational endings, success, and post-conflict transformation.

### **Connection as Holding On**

Staying in "active" connection relationally in an individualistic society that values only certain relational bonds and configurations isn't easy. Staying in "active" connection across lines

of difference in a society that positions sameness and what is common as the “glue” that holds folks together is even more challenging. Staying in “active” connection in a world and context where your relationships and ways of being with each other threaten the dominant culture, well, you get the point. As discussed throughout this dissertation, participant kin pairings and groups are living and working for more liberatory worlds with/in and through their relationships. Thinking of this, what matters in maintaining connection isn’t only *that* folks are staying connected, but *how* they are doing so. The sections that follow will look at how participants are experiencing and engaging connection as a holding on, staying in connection through reconnection, retaining, and returning to each other through the busyness of life, the demands of hardship as well as after mistakes, transgression, and conflict.

### ***Reconnection: There’s a Flow Between the Two of Us***

Many of us can relate to how the busyness of life, the business of working and taking care of our day-to-day needs and those of the loved ones who depend on us, can be all-consuming, leaving us little time for much else. In a capitalist society that is so steeped in individualism, this is often an isolating and relationally fragmenting experience. Our culture encourages putting work first and is a significant part of the mythology of the American Dream. The messaging goes, work hard (in competition with others) toward your (individual) dreams and then take care of your (nuclear and maybe extended) bio/legal family. Going back to what I shared in the value-practice of joy, having loving, meaningful, nourishing, joyful connection is only for after the work is done, on weekends, and during vacations, when it has been “earned.” And so it is no wonder that people at “best” take up relationship hierarchies and, at worst, put all relationships, even the ones deemed important, on the back burner.

Dropping relational connections to the wayside and sometimes never picking them back up is common, particularly among folks who fit into Birdsong’s (2020) conceptualization of the American Dream isolationist nuclear family. In our culture, for a great many folks who are married, especially those with children and who remain in active relationships with extended

family, relationships that do not take the form of bio/legal family are considered not as “permanent” or important. With these relationships positioned as extra, even when folks do reconnect, it is often in a way that relegates them to a secondary or tertiary position in the hierarchy of relationships, with the get-togethers and conversations staying “light” and “passing” rather than inclusive of authentic, deep, engagement, and connection.

While life’s day-to-day responsibilities take a toll on Mani and Trae, leading them to go months without seeing each other, they don’t see the months that pass as hindering their connection because of *how* they come back together. When going through the collage that Trae created about their relationship, Mani made a point to say to me, “for all of these pictures, there’s sometimes a month or a few months where we don’t see each other.” They emphasized that all it takes for them to reconnect after these long stretches of not being together is for one of them to just reach out and ask the other, “what are you doing?” and for one of them to offer up plans to meet. Mani explained that they don’t have this with everyone, stating that their closest relationships stay close because they are able to spend time together more consistently. But with Trae, seeing each other in person, while great when it happens, isn’t necessary for them to stay close, to stay in queer kinship.

Mani attributes this unique ability of their relationship to go months without being “alive” in person to the energy always alive between them and within the relationship. “There’s a flow between the two of us,” Mani said, explaining that it was something they couldn’t really put into words, “it’s just the way I feel in Trae’s presence.” Trae also spoke to this embodied, emotional, felt a sense of connection when talking about how he knows Mani is family to him. “With chosen family versus biological family, it’s more experiences or other more ephemeral things that tie you together,” he said, adding, “so it’s a little bit hard for me to put it into words.” He went on to explain that “as opposed to a document or a family tree telling me that this person is family,” the connection being real is just something that he knows because “I experience it.” Rather than being tied together by blood lines or even recognized shared experiences, for example, having



grown up together or gone to school together, Mani and Trae seemingly stumbled upon each other through mutual friends and have been consistently choosing and coming back together through the ebbs and flows of life ever since.

After focus groups ended, when I checked back in with Trae and Mani; they hadn't gotten together in person yet, both because of the busyness of life and because of the weight of the pandemic on their time, energy, and ability to go out together like they typically do. Mani works in healthcare and Trae in higher education. They've been "working" in person almost the entirety of the pandemic, and that has taken a toll, particularly on Mani. But Trae shared with me that when he was asked by one of their mutual friends to illustrate a book about a two-spirit young person's coming out experience, he naturally thought of Mani when creating and bringing the character to life, particularly in one picture. "I had Mani in mind," Trae told me, "for the one picture when Sam felt like Samantha and felt happy, so I created Samantha and Samantha in the picture is 90s, very pink, fierce, hyper feminized, really embodying Mani's energy" (see Figure 20). When they got back together, Trae showed Mani the picture, and Mani loved it. When there was a virtual book launch party, Mani made time in their busy schedule to hop on. "I wanted to honor Mani and what they have taught me," Trae told me, "they are always with me and I'm always with them, in all our iterations and evolutions as people and in the work that we do."

**Figure 20. Trae's Illustration of Samantha Inspired by Mani**



I see the possibility model offered by Mani and Trae as challenging conventional ideas of “strong” “successful” relationships and friendships both in regard to queer chosen family and in regard to alliance/solidarity/coalition relationships in a couple of ways. For one, they are serving as inconsistent constants in each other’s lives and experiences and do not experience this as a weakness but a strength. They describe the felt sense of flow and openness between them not as a strength because of what it is working “around” but because of what it makes possible in their lives as family to each other and in their working together and with others for a more socially just world. They experience their relationship as a flow, a connection in which they are able to engage in varied ways. An engagement that includes the more “active” or in-person, in-depth engagements that involve critical conversations, questioning, and challenges and more “distant” or “separated” kinds of being and moving with each other and the relationship through reflecting on, thinking of, and applying the learning they have had from one another in other relationships and spaces.

Mani and Trae, like other minoritized/marginalized families, I’m thinking especially of migrant/immigrant families and low-income families, can at times be separated by the limitations of structural barriers (capitalism’s impact on time, proximity, and capacity. But they do not see their way of being family in these times of disconnect or absence as weak. They are a kind of family that flows and does so in a way that doesn’t make their relationship any less important, grounding, or world-making.

***Reconnection: We Allow that Room***

While, as I discussed in the value-practice of dignity, serving as caretakers of Tomi’s parents was important to both Nicole and Tomi, Tomi made a point to share that in taking up this work together, her and Nicole’s connection had been “literally engulfed” in the lives of her parents. Tomi shared that it wasn’t until her dad’s passing that she and Nicole realized “how much of us had gotten lost in the family dynamic.” This realization led Tomi and Nicole on a path to reconnection. “Even though you’re living together and you’re sleeping together and you’re

hugging and you're kissing and you're loving and all of that," Tomi said, looking at me over Zoom, "you can be disconnected ... and still be really, really close." Offering herself compassion around this disconnection, she added, "I emotionally had a lot going on, I mentally had a lot going on, I physically had a lot going on. I had to take on, you know, caregiving, selling properties, selling cars ... it was a lot."

The toll of caretaking, as with most things in our society, falls unevenly. As Milli et al. (2022) report, "In a world where Black women are already expected to perform unpaid labor, beyond their physical and emotional means, the (COVID-19) crisis has stretched their bodies and capacities in ways we may never understand." Similarly, a report completed in 2021 by the National Alliance for Caregiving, *National Analysis of Diverse Families Reveals How Systemic Inequities Impact Caregivers*, indicated that "African American caregivers were less likely to receive respite, a critical need especially for families who live in the same household as the person who needs care" (para. 11). Though Nicole and Tomi extended each other compassion and understanding around how the enormous and all-consuming responsibility of caretaking had impacted their partnership, they still made a point to acknowledge how large the disconnection loomed. "We weren't always hearing each other even though we were talking to one another," Tomi confessed.

Tomi explained how in their journey toward reconnection they had to start "rehearing each other, revisualizing the things that we as a couple need to do to stay a couple." Foundational to this work of reconnection then was the ability to "speak honestly" to each other as well as sit with, actively listen to and hold with critical curiosity each other's whole and complex feelings around how things have been and how they were currently in order to find a different way forward. "We allow that room," Tomi explained; "you have to be willing to do that," she said. Holding this space and engaging with each other in reconnection, being radically honest, whole, and present with each other in the challenging process of reconnecting and healing the pain and harm caused by not always showing up as their best selves because of

being at capacity isn't easy. But as difficult as it can be to reconnect in this way, Tomi and Nicole experience their connection as strong because of their willingness to grow and go forward differently rather than just continue to go through the motions and lean on their legal commitment.

In hearing about how they were making time for recognizing what had been lost, finding their way back to each other, and engaging deeply around pain and disconnection, I witnessed them sharing how they were re-committing to valuing-practicing authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy. Whether they were eating take-out together at home, together at a gig of Tomi's enjoying her music and dancing outside, doing chores together, or watching cartoons again, they were intentionally coming back to each other *and* doing so with renewed honesty, intentionality, and wholeness. Folks don't always make this choice, choosing to be present and honest with what has been and what is, to stay open and engaged in the moment. To go back to the example of Friday night drinks, to decide to value and practice joy together, to dignify each other and the relationship when the world asks and takes so much from them and devalues their partnership as Black lesbian women who are childfree, is revolutionary.

