

GRAMMARS OF CARE: ON CARE-FULL WRITING AS BLACK FEMINIST
PEDAGOGY AND PRAXIS

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abstract

In *Grammars of Care: On Care-Full Writing as Black Feminist Pedagogy and Praxis*, I interrogate the processes through which care is theorized and enacted in order to make evident the ways in which anti-black state violence is narrativized as care and re-inscribed through formal education and professional practice. The method I activate in this project—what I call *care-full writing*—is informed and guided by the scholarship and creative practice of Black women and Black feminist writers that model strategies of writing as practices of care. Over four chapters, I use care-full writing to pursue a Black feminist project of Black study and care through reading and re-/writing stories of Black life. Moving across genres and into family archives, I study and engage a practice of autotheoretical research creation to expose violence re-linguaged as care and as a means of writing a counternarrative of the practices and relations that attend to Black life.

dedication

To honor all the ways you have cared for me...

to Bertha Hackley McAleer *(1909-1996)*
for your example and your foresight

to Donovan “Deebo” Gayle *(1981-2017)*
for the friendship that saved me

to George Stephen *(1943-2021)*
for everything

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Introduction: A Project About Writing

*Dear reader:
Nothing is new here,
nothing is only mine,
and everything is extremely personal.*

My first academic conference presentation was at the 2017 Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care (OACYC) biennial conference in Toronto, Ontario. I had just graduated from my undergraduate program, returning to school after ten years of professional practice and was on a panel with three of my former classmates. We each presented on our undergraduate thesis projects along with our former professor. The professor on the panel (whose role was something akin to a chair) had taught a class called *Ways of Knowing* which we all took while writing our theses and during which we were meant to engage our topic and research through art—a practice I now understand to be research creation. My thesis project, titled “Parenting from the Inside,” was a systematic literature review investigating the experiences of mothers involved in parenting programs while incarcerated and the impacts of those programs; my conference presentation, titled “What the Eye Has Been Trained to See,” demonstrated how I used poetry and textual manipulation as a part of research analysis and dissemination. I do not remember the details of the other panelist’s presentations, but they similarly demonstrated how they used art to further their research.

The creative work that I presented at the conference was an interactive object based on a scene from Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*. The scene is one where

Assata's daughter visits her in prison—and the interactive object was activated by sliding a filter over an enlarged excerpt of the text.¹ I had made three different filters and each one redacted the text to narrate the scene highlighting a different perspective: the perspective of Assata; the perspective of her daughter; and the perspective of a prison guard. The exercise was meant to get the audience to think about perspective, to think about how they understand what is happening in the scene. I asked the conference audience to consider how their perspective as a professional care worker is shaped by their race or their clients' (as well as by their cultural, linguistic, moralistic, educational or economic biases, or their experiences with familial incarceration or being in care) and how that perspective filters the way they read and make sense of clients' lives and behaviours. I asked practitioners who were present to consider how their professional care practice and documentation reflected this perspective, and the instructors to consider how it enters the classroom as they teach child and youth care to professionals-in-training. The questions I posed to the conference attendees were reflective of the research I had conducted for my thesis, but also of what I already knew from my direct service work, post-secondary instruction and my experience as a mother—that we do not all mean the same thing when we use the word *care*.

Teaching, studying and engaging in professionalized care work includes a significant amount of descriptive and narrative writing about the care we (care practitioners, students and instructors) do—academically, through papers and assignments, and professionally, through case notes and reports. Over my (now seventeen) years in the field of child and youth care, I have spent countless hours reading descriptions and accounts of care work

¹ The excerpt I used was taken from Chapter 20 of *Assata: An Autobiography* (pp. 257-258)

written for practice and in practice and I have witnessed firsthand that not everything that is described as care is actually providing “what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection” of the intended (or stated) benefactors (Oxford). This is particularly true when the stated benefactors are Black and/or Indigenous and/or queer and/or poor and/or disabled and/or disruptive, ungovernable, (seemingly) ungrateful young people. Often what is obscured behind “protection” and “working in the best interest of the child” is a type of systemized and violent state discipline mobilized via care discourses. I am not only referring here to the violence that dominates the body, coming by way of physical and chemical restraints, weapons, and other forms of abuse that leave bruises steal lives. I am also referring to the psychological and spiritual violence enacted through family separation, community surveillance, regulated movement, isolation and the perpetual threat of capture; as well as the epistemic violence inherent to Euro-western hierarchies of knowledge that determine who can care and how, and which is disappeared and reproduced through the powerfully invisibilizing force of objectivity. The violence comes into view in this project through careful and critical readings of case notes and curriculum texts, policy documents and legislation that report on or regulate the state care that attends to Black young people and families.

The context for such a project is important. As we learn from the extensive scholarship that tracks the naturalization of relations of domination in terms of race, racial/izing logics are not universally applied nor interpreted and are not fixed in terms of classification criteria or language. For example, whereas race is a key analytic category in studying the hierarchical sociality of settler colonial nations in North America and southern Africa, Eddie Bruce-Jones explains that “in various settings across Europe, race is

discussed as something of an American relic, part of a clunky imported vernacular unfit to serve as a framework for understanding the European context” (25). However, the *European context* is, in fact, a collage of varying national priorities and diverse interpretations (and sometimes absences) of race within political policy and governance.² Because of this contextual variance, my discussion primarily focuses on the context of blackness and relations of power in North America, the place from which and about which I write. I primarily draw on works born out of, attendant to and reflective of the North American context of racialized and gendered violence, care work and knowledge production.