While they could be seen as inhabiting many mainstream norms with regard to partnership and family, in their caretaking work and in their choice to reconnect and prioritize their partnership as a married couple, I again see them as taking up queer in the way Ahmed (2006) defines it, by inhabiting these norms differently. They don't rely on traditional scripts and the bond of legal marriage to get them "through" to keep their relationship "going." Instead, they see themselves as making an active choice to continue to grow and transform in their connection, one that requires them to take up presence, honesty, openness, emotional attentiveness, conscious engagement, as well as acts of care, rest, and joy, with others, in solitude, and together, etc. They were never abandoning their work in social justice. They did the work they could where they could in the ways and the worlds that they could. Furthermore, their shifting to caretake and now to heal, grieve, and reconnect is also liberation work. They are

taking the opportunities before them in each moment, making shifts along the way so as to stay present with each other, others, and the world, and the work of liberation in ways that honor, dignify, support, *and* nourish all in all of their relations.

***Retaining: What You Do Next is Most Important***

“I think back to our most recent cabin trip last year,” Concetta said, looking down slightly, as they began recalling a time when they “transgressed.” I could tell that they weren’t going into detail about what took place since recalling this moment was hard for them. Concetta simply said that they hadn’t done something they said they would, something integral to the trip, and in addition to having fallen off of their responsibility, they weren’t stepping up and taking account for their actions or trying to solve the issue. Instead, they sat silently in the room while everyone was trying to figure out how to move forward. “I didn’t show up in a way that I should’ve shown up,” they said, and despite having let folks down, Concetta was shown grace and support. “They weren’t looking at me like I’m some irreparable, broken piece of garbage because I fucked up,” Concetta shared, “people were retaining me.” But it wasn’t only the grace and the problem-solving that meant a lot to Concetta, nor was it that they forgave Concetta and continued to see them as whole, human, and worthy of connection; it was also that they were still held in the relationship in a way where they would be able to “show back up, the next time, and next time, and next time despite having been harmful to people I really love and care about.”

Like Concetta, Loni also saw their experiences of being retained through transgression and conflict as critical moments. These moments were especially meaningful to Loni and others because this being retained in accountability was different from what they grew up with. “In my family of origin,” they explained, there was “a lot of shame tied to doing something perceived as wrong or perceived as making a mistake.” In Loni’s family, as is the case for many folks, accountability was “punitive” with “physical and emotional consequences.” In queer kinship, however, Loni experiences accountability as challenging but also always loving, as being retained in the ways Concetta described. “In this configuration,” Loni elaborated,

folks care enough to say, “Hey, these things are not feeling good, how ‘bout we do this a different way” or “I know from conversations you say you value these things, and it’s not showing up in the way you think so how bout we think about doing this some other kind of way.”

Loni expressed a deep appreciation for the authenticity, honesty, and willingness to engage conflict as generative and accountability as transformational. They emphasized how these experiences of connection through being retained have fundamentally shifted how they approach relationships, “I feel like it’s ... a turning point or transformational point for me,” they said, “to level up in how I show up in kinship with folks.”

Parker, adding to what Concetta and Loni shared, said of post-transgression accountability, “The difference is not the transgression because that is always going to be something that happens but what happens afterward. What you do next is the most important.” Loni chimed in, “Yes, it’s what happens next.” For Concetta, Parker, and Loni, this retaining each other through “post-transgression” accountability is a big part of how they are engaging and experiencing connection; it is how they see themselves as “planning to be together in the future” by practicing that future together in “practicing fucking up together” now. Informed by transformative justice and abolitionist frameworks, they recognize that there will be mistakes made and harm and pain caused, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes intentionally, because of unhealed trauma and system socialization. Parker said of this, “we all have the capacity to be the oppressor and the oppressed, the harmer and the person harmed, we’ve done it all, we’ve all negotiated all of that space.” Moving from a healing justice framework, they recognize how systems are alive inside of them and how they, as much as they are working on unlearning them, still enact their violence on each other. And so they see themselves as doing the best they can to offer grace and retain each other in the process of conflict, in the process of accountability, and in the “post” of it all.

### ***Return: We Can Find Accountability and Come Back Together***

Similar to Concetta, Parker, and Loni, Green, Morgan, Holden, and Tree talked about how their relationships have offered them more liberatory possibilities when it comes to reconnection after mistakes, transgression, or conflict.

In sharing that they experience this configuration “as a grounding rock for me to come back to in regards to what type of families I want to create and be a part of,” Morgan made particular mention of how these queer kin relationships encouraged them to revisit past conflicts and fall outs that “are at my back,” and that “feel really hard to go back to or that I’m really fearful of.” They expressed that they’ve learned from Holden, Green, Tree, and JuJu that revisiting conflicts or having them to begin with can be hard, but “it’s ok” and “it’s necessary.” Furthermore, they shared through being in relation with these folks and witnessing these folks and their relationships with each other and others has taught them that taking distance or releasing a relationship at times post-conflict or transgression doesn’t have to mean a “forever cut off or cancel.” They said that instead, what they have come to believe and move toward, is believing in returning to folks, holding on to the belief that there can sometimes be “a possibility of reconnection.”

Holden similarly talked about how they have learned about connection as a returning to after conflict and accountability. “A fuck up doesn’t have to be detrimental, or the ending of a connection,” they explained, “we can actually find accountability and come back together ... I appreciate that there can be points of return.” Holden added that even if a return to the relationship in the same form isn’t desired or possible, “we at least can move in some level of alignment as comrades who traverse the same landscape together.” They expressed gratitude for this aspect of some of their experiences of the larger QTBIPOC North Carolina organizing “universe,” stating, “I appreciate that in general about doing (movement) work in North Carolina. Even when it’s messy, it doesn’t feel like it’s messiness beyond repair.”

**Figure 21. Pinky Promise to Symbolize Connection from JuJu's Collage**



Green brought some more levity and complexity to this discussion of conflict and fallouts, sharing how they and others “still hold on” to each other in the midst of fallouts and conflicts but not necessarily always in a way that is about processing and repairing or resolving the conflict, transgression, disagreement right then and there. “Even when we fall out,” they said, giggling, “and like your body is really away from me ... like I don’t want to fuck with you, but let me get your pinky, though.” They continued, saying, “you don’t, we don’t gotta talk about it,” they continued, “but can we hold pinkies, can you sit right next to me, do you wanna share space? You can be in the other room where I can see you, but we don’t gotta deal with each other.” While they were joking, what they were saying was significant. Sometimes we may still want to be close to each other and not want to hash out a conflict. This doesn’t necessarily mean we are avoiding things; it can just be that we are wanting to be with and not feel like we have to have it all figured out, resolved, sorted, etc. What Green shared makes all the more evident how holding on to each other through reconnection, retaining, and returning can look (and feel) many ways.

Going back to Songbird’s (2020) assertion about the complexity of “staying” chosen family and community, there isn’t a recipe or perfect formula for how to “stay” connected, reconnect, experience, heal, and grow with regard to transgression, mistakes, conflicts, etc. Folks hold on to each other, reconnect through retaining and returning to in complex ways. Be it flow, or conscious coming together, staying with/in in the midst of it all, taking space and coming



back to, or being together while also taking space, it is all nuanced and varied. I see these stories, as I will discuss in more detail in concluding sections, as expanding our ideas of what makes a connection “strong” or “successful” and even what makes a relationship connected.

### **Connection as Letting Go**

People aren’t only with us when they are physically present. People often talk about feeling and carrying loved ones with them after they cease to exist in this world. I often also hear folks talk about being connected to folks who are alive but far away through being reminded of them, hearing their voice, trying to make them proud, channeling them, etc. I’ve been in organizing and educational spaces where people are invited to share about the people who got them to that space, who they are bringing into the space, and who they are going to return to and serve after the work in the space is over. We are always connected, interconnected, across planes, across time, and space. And yet, as I wrote earlier, with few exceptions, in our writing about and talking about chosen kinship relationships and alliance/solidarity/coalitional relationships, we reserve our reverence and value for “on-going,” “active,” “long-standing,” “serious,” or “deep” connections. We position these relationships as the exemplary ones to learn from because to have the relationship end means the connection is over; thus, there is nothing more to learn from the people involved with regard to being “connected” and living with/in that connection for a different world. But I disagree.

I’ve had my fair share of queer kin “breakups” and “fallouts.” Some have been mutual; others have not. Some have been painful and messy. Others have been more intentional, up front, and loving. In what I’m hearing from participants, connection is present, engaged, and experienced *in* letting go and beyond it. Put another way, while folks appear to be ending certain kinds of relationships with each other, they can be engaging and experiencing connection as a release or reconfiguration that allows for shifting or reformulating, that holds on to hope and belief in collective transformation and collective liberation. I believe that from what participants share about engaging and experiencing connection as letting go, we can learn a great deal

about the ways we can be living together for a different world in how we “end” or shift our relationships.

### ***Connection as Release***

One of the definitions for release offered by Oxford Languages is to “allow (something) to move, act, or flow freely” (Release, n.d.). An additional definition Oxford Languages offers that I find interesting and fitting for this discussion of connection is that of release: “to allow (something) to return to its resting position by ceasing to put pressure on it” (Release, n.d.). Participants in this project experienced relational release over the course of the project as well as after and also shared insights from the experiences they had with others in the past. And I heard, perhaps because of the valuing of collective liberation and the deep belief in and practice of interconnectedness, an understanding of connection as present with/in and through release. This was especially the case in Parker, Loni, and Concetta’s group.

“Within this whole idea of chosen is that you can be un-chosen, right?” Parker said, looking into the camera at me, “So there is something to that, something I think we’re rubbing against.” He continued, “you know, no one is gonna get rid of you, you’re not disposable, but you might be on time out,” he said, laughing, “Or I might have to love you from afar.” “People make different decisions,” Parker said when talking about relational ruptures where folks don’t retain each other or return to the relationship, “they make different decisions for their time, resources, and capacities that they have, learning ... what is reasonable.” He paused, looking down, and then looked back into the camera, “What it is that we are committing to, committed to, is change and being variant, in ways that are challenging at times.”

Parker, Concetta, and Loni experienced a release of a relationship over the course of the project, with the person who they were in queer kinship with, who also was once participating, leaving their configuration after a rupture and subsequent fallout. And while folks didn’t want to get into the specifics of it, you could see it was difficult and tender. Loni said of the fallout, “There was a rupture in that relationship, and I don’t think either of us were in the place

to do the work of repair at the time.” Later they added, “Personally, I still hope that one day repair can happen, but I’m not sure if/when it will.”

There are times when retaining and returning don’t happen. Sometimes it is because it isn’t mutually desired. Sometimes it is because the harm and damage done need a substantial time to be or breathe. Other times the relationship just needs to take, as Parker stated, a more distant kind of connection. But going back to my earlier points, I don’t think that this means a complete end to the connection, nor do I think there aren’t things that are still living between folks, learnings/teachings, healing, growth, radical hope, and love. What I hear from Parker and Loni is that through releasing a relationship, letting go in order for energies, capacities, and time to be in alignment with what folks can do or need or want to do, there is born an expansive kind of connectedness, one that has me thinking about the kind of ecosystems and movements we can build if we don’t always require ourselves to be in “direct” “active” connection to consider a connection valuable.

When I listen to this releasing, this loving from afar, with a belief in an extended interdependence that still moves toward collective liberation regardless of if repair and/or return take place, I hear an engaging and experiencing of letting go that isn’t completely letting go. It feels almost like letting out the string on a kite. The kite goes further out, but because it is further out, it is both smaller and bigger, less rattled by gusts of wind, and able to soar and float in new ways.

### ***Connection as Reformulation***

In focus groups and follow-ups, participants also discussed how they experienced connection as letting go in the form of shifts and reformulations. As I wrote about earlier, some participants, over the course of some of their relationships, have been many things to each other.

**Hugging it Out and Moving From There.** Holden and Green shared that this had been the case for them. While talking about fallouts and accountability, Holden talked about an

awkward moment that, in retrospect, felt both funny while inviting some beautiful reflection about the power of finding new ways back to each other.

“Green was doing a project on intimacy and radical politics,” Holden began. The project was a multi-phase, multimedia project designed to shift how marginalized communities and individuals coexist and practice care and healing through exploring the impact of intimacy on their lives on various levels (i.e., physically, spiritually, mentally, and kinesthetically). The project directly engaged folks through installations aimed at “teaching the importance of self (and community) care and healing in social justice work.” One such installation invited the social justice workers in attendance to hug each other for extended periods of time. Holden participated in this portion, as did another person with whom they and Green both had had a sexual relationship. They explained that this moment in the project felt to them like a beautiful expression of how folks are able to come back together and find new ways of intimacy after falling out or breaking up. They said that though it felt funny and awkward at the time, the fact that they all “ended up in this intimacy space together” allowed them to, through that space and subsequent other interactions, reconfigure their connections with Green and the other person, to find new ways forward.

Green, in reflecting on messy moments with Holden through their sexual relationship and after, joked, “it ain’t all been easy ... Felt like I had to snatch Holden’s ass a couple time.” But they expressed that what is powerful about the queer kinship relationship that they have is that they can shift and reconfigure and reformulate so that “endings” aren’t necessarily “endings.” “Through it all,” Holden explained, “we’ve been able to find that right balance in these relationships.” Rather than feeling like “I have to cut you off because of XYZ thing,” Holden added, “it’s like, ‘no, let’s talk about it, where the disconnect happened and how do we want to be in relationship to each other now and move from there.’”

**A Beautiful Opportunity.** In following up with Alex and Sophie, I learned that they had, since our last focus group, ended their romantic relationship. Alex described the breakup and

the co-creating of their new relationship with Sophie now as a “reconfiguration,” one that “was actually an invitation for expansiveness.” While they described that there was an element of release to this transformation, they made a point to tell me that the releasing, for them, isn’t what “led.” Yes, “letting go of the shit that was hurting our balance with one another to make room (the expand part)” was important, they explained, but in the end, it was the process of figuring out together “how we can be more genuine with one another and ourselves” that “in the end ... enriches our bond.” Rather than seeing their romantic ending and the shift as weakening their commitment to Sophie, Alex emphasized that the queer kinship relationship they have with her is one they are committed to “keeping alive, however that may look.” Like Holden and Green, Alex expressed that though the shift was hard and painful at times, as shifts out of romantic partnerships can sometimes be, they feel excited about the transformation they are experiencing in connection with Sophie. In a world where “so much shit is not up to us to define,” they explained, “It’s something beautiful ... an opportunity.”

### **Expansions on Connection**

Participant kin pairings and groups in this project shared a complex understanding of connection. As people who are living and working for a more collectively liberatory world with each other and others, with/in and through their relationships, and as people who believe in and value interdependence, connection was conceptualized as more expansive than it is conventionally. Rather than seeing connection as something that is only present when people are in “active” communication and/or interaction with each other, they discussed being in shifting, transformative connections with people. This included both “active” relationships and those that might be seen as being disconnected because of fallout, ‘unresolved’ conflict, or breakup.

Additionally, a great many folks, because of their belief in collective liberation and healing/transformational justice, expressed a direct opposition to the kind of blame and disposability that is common in our culture. I hear folks trying to live in ways that are in

alignment with adrienne maree brown's (2020) words: "I want us to let go of the narrowness of innocence, widen our understanding of how harm moves through us" (para 80). I see them, through their relational work with each other and others, answering brown's (2020) call for us to "see individual acts of harm as symptoms of systemic harm, and to do what we can do collectively to dismantle the systems and get as many of us free as possible" (p. 51).

No, folks do not always have the "time, or emotional capacity, to walk each path together," but in the way they are releasing and shifting relationships, I see them doing what they can for everyone's healing and transformation, fortifying themselves, the relationships that they are "actively" in, while still holding onto hope and radical love for the relationships they let go of, trusting the larger community to hold close the folks that they can't.

### **Abolition Starts with Abolishing the Cops in Our Head**

Thinking back to trust and Brené Brown's (2012) marble jar friends, we have a tendency in conventional society to view relational injuries from conflict or transgression as taking a hit at or draining trust. Conventionally the understanding is that if there is an injury due to a relational conflict or an inconsistency in showing up, there is, as my mother says, "a hole in the bucket," and all the trust in the relationship comes running out. If folks are able to repair, the understanding is that they are starting from scratch but with more difficulty since there is an injury to the relationship as a container for trust. If folks do choose to repair, there is often a significant power imbalance between the person who did the damage and the person hurt. This can lead to the person being held responsible for damaging the relationship having to atone and "make up for" the harm done in a way that is punitive, engaging carceral logics with the person who transgressed doing "time," paying for and having to prove themselves worthy of a more restored or full connection again.

Participant pairings and groups in queer kinship in this project not only didn't engage conflict as a terrible inevitability that needed to be feared, but they also, informed by abolitionist and transformative justice frameworks, pushed back on the carceral logics that frame the people

more responsible for conflict, transgression, disappointment, or damage done to the relationship as less worthy of care, connection, or support. They did not wield relationships as rewards or take them away as punishments. Instead, they engage conflict as generative and relational transgression, damage, and disappointment as opportunities to transform interdependently and relationally. Even in cases when relationships ended or shifted, participants did not exercise the ending as a value judgment on the person's worthiness of love and care by others or on the relationship as "failed," "bad," or "wrong." I heard and saw folks, even in the most challenging "endings," still holding on to the other person's and the relationship's power, still believing in transformation, even if they couldn't be actively a part of or engaged in it at that time.

### **Relational Endings: Beyond Success and Failure**

There isn't space in our society for grieving the end of non-marital, non-romantic relationships in particular. Senior (2022), in a recent article titled, "It's Your Friends Who Break Your Heart," wrote that when it comes to ending friendships in our culture, it is almost cliché to note that there are "no rituals to observe, no paperwork to do, no boilerplate dialogue to crib from" (para 1). This has much to do with the relationship hierarchy we are socialized to ascribe to. As hooks (2000) argues, "many of us learn as children that friendship should never be seen as just as important as family ties" (p. 134). Friendship often gets further relegated to a back seat if/when folks enter into committed romantic relationships as we are told to, to give these bonds our "exclusive attention" (hooks, 2000, p. 135) as they will become sites where we form our own, "new" families. Even the need to grieve the end of queer romantic relationships that were not "marriages" isn't given substantial space. This is in part because of heterosexism and in part because queer romantic relationships that deviate from mainstream norms are seen as not as serious, particularly if they were non-monogamous or did not involve legal marriage.

What's more, society's belief in a black and white, right and wrong, and productivity and quantity view often leads to the ending of recognized, "valid," "important" relationships being reduced to a "failure." When talking about or thinking about these "failed" relationships, there is

usually one party or “side” being viewed as both “right” and “good” and the other being viewed as in the “wrong” or “bad.” The wrong or bad party is who folks view as the one responsible for ruining the relationship. This leads many to perpetuate narratives at the end of most relationships where the relationship, even if it had been once viewed as strong or good, now is a failure and perhaps wrong all along.

While people do harm, and there are cases where folks do serious damage to a relationship that cannot be repaired, it is this individual value judgment of that person as inherently “bad” and the simplistic framing of the entire relationship as “wrong” and “a failure” that I find problematic. The collapsing of the relationship as a failure or doomed/wrong from the start and the accompanying social sentencing of one person as an inherently bad human being is a micro-level perpetuation of carceral logics. To revisit the quote from Birdsong (2020) I included above, all relationships are made up of imperfect people and their “baggage and damage, our dreams and passions” (p. 23). We miss out on learning so much from past relationships and people when we collapse all the complexities and engage in blame, shame, and disposability rather than principled conflict, accountability, and community transformation. Through emphasizing their constant learning, healing, and transformation, participants push back on relational success as “arrival” and a positioning of any of their relationships as ideal finished models.

### **Conclusion**

Queer kin pairings and groups in this project shared and demonstrated ways of experiencing and engaging connection as a dynamic element that brought new insights, challenges, and expansions. I believe that what participants share can open up, and in some ways soften, our understanding of the role of relational connections in our living and working for a more liberatory world(s). In terms of connection being engaged and experienced as holding on, they demonstrated the varied ways folks experience and take up (re)connection. Through sharing their lived experiences of moving through transgression, conflict, and fallout, they also



brought to life how abolition and transformative justice starts at home. Lastly, through the ways they engage connection as release and reconfiguration, they push back on conventional ideas around relational endings, success, and failure. By sharing the ways they are holding on to and letting go of connection, I see the queer pairings and groups in this project taking up relational liberation work that embodies queer, decolonial, feminist, abolitionist, transformative justice-informed frameworks.

## CHAPTER XIII: CONCLUSION

There are ripple effects from the bonds that are created here ... it's like the more bonds that we create and the denser our bonds are, the more gravity we have for how we impact the world around us and this way of relating to each other. It's like the fractals of it, of this kind of way of being ... the waves you make keep spiraling up and out and spilling over into other places. - Loni

### **We Are Fractals**

Communities and the relationships that make them up are not only how we sustain ourselves in working for more liberatory worlds, but they are also where we bring those worlds to life in the present. As adrienne maree brown (2017) argues, "Our friendships and relationships are systems. Our communities are systems. Let's practice upwards" (p. 60). And yet, while the significance of relational liberation work is becoming more discussed in present works (Birdsong, 2020; brown, 2017, 2019), the ways in which folks are co-creating and moving toward more liberatory worlds together with/in and through their relationships is largely under-discussed and under-examined. We have much to learn about how we can take up living for the more socially just, liberatory worlds we dream of in all of the spaces that we inhabit with others, not only the spaces that we recognize as sites for social justice work.

I believe that the LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South participating in this project offer valuable insights into the expansive ways they are, with/in and through their relationships, taking up liberatory ways of being with each other, others, and the world. In living for liberation in this way, I believe they are, as Loni articulates above, engaging in brown's (2017) fractal conception, practicing a more liberatory future together at a small scale to reverberate to the largest scale. In short, they are engaging queer kinship solidarity relationships as liberation praxis.

While I was led to this project because of my own witnessing of the power of queer kinship solidarity, I set out to hear from and witness the experiences of those I know and love and the people they know and love. My research questions were: How are LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South doing/living queer kinship solidarity with/in and through their relationships; What might queer kinship solidarity relationships entail that is particularly unique due to the queerness of them, and; How do these relationships inform, sustain, and expand the social justice work done by those in the relationships with/in the relationship and “outside” of it?

I witnessed participants doing/living queer kinship solidarity through engaging and experiencing what I see as dynamic elements of trust, solidarity, care, and connection. Undergirding their engagement of and experience with these elements is a taking up of authenticity, curiosity, dignity, growth, and joy as relational value-practices. Participant kin pairings and groups live trust, solidarity, care, and connection and the relational value-practices of authenticity, curiosity, dignity, growth, and joy in ways that are informed by decolonial, queer, feminist, abolitionist, transformative, and healing justice frameworks. Through living these dynamic elements and value-practices with/in their relationships, participants are pushed and held by each other in ways that inform, sustain, and expand the social justice work they do interdependently and with others.

### **Doing/Living Queer Kinship Solidarity through Living Relational Value-Practices**

One of the ways I witnessed participant pairings and groups in this project doing/living queer kinship solidarity was through taking up authenticity, curiosity, dignity, growth, and joy as relational value-practices. They engaged these value-practices as foundational to their ways of thinking about and approaching their relationships with each other and others. In many ways, they grew and nourished these value-practices among them, and with intentionality and attentiveness, worked to keep them living and moving among them in ever-evolving and expansive ways.

As I stated in the value-practices section, I name them value-practices rather than value-based practices because I see participants taking them up as both values and practices inseparably. I see this as similar to the way that praxis, as defined by Freire (2000), is theory and practice always in a cyclical, unending relation with each other. I also chose the selections I did and discussed them in the ways I did because I believe that what participants expressed with regard to these value-practices offered something I did not see in the literature. Specifically, the queer kinship solidarity pairings and groups in this project made it evident that authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy are relational. This deviates from the common tendency to, because of the ideologies circulated by an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-het patriarchy, conceptualize these values and practices as “occurring” relationally or being relational experiences existing because of individual values and practices that “come together.” I see this more interdependent understanding and taking up of authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy offered up by participants as a significant contribution to the literature and people interested in undoing individualism in their living and working with others for more collectively liberatory worlds.

### **Authenticity**

Participants value-practice authenticity through relational wholeness and healing, transparency and honesty, and vulnerability, as well as accountability. Their valuing and practicing authenticity in this way goes beyond what is present in most of the studies on LGBTQ+ chosen families, where there is a focus on authenticity as individual and as a product of one time and linear “identity development” and expression that occurred because of relational affirmation and support within the chosen family. Participants in this project instead put forth an engagement with authenticity as fluid, multiple, nonlinear, unending, and relational. Moreover, authenticity was not only about being able to co-create relationships that served as a “dressing room where people can try on their most authentic selves” (p. 30); folks also took up authenticity as the quality of being present in the relationship with regard to emotionality. In other words, in

addition to valuing and practicing being their full selves with each other, they also value-practice being with each other regardless of how they are feeling in a moment. They also value and practice being honest with each other not only with regard to how they feel when stressed, exhausted, or as a result of emotional experiences they are carrying from their life outside of the relationship, but also with regard to talking through hard feelings toward each other. Being authentic then was linked to being able to come to each other and engage in conflict and accountability in generative ways.

### **Dignity**

For participants, valuing and practicing dignity involves being grounded in one's power and fullness as well as encouraging and supporting others to do so as well. In the narratives that folks shared, I heard participants valuing and practicing dignity by honoring and moving in their dignity even in the face of it being erased by others; taking care of self and others by having, respecting, and encouraging boundaries; removing worth (theirs and the relationship) from productivity and perfection; and holding, taking, and taking up space. Through emphasizing the way they encourage and support each other around boundaries and through direct communication and check-ins, I see participants demonstrating how, in queer kinship, interdependence allows for dignity to be relationally sustained and fortified. Rather than only ever "dignifying" oneself and others as individuals, there is a complex interplay at work that is inherently relational. This is especially significant considering the historical and contemporary denial of dignity that Black, Brown, queer, and trans folks experience by the larger society and culture. By not only dignifying each other as "individuals," but by dignifying each other with/in and through their relationships and thus also dignifying their kinship and relationality, participants are not only combatting the harmful effects of oppressive societal structures and systems, but bringing to life more liberatory possibilities, one where they and their relationships have value and thus should be honored, held, and supported.

## **Curiosity**

Curiosity as a value-practice of queer kinship involves relationally embodying an openness around being in change/flux/fluidity and seeing that alive, at work, and working with/in self, other, the relation, and the world. In valuing and practicing curiosity, there is an appreciation for the certainty of uncertainty and both a reverence for and playfulness around our “individual” and collective unfinishedness and that of the social world. The significance of curiosity as a value-practice in queer kinship solidarity was particularly evident in how participant pairings and groups emphasized the importance of active listening, asking questions for clarification and further exploration, being present and attentive with each other and with/in the relationship, and being with and witnessing each other in ways that never collapse possibility. Curiosity as a value-practice wasn’t only conceived of and taken up as a “wonderful” “playful” way of being, it was also critical and serious, *and* sometimes it was both within the same conversation. Curiosity alongside joy feels particularly important in terms of how queer kin pairings and groupings move toward more liberatory worlds while also bringing into the here and now collective liberation.

## **Growth**

Participants take up growth as a value-practice of queer kinship solidarity wherein growth is about learning and unlearning, healing, and taking new action. I witnessed participants valuing and practicing growth similarly to how they take up curiosity and authenticity, engaging it as a nonlinear, unending, relational process. Central to the value-practice of growth is an engagement of critical reflexivity that is sometimes taken up in solitude and other times taken up together. As with the other value-practices, this interdependent critical reflexivity engaged in growth is grounded in an attentiveness to the socio-historical situatedness of all involved. Additionally, in talking about their learning/unlearning and healing journeys with each other, with/in and through their relationships, participants emphasized the important role they saw compassion and grace playing in growth, stating that without the compassion, grace, and

support of others they would not have experienced the growth that they have and would not have the energy or tools to continue growing.

## **Joy**

Valuing and practicing joy is also integral to how participants do/live queer kinship solidarity. I witnessed them valuing-practicing joy as a resistant refuge by making time to put down the weight of the world and their work and enjoy everyday moments of pleasure. It was also evident in the ways in which they take up a queer joy in *both* how they affirm each other's desirability and engage each other as erotic beings *and* in their celebrating of holidays and milestones together in ways that disrupt narrow and oppressive roles and scripts about how to be in the world and with others. Participants also value and practice joy through engaging play, pleasure, and fun *in* the work of social justice. Many participants also made a point to highlight how they saw and experienced valuing and practicing joy with each other with/in and through the relationship as important liberation work in and of itself.

Queer pairings and groups in this project make evident that valuing and practicing authenticity, dignity, curiosity, growth, and joy relationally is central to how they are living/doing queer kinship solidarity. As I stated in the value-practices section, many people, because of the ideologies circulated by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, cis-het patriarchy, still conceptualize these values and practices as "occurring" relationally or being relational experiences that exist because of individual values and practices that "come together" rather than something that is valued and practiced interdependently and collectively. Participants tell us something different. They demonstrate how these value-practices are always relational and that through engaging them interdependently with/in and through relationships we can bring to life an everyday living, relational liberation praxis where we both combat the impact of oppressive systems and bring to life new worlds simultaneously.

## **Doing/Living Queer Kinship Solidarity through Engaging and Experiencing Dynamic Elements**

As I wrote earlier, I see dynamic (relational) elements as something that we value and practice, something we live into relationally, and also at work on us and working through us in a way that differentiates them from value-practices. Put another way, I see dynamic elements as ways of being with and moving that we can engage in *and* also as an experience that can come from “outside of us,” from the people, relations, and non-human world, sweeping us up and moving us. In this sense, much in the same way that relationships are more than the sum of their parts, these elements are bigger than the relationships that experience and engage them. Thus, while dynamic elements exist as with/in our relationships and our lives in ways that we can grow and nourish, I see them as also having “a life of their own” that can gather us up if we welcome them.

To return to my first research question, the most significant way I saw participant pairings and groups in this project living/doing queer kinship solidarity was through their engaging the dynamic (relational) elements of trust, solidarity, care, and connection in complex, varied, and expansive ways. As I discussed both in the sections on the value-practices and in the chapters, I saw the value-practices undergirding the dynamic elements, with some more salient in particular elements than others but often with many of them working together in interdependent ways within each. As was the case in the value-practices, though I parsed out the dynamic elements as separate chapters in this dissertation and discuss them below in separate sections, they are mutually informing and deeply intertwined.

Lastly, the in bridging and bringing together ways of being that are traditionally understood as in opposition to each other or as “tensions” within each dynamic: trust as knowing and believing, solidarity as being visionary and strategic, care as offering and receiving support and struggle, and connection as holding on and letting go, I see participant pairings and groups inviting us to relationally embody more complexity and fullness with regard to the ways



that we engage and experience these relational elements and thus expanding our ideas of what we can do and how we can do it when it comes to living and working with others for more collectively liberatory worlds.

## **Trust**

In doing/living queer kinship solidarity with each other, participants engage and experience trust as a dynamic element that lives as both a knowing (from experiencing) and believing (from extending in faith). The narratives participants shared in this project about building trust through experiencing people to be trustworthy shed light on the importance (a) of explicit verbalized intent and commitment, (b) of interdependence and community knowing and varied spaces and experiences, and (c) of joy in trust-building. With regard to trust as believing, participants told stories of trusting their intuition and extending themselves and their trust toward each other. This extending in faith was also deeply part of their living into their politics, particularly as it relates to interdependence, abundance thinking (brown, 2017), and hope as a discipline (Kaba, 2021). Participants also experienced and engaged trust not only as trusting something *with* (their vulnerability, for example) but also as trusting someone *to*, specifically trusting a person/people to give them honest feedback, to hold them accountable for their actions being in alignment with their values, and to push them to grow in their solidarity and liberation work.

In emphasizing the importance of verbal commitments and situating them as part of a dignifying and healing practice within trust, participants brought more complexity to the idea that actions speak louder than words when it comes to trust. In valuing trust being shared by others, I saw participants desiring a trusting community for all, which included but did not remain centered on themselves. In seeing joy as fertile ground for deep trust to grow, I hear folks dismantling dehumanizing and separating aspects of white supremacy culture by disrupting imperialist, white supremacist, cis-hetero capitalism's valuing of urgency and objectivity. In revealing the significance of moving toward folks as a way of living into and enacting,

somatically, abundance thinking and liberation work. Lastly, by evoking trust as trusting kin to hold one another accountable and challenging ideas about trust being a slow process that is quantified over linear time, I see queer pairings and groups in this project experiencing and engaging trust with/in and through queer kinship solidarity as a radically loving, queer, decolonial, anti-capitalist, abolitionist, transformative justice informed liberation praxis.

## **Solidarity**

Participant pairings and groups in this project shared experiences and engagements with solidarity, with solidarity being both strategic and visionary. The narratives they shared indicated that they take up solidarity as a leveraging of the power they have in given situations to offset the inequitable and oppressive impact of systems and structures on the other(s). Examples shared by participants included everything from writing a strongly worded letter to a hostile landlord, helping with a move, putting on a political drag performance, educating family and community, being proactive to keep each other safe as well as being prepared to physically protect each other in public, and, lastly, moving as a leader professionally in ways that supported the liberatory work folks were doing to be in solidarity with each other and others also demonstrated how folks in queer kinship solidarity relationships are always trying to take up solidarity in embodied, resourceful, and creative ways.

Their experiences with these various forms of solidarity work illuminated not only how they engage solidarity as both strategic and visionary but also how they move in ways that honor the nuances involved in social justice and solidarity work. This meant always being in tune with the multiplicity of sociohistorical situatedness and our ever-changing contexts that make living and moving with/in solidarity relationships with each other all the more complex. Being open, attentive, queer, creative, and embodied, I saw folks engaging in intersectional analysis, recognizing, as I wrote earlier, that while everyone has a role to play in the solidarity economy, because of the complexities of context and our positionalities we do not (and sometimes cannot) play the same role or offer the same gift each time, nor should we.

## Care

Participant pairings and groups, in living and doing queer kinship solidarity with/in and through their relationships with each other experience and engage the dynamic relational element of care as both support and struggle. Like others, they politicize “small” daily acts of care, demonstrating the ways that care work is often, when engaged with an analysis of power and an understanding of the unevenness of systems of oppression and the microlevel impact they have, the work of liberation. As I wrote earlier, the ways in which I heard and witnessed participants experiencing and engaging care as part of the doing/living queer kinship solidarity has me thinking, even more than before, how there is less of a distinction between solidarity work and care work than I initially thought. Much like community and relationships aren’t only tools or sites for holding, fortifying, sustaining, and carrying out “larger” social justice efforts, care and joy are never only engaged as a way to get folks “through,” they are often taken up as the way to get folks to those more liberatory worlds.

Participants also disrupt the trend in the literature to position the care they are giving and receiving in queer kinship as only political and powerful because it comes from a place of lack, meaning that they are giving each other the care they should be receiving from bio/legal or given family or the other communities they have come from. As I wrote in the introduction to the chapter on care, this was not only not often the case in that many participants have active, loving relationships with bio/legal given family. More importantly, for both those with active bonds to given family and those who had experienced relational rejection/abandonment or were not in active relationship with bio/legal/given family, they viewed the care they received and gave with/in queer kinship as political because of its abundant possibilities, possibilities they did not/do not often experience as present in the structure and engagements within family of origin and normative friendships.

Lastly, participants engage and experience care as mutual aid and in such a way that embraces difference and pushes back on even/balanced real-time reciprocity. In taking up this

approach to care, as involving both support and struggle and as embracing and learning from difference and valuing of unevenness as living a queer, decolonial, anti-capitalist, anti-ableist (among other things) interdependent abundance, participants co-create a “more” together that isn’t the presence of a measurable, evenly disbursed more but instead living into reality an abundance that is about living and moving in right relation(s) with each other in varied, multiple, complex ways that enhance the collective quality of life. Through centering and valuing difference and the uncommon as well as the unevenness in reciprocity and mutuality, participants are living/doing queer kinship that involves a giving and receiving of care as both support and struggle, in the form of challenging each other’s world views and solidarity/social justice practice, in varied, multiple, dimensional, ever shifting, nonlinear ways which allow for a living with/in and through relationship in a way that embodies abundant interdependence.

### **Connection**

In living and doing queer kinship, I witnessed participant pairings and groups engaging and experiencing connection as both holding on and letting go. In the narratives they shared with me during focus groups and in our follow-up conversations, they demonstrated how they were engaging and experiencing connection as holding on through reconnection, retaining, and returning to each other after accountability. In the narratives and experiences they shared with me, participants engage and experience connection in nuanced and varied ways, including flowing as inconsistent constants in each other’s lives, staying with/in their relationship in the midst of hardship and challenging life demands and transitions, taking space and coming back together, being together while taking space from conflict, releasing the relationship, and shifting into a new configuration entirely.

Through the many varied ways in which they are taking up and moving with/in and through connection, participants are living/doing queer kinship in a way that challenges and pushes back on conventional ideas around connection. In particular, I witnessed participants pushing back on the linking of longevity and “active” connection with relational strength or

success and always deeming relational “endings” as an indication of failure and disconnection. Lastly, informed by abolitionist and transformative justice frameworks, I witnessed participants challenging conventional ways of dealing with mistakes, conflict, and transgression relationally, pushing back on the carceral logics that frame the people more responsible for the conflict, transgression, disappointment, or damage done to the relationship as less worthy of care, connection, or support. Instead, I heard and saw folks, even in the most challenging “endings,” still holding on to connection, being with the other person’s and the relationship’s power, and believing in transformation, even if they couldn’t be actively a part of or engaged in the relationship at that time. Once again, this time with regard to connection, I witnessed the queer pairings and groups in this project doing/living queer kinship solidarity in ways that live out queer, decolonial, feminist, abolitionist, transformative justice informed frameworks.

### **Distinctly Queer**

Though it has been highlighted a bit already, I want to emphasize how I see the queer kinship solidarity taken up by the Black, Brown, and white anti-racist LGBTQ+ workers in this project as distinctly queer. As I wrote in the introduction, participants in this project are not only queer in the sense of being non-heterosexual. They also take up being queer as a being against the state (Wiley, as cited in TallBear, 2018a), “anti-normative” (Dean & Lane, 2001, as cited in Ahmed, 2015, p. 149), and/or “inhabiting norms differently” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 155). The kinship solidarity relationships within this project are distinctly queer in that alive with/in them is a fluidity. Their flowing intimately into each other’s orbits, present *both* in the ways these relationships came to be *and* in the ways folks have been within relation with each other over time, also moved well beyond that. They embraced flow and flux in the way they move beyond binaries and scripts around gender and sexuality, relationships and communities, even in what they consider and take up as the work of social justice and liberation. Even when participants are being with/moving with each other and others in ways that seem to ascribe to normative ways of being, there is a way that they are staying playful with themselves, each other, and

others, opening up and inhabiting the norms differently, in such a way where they are always deviating and disrupting them.

While I see this distinct queerness as most obviously present in how participants value-practice authenticity, curiosity, and growth and how they experience and engage trust and connection, I believe it is alive and at work in every expansion within each of the dynamic elements and in the multiplicity and complexities present in the ways they live out all of the value practices. These fluid ways of being are rooted in their relationships and the everyday practices and engagements they take up. As such, I see the participants as taking up a living and moving together (and with others) for more liberatory worlds in ways that are simultaneously fluid and grounded, open and focused.

### **Social Justice Work and World Making**

In doing/living queer kinship solidarity relationships with/each other, participants are sustained, fortified, expanded, and moved in new directions with regard to how they take up social justice and solidarity work with/in and beyond their relations, including the more recognized work they take up in higher education, healthcare, healing, organizing, and art/music.

I witnessed participants, through doing/living queer kinship, staying fluidly attentive and curiously open to how we all are multiplex, ever-changing relational beings in complex contexts and having that inform the liberation work they do in all of their relations and all the spaces they are in. In valuing and practicing growth as unending interdependent learning and healing and engaging care as support and struggle, I saw participants actively seeking to unlearn the ways in which they have internalized ideologies and habits that uphold the very systems and structures they are working to dismantle. They expressed feeling challenged and encouraged in their unending growth by their queer kin in ways that lead them to share what they learn with others and take new action. Furthermore, because of co-creating this interdependent support with each other, they often feel called to do the same for/with others with/in other relationships.

This relationship to interdependent critical reflexivity, growth, support, and action often also leads them to take up social justice education and action or liberation work in ways they did not previously. This was not only with regard to their paid or more “recognized” social justice work. Going back to Loni’s quote, the way of being and moving with/in and through queer kinship, they have been moved to and continue moving toward taking up everyday social justice education and action and relational liberation work with people in their daily lives, including co-workers, family, friends, community members, students, in ways they otherwise wouldn’t have.

Additionally, participants demonstrated an embracing, appreciating, and learning from differences in lived experience as well as strategies and approaches to working, creating, learning/teaching, (even parenting) for liberation that deeply informs and expands the work they take up with/in and through the relationships and beyond them. This reverence for and curiosity around difference and unevenness has them thinking about and moving with a nuanced, contextually informed understanding and appreciation of the diversity of groups they aren’t a part of as well as those they are. Because of grounding their living for social justice in the relational with each other, they more often take up collaborative, resourceful, and creative social justice interventions/actions with each other and others. This manifests as authentic, curious, dignified/dignifying, open, and joyful ways of building trusting relationships and communities, leveraging power, supporting and challenging each other and others, and “being in good relation” (TallBear, 2019a) with each other, others, and the world.

In sum, participants, because of their living/doing queer kinship solidarity, relationships take up their social justice work, both the “formal” and the “informal,” in more nuanced, honest, compassionate, connected, radically hopeful, and loving ways. They are living relationally with each other and others in ways of being that are in alignment with decolonial, queer, feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-ableist, abolitionist, healing, and transformative justice frameworks, and that comes through in the ways that they take up and carry out social justice “work” in all of the spaces they are in.

## **An Offering and An Invitation**

As Parker said in the last focus group I had with him, Concetta, and Loni, what folks are doing with/in and through queer kinship solidarity “[is] beautiful work” and “makes me feel like we have so much to do.” And while that is true, I also agree with Parker that “What I value and appreciate is that these are not foreclosed conversations ... that’s the most hope inducing, the possibility.” Whether they are pushing back on the way individualism restricts our values and practices, disrupting the white supremacy culture creeping into our social justice and organizing work or challenging the way colonial notions of linear time restrict our learning from and with each other, or dismantling the carceral logics we often engage in our conflicts or our capitalist understandings of relational “success” and “failure”; whether they are making the distinction between solidarity and care work less and less distinct, fast-forwarding the speed of trust, or extending out what it means to be connected, I see the participants as offering us multiple, fluid, open, everyday, expansive ways of approaching the important work of being with and moving with/in and through relation with each other and others for liberation.

As indicated in the title of this project and as I’ve written throughout this dissertation, the possibilities offered by the Black, Brown, and anti-racist white LGBTQ+ social justice workers in this project around their living relationally for liberation with each other are just that, possibilities. They are not meant to dictate. They are offered in the hopes of inviting more of us to take up more ways of staying in the trying together, ways of living with/in and through our everyday relationships that simultaneously co-create and move toward more just and liberatory world(s) for all of us.



## CHAPTER XIV: CLOSING

As I stated in the introduction, I came to this project from a place of wanting to honor transformation, critical hope, and to look more into who has taught and teaches me reconstruction (brown, 2017). While I still am, I also want to hold space for grief; grieving both how this project couldn't take the shape I and others originally envisioned and grieving what falls apart, that some relationships and configurations don't and can't hold. Yes, there are some participants in this who take up the "ending" of queer kinship relationships in the forms of release and reconfiguration in ways that expand our ideas of connectedness, of building and being and moving in relationship and community with others for liberation. *And* it would be remiss and irresponsible of me if I also didn't explicitly state that there are also terribly painful and necessary relational endings and disconnections among people doing/living queer kinship where repair in this lifetime isn't possible or desired, at least not by all involved.

Sometimes, as some participants in this project shared, generational and societal oppression and the ensuing trauma comes out and into our kinship relationships, in the form of harm and, at times, violence. It is important to name that relationships can be violent, community can be violent, even among those of us trying to do things differently. I think of those who have called us to think more on what this means for those of us engaging in abolition (brown, 2020; Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021), transformative justice (Dixon & Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2020), healing justice (Page, n.d.), and mutual aid (Spade, 2020). How can we expand what it means to be in larger relationship and community in ways that honor both the need to walk away and be held, for healing and for accountability? And so what stays unsettled calls me, calls us, to recognize and name that there is always a danger in emphasizing the importance of relationality and community. In our investment to work towards justice and honor others we also recognize that people may do harm and sometimes enact violence because of

the systems of oppression that they've experienced, consequently we may be even more apt to stay in harmful and even violent relationships with each other.

Relationships and community are not automatically good. We know that systems of oppression and the violence that run through our worlds, institutionally and interpersonally, rely on relationships and weaponizes them. And so, just as the mind is a part of the body and needs not be split through western ideology (Anzaldua, 2012), the self is a part of the community and needs to be honored and held (Lara, 2002). I return again to the Brené Brown (2021) quote, "Any belonging that asks us to betray ourselves is not true belonging" (p. 155) because right relationship to self is part of relational liberation praxis. The good of the whole has to include the good of the self and there are times where staying in the trying together means moving *out* of relationship or community. In the words of a mentor, walking away isn't the same as cancelling and disconnection isn't the same as disposing. And, as bell hooks (2000) reminds us, solitude isn't the same as being alone. Even when flocking, birds get left if they don't stay at the right distance in the flock, if they get sick or injured, they fall behind, a few stay with them and they might meet back up with their flock or another, or they might have to rejoin in another season (brown, 2017). It can be the most loving act of critical hope to leave a relationship and entrust ourselves and those who have harmed us or who were violent towards us to the greater whole, to loving and right relationships with ourselves and other people, in hopes that we can, in these different configurations, hold and nourish ourselves and each other in healing and transformation. I know this dark side of relationality and community and I return to the both/and: just as we need not shy away from the complexities of challenge, conflict, transgression, and rupture, we need not shy away from how relationality and community can be *both* violent and healing.

This is why the *how* of relational liberation praxis matters so much. It isn't enough to critique and try and take up nonnormative ways of being and being in relationship beyond toxic individualism, the nuclear family model, and exclusive/ insular communities, we have to live

expansively, in large webs of communities that can hold us and help us on our paths of interdependent healing and transformation, of being in and moving in right relation with others, which *a/ways* requires being and moving in right relation with ourselves. I think the value practices, particularly dignity and authenticity, can help us ensure that we don't stay in relationship in ways that actually take us or others out of loving and right relation. And there is still so much for us to learn, to heal, to do in our relationships, in our communities, to stay in the trying for more liberatory worlds for all of us. As Concetta said,

I know that we stand on the shoulders of others, and there's a legacy, but I also think there are not a lot of roadmaps for how to do this, for creating something different, believing that a better world is possible and trying in the ways that we show up to build that world, to create it together.

I am grateful that there are many folks who believe, as Concetta does, that a better world is possible. I am even more grateful for the folks among them who work and live for liberation with others, including the participants in this project. Again, neither I nor the participants themselves see them or their relationships as perfect exemplars. But I do see the possibilities offered in this project as bringing forth binary-and-barrier-breaking ways of living out more liberatory possibilities with/in and through kinship, relationship, and community, as well as social justice education, movement and action relations and spaces. I see, in the journeys shared and offered, in the maps being drawn and redrawn, in the calls being answered and extended out through this project, an open invitation to all of us, to take up and stay in the trying of living out liberation in our relationships with ourselves, each other, and others. That is what I see this project and the participants as contributing: an open, imperfect invitation, with possibilities to try on and experiment with, possibilities that I believe can bring us closer to liberation, in the future, and in the here and now.

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## APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION GUIDE

### **INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS:**

- Describe what the participants' energy levels were as they entered the focus group and greeted each other
- What, if anything, did the participants do to welcome each other to the space?
- How were participants interacting with each other as they entered the space?
- Describe the participants. What were they wearing?
- Describe the space each participant is in. Where were they?

### **DURING THE FOCUS GROUP**

- Describe the participants' nonverbal communication throughout the focus group conversation. What were the sounds and/or gestures shared? How were they received or taken in by others?
- Were there moments of disagreement, tension, or conflict during the conversation? How were these moments embodied? Describe.
- Were there moments of resonance, affirmation, or agreement during the conversation? How were these moments embodied? Describe.
- Did participants express emotion outwardly with each other? When? How?

### **CLOSING QUESTIONS**

- Describe participant energy levels as they left the focus group and said goodbye to each other.
- What, if anything, did the participants do to close the space?
- How were participants interacting with each other as their time in the focus group together wound down?



## APPENDIX B: EMAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing to share a little bit about my research project with you. As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, pursuing a PhD in Educational Studies with a focus on cultural foundations. While I have been engaged in social justice education and action since 2009, I feel my journey in this work didn't really begin until I moved to Greensboro in 2012 and came into social justice work in community with the queer chosen family I began to have, which is how I know you! This is what has led me to my current research project, my dissertation.

Through this dissertation project, I seek to explore, with participants, the nuances of queer kinship solidarity relationships among LGBTQ+ social justice workers living and mobilizing in the South.

The research questions that I have include:

1. How are LGBTQ+ social justice workers in the South engaging with doing/living queer kinship solidarity relationships?
2. What might queer kinship solidarity relationships entail that is particularly unique due to the queerness of them?
3. How do queer kinship solidarity relationships inform, sustain, and expand the social justice work done by those in kinship with/in and through the relation as well as "outside" of it?

I am reaching out to you to invite you and the members of your queer kin or chosen family to be a part of this project. As stated above, all involved must identify as a LGBTQ+ and a social justice worker located in the South. I use the term social justice worker to include people who take up social justice work in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: organizing (through organizations, both nonprofit and grassroots), teaching (in higher education, K-12, or community spaces), creating and sharing political art (visual art, music, dance, etc.) as well as counseling and caretaking. All participants must also consider each other queer chosen family/kin and must agree that relational solidarity is a significant part of their queer kinship/family dynamic.

In terms of design, the project will include an open-ended background information sheet where participants will share information about their social locations, social justice work, and the amount of time they have been in relationship with each member of their kin. This is completed by each participant. Additionally, I will invite participants to participate in two optional components (not required for participation in the project): a found object collage completed by participants within their pairings or groups/families telling the story of your queer kinship solidarity journey with each other and a final, large, unstructured optional, focus group across the families.

All focus groups will be between an hour and a half to two hours in duration. Focus groups, because of COVID-19, will be online using Zoom. With regard to focus group facilitation, I have crafted questions and probes to guide me in facilitating the small semi-structured focus groups and will share them with you and your kin/family group should you all be interested in participating. All focus groups will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. In terms of data collection, I also plan to incorporate observation note-taking during and after focus groups in order to be attentive to embodiment, nonverbal communication, and expression. Found object collages, if completed by participants, may be shared by participants with myself and each other at any time within family focus groups and potentially in the final focus group, should they choose to share out across the families/kinship groups or pairings. While this project will be the basis of my dissertation and thus requires that I take the initiative and responsibility in its design, I am committed to being in alignment with the topic and am therefore open to shifting the research design and focus group questions and probes based on participant feedback and suggestions.

As a feminist researcher, I practice reflexivity and see myself as part of the project. This means that I will also be taking embodiment notes, completing memos, and writing researcher journal entries about my own experiences, reactions, and journey in the project. I am happy to make the notes and memos that relate to you and your kin group/family available to you all along the way, should you want to read them.

Additionally, accountability is extremely important to me, not only as a researcher but also as a person. In order to be accountable to you all in my representation of the data, I will share the themes that I identify after each focus group and ask if there is something I've missed that you noticed or experienced. I will also share my writing and analysis along the way and invite your feedback. Lastly, I will share the final product in a culminating event in the spring, either in person or via a secure online platform, with all participants prior to submitting my final dissertation to get final feedback.

After sharing this email with your queer kin/family and deciding whether or not you all want to participate in this project, please reply to this email, letting me know what you all have decided. If you and all or several of your queer kin/family members are interested in participating, please email me as a group with all emails included in the cc section of your reply. If you all express interest, I will email all of you to coordinate a Zoom or WebEx meeting where I can answer questions, discuss the project design in more depth, hear suggestions, and go over the informed consent form. My email will have the informed consent form attached for you to review and have prior to our interest meeting.

Thank you for being who you are to me, inspiring this project, and taking the time to consider participating in it. I look forward to hearing back from you and your queer kin/family at your earliest convenience.

With gratitude,

Cristina Dominguez

## APPENDIX C: BACKGROUND INFORMATION HANDOUT

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

This project seeks to engage an intersectional analysis and an attentiveness to the multiplicity of identities in order to delve into the complexities of power dynamics and solidarity efforts with/in queer kinship solidarity relationships. Thus, I am interested in getting as much detail as possible with regard to how participants experience their social locations. This project also seeks to engage in an in-depth and nuanced understanding of everyday social justice work. Thus, I am interested in getting as much detail as possible with regard to how participants engage in working for social justice, by which I mean working with others for a more socially just, inclusive, and equitable world in both “formal,” “traditional,” or organized ways/settings and “informal,” “intimate” or interpersonal/personal ways/settings (and all of the actions, places, and spaces in between). By social location I mean our locations/positions within social groups that we are born and/or develop into. These locations/positions that we are situated in and navigate the world from are historical and informed by place/context and some of these locations can and do change with time and experiences (age and ability, for example). By social justice work, I mean to include teaching, learning, organizing, healing, caring, creating, building, etc., for a more collectively liberatory world. Additionally, I also invite you to share how long you’ve known each person in the relational configuration. If you are unsure of how to answer any of the prompts below and want some more guidance, please feel free to ask me. I left them intentionally broad for you to answer freely, but if a term is new to you or unclear, I’m happy to explain it. Please describe your social location with regard to the following:

Age:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Class (generational and income):

Gender:

Physical and Cognitive Ability (physically disabled, chronically ill, mental health illness, etc.):

Sexual Orientation:

Educational level/experience:

Relational Orientation (Polyamorous, monogamous, etc.):

Religious Affiliation or Spiritual Identity:

Regional Identity:

Educational level/experience:

Name and describe any additional social locations not listed here that you want to include:

Describe the kinds of social justice work you are engaged in, from the more recognized and “organized” ways/forms to the more intimate, “private,” everyday, interpersonal ways/forms (and everything in between).

Lastly, how long have you known each person in this relational figuration:

## APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS & PROBES

### Focus Group 1:

#### 1. Where and how did the relationship(s) start/form?

- What was the setting, the timing (in your life and in the world around you)? (context)
- What makes it kinship? What defines that for you?

#### 2. How do you all understand, feel, and mobilize your queer kinship?

- In other words, how do you experience yourselves and each other doing/living these relationships?
- Are there specific memories/moments that come to mind? Sensations? Sounds? Places?

#### 3. What have been some significant moments or experiences in the relationship(s) that has/have shaped it/them over time?

- What do you feel makes your relationship strong? What makes it work?
- What have been breakthrough moments or memories of connection?
- Talk to me about critical moments (pivotal conversations, experiences, life events- mutual or individual) that may have changed/shifted/deepened the relationship?
- Have there been important fallouts, missteps or miscommunications, separations or moments of disconnection? Tell me about those.
- How has the relationship waxed and waned? Become deeper or more intense?

### Focus Group 2:

#### 4. What are the learning and teaching dynamics in the relationship?

- Around differences in positionalities and lived experiences
- Around complexity and nuance of collective and relational work
- Around accountability, healing, and transformation
- Around listening and reflection, pausing as well as action, risk-taking? Subversive action? Speaking up/out?

- Around the unevenness of the emotional, embodied, and spiritual toll of systems of oppression and anti-oppressive work/labor
- Were there significant moments or events that led to any of this learning and teaching?
- Are there pedagogies or theoretical frameworks that inform this learning and teaching?

5. How does queerness play a role in your relationship? What makes your chosen family relationship/s queer?

- How are these chosen family solidarity relationships different from those that you have with non-queers or those relationships that you would describe as not queer?

Focus Group 3:

6. How do you see solidarity playing a role in your relationships?

- What are the points of difference in social locations and thus lived experiences?
- How do you work to be in solidarity with one another?
- What events have led to this?
- Are there significant moments that come to mind around this?

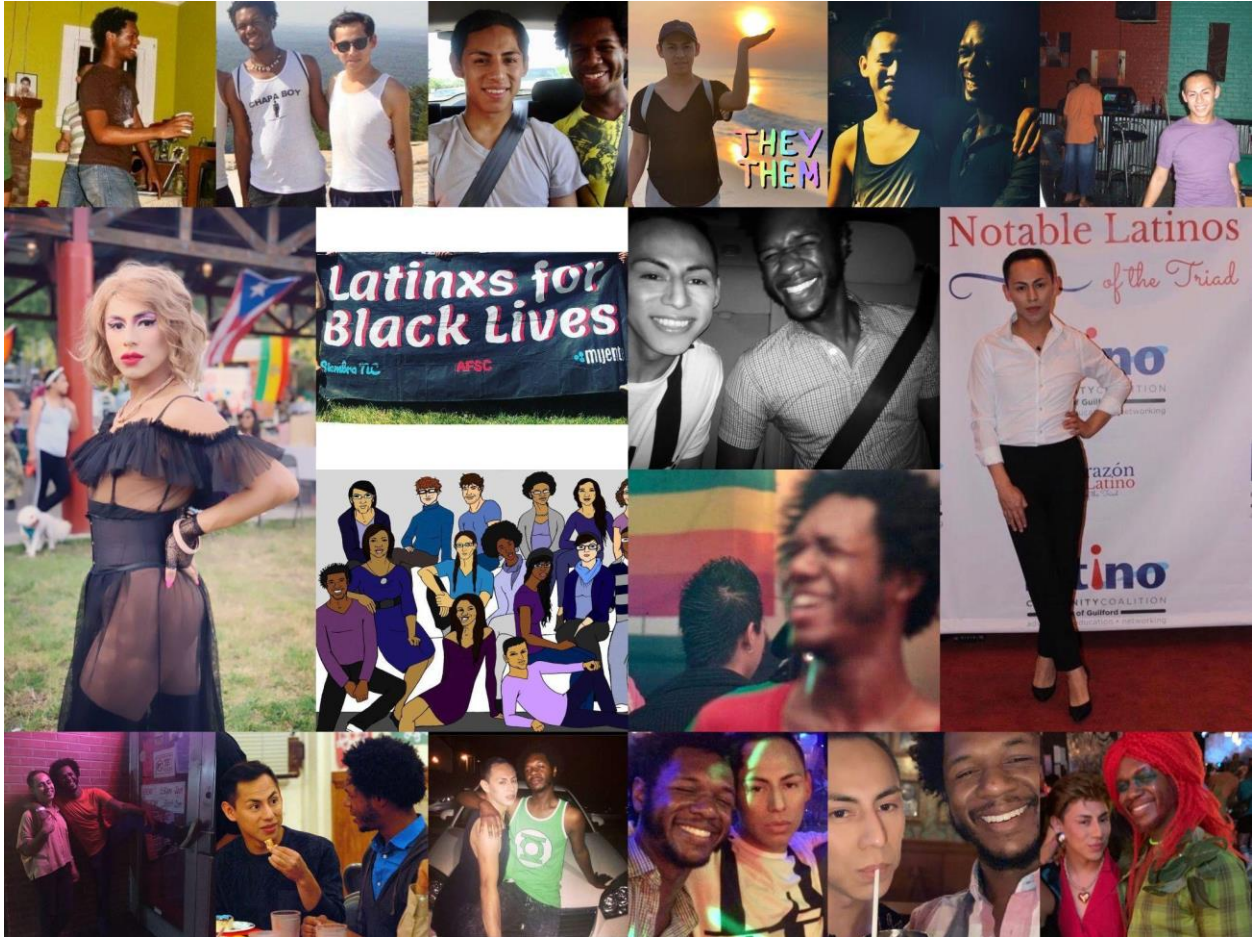
7. How does the relationship inform your social justice work?

- What kinds of social justice action have you all taken up collectively with/in and through the relationship as well as outside of it (with/in and through other relations)
- In what ways has/have this/these relationship/s informed your individual social justice work outside of the relationship(s)?
- How has the relationship shifted, deepened, changed, or expanded your work? Together and separately?

8. How is your relational work liberation work? What world-making things are you all doing with/in and through these relationships?

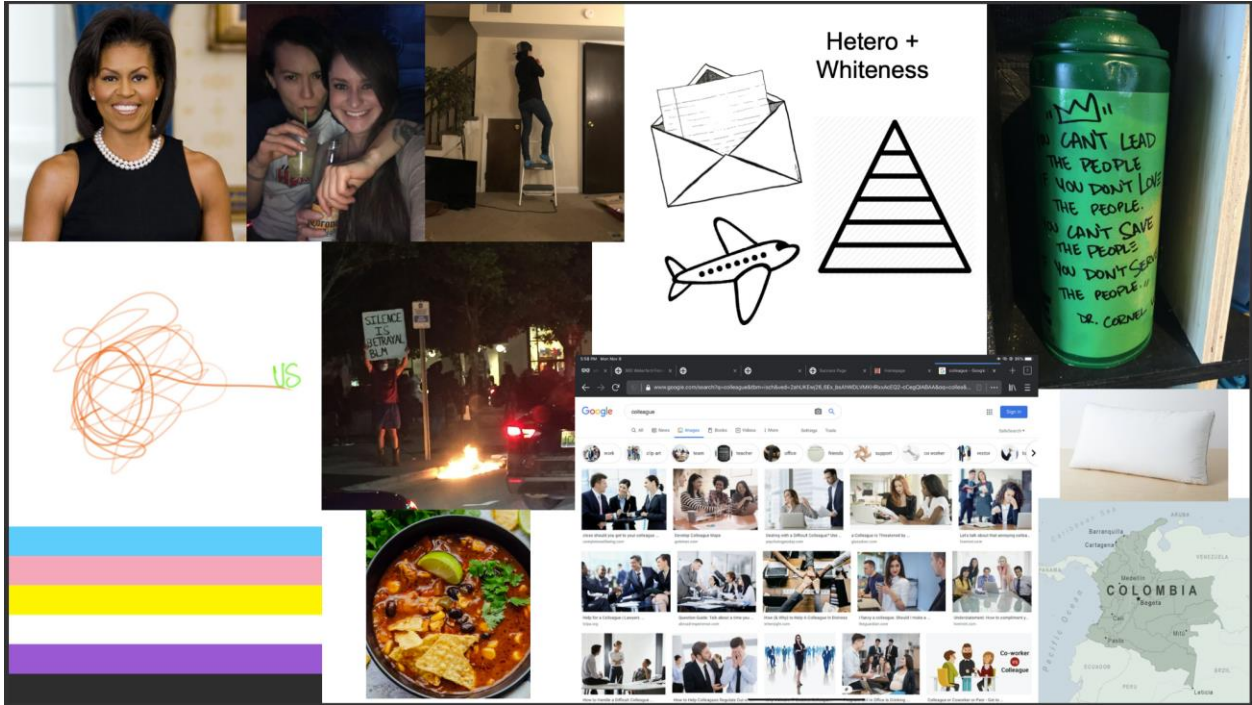
- In what ways are you all co-creating the world you want to see within your relationship(s)?

APPENDIX E: TRAE AND MANI'S COLLAGE





APPENDIX F: ALEX AND SOPHIE'S COLLAGE



APPENDIX G: TOMI'S COLLAGE



APPENDIX H: NICOLE'S COLLAGE



Daughter of Carla, Yolanda, Willye, Mary Elizabeth, and Mary Jane



APPENDIX I: JUJU'S COLLAGE