In this project, I work in and attend to the narrative space of care—the discursive register in which care is constituted, practiced, withheld, and (re)inscribed—in order to investigate and propose strategies for intervening in violence masquerading as care by interrogating the processes through which care is theorized and enacted. To do that, I read published and unpublished stories of Black life, including case notes and case studies, poetry, narratives and scrapbooks, asking how the writers are using language and form to name, narrate or describe care. At the time I made and presented my research creation project at the OACYC conference, I did not have the theoretical grounding to articulate my

² For example: France’s colourblind ideologies prefer a unifying national identity over the ‘divisive’ *categorical fiction* of race and have therefore outlawed its use. By contrast, the United Kingdom’s national priorities are reflected in Race Relations Act of 1956—developed during the same era as the US civil rights movement—which acknowledges and protects its citizenry against discrimination on the basis of race. (It has since been repealed and replaced with the Race Relations Act of 1976. A third example is Germany’s constitution which also asserts equal protection for its citizenry, prohibiting discrimination based on “*Rasse*.” However, though this word translates to *race* in English, in German it refers more to “the biological race thinking of *Nationalsozialismus* or National Socialism...rather than the social construct of race” (Burce-Jones 28; *emphasis in original*). As a general practice, German governments do not collect statistical data on race or racism and leave that work to the groups and organizations who choose to take up the task. For more, see Camilla Hawthorne’s “In Search of Black Italia” (2017), Keaton “The Politics of Race-Blindness: (Anti)Blackness and Category-Blindness in Contemporary France.” (2010).

practice as part of an intellectual tradition of study. I had never taken a course in Black feminist theory or methods and didn't even have what Kathryn Mariner (quoting Katherine McKittrick) calls "a clandestine degree in Black Studies" to theorize this thing I was doing with words.³ What I mean is that I had not yet embarked on the self-guided study that many Black students engage in who have neither Black Studies professors nor departments to formally guide us. So in 2018 when I started my doctoral program, I found myself for the first time studying—not just reading, but spending time in deep engagement with—the writing strategies employed by Black studies (and particularly by Black feminist) writers to tell stories about Black life and care. It began with Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* (which I read first on my own and later studied in class), then Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* and "Venus in Two Acts," M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Jennifer Nash's "Writing Black Beauty." Text after text offered practical, unconventional, experimental and often beautiful examples of how to tell (or not tell—what Philip calls *telling the story that must be told but can only be told by untelling*) stories about Black children and Black families, as well as about the actual practices that have been used to attend to their (our) needs, safety and wellbeing. The stories exposed where care should have been offered but had been withheld, and where violence had been obscured through its telling. But also—and perhaps most importantly for this project—the texts were not only writing *about* care, but they were written *with* care and through methods that practiced care as they told and untold stories about Black life.

³ Mariner, Kathryn. "On Needing Black Studies." *Black Studies Now*, special issue of *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, vol. 31, 2020, ivc.lib.rochester.edu/on-needing-black-studies/#fnref-8855-10

In particular it was Jennifer Nash's assertion that "Black feminism has always been a project about writing" ("Black Beauty" 108) that set in motion the line of inquiry that has led me to this project. Nash cites Sharpe and Hartman as well as Marisa Fuentes, Jennifer Morgan, Emily Alyssa Owens, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker and Ann duCille as examples of Black Feminists who use writing to undermine, resist and refuse dominant western theories, rigid academic disciplines and the historical archive which rely on and privilege "epistemic certainty." They do this through "alternative archives and experimental, creative, and sensual form" (105) as well as "troubling of theory... practices of self-definition...[and] self-reflective forms of theorizing that make visible critical ambivalence and scholarly desires" (108). Nash takes up this genealogy in her essay to advance a project of self-conscious and vulnerable writing that engages the political dimension of beauty—countering prevailing systems that mark the Black body as *deviant* and *monstrous*, and moving beyond the body to "[expand] our collective conception of where black beauty is found, staged, performed, and articulated" (109). She goes on to describe this type of writing—beautiful writing—as a practice of care. And while I would say that writing has always been an integral and powerful tool of Black feminist praxis (rather than the latter being a project about the former), the method of study I activate in this project—what I call *care-full writing*—is deeply influenced and guided by the scholarship and creative practice of Black women and Black feminist writers that model strategies of writing as praxes of care.

For example, two of the models that guide my work come from my mother and grandmother in the form of family albums and a method of autoethnographic historiography passed through my matrilineal family line—from my grandmother to my

mother, from my mother to me—as an act of care. Their practice of recording names and relations, of gathering advice and knowledge for future generations, of making the connection between our family and the larger institutions to which we were and are connected and the broader social context of our lives, was born of a tradition of record-keeping rooted in the Black Atlantic context vis a vis the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Canada and the USA. Born in 1909, my grandmother didn't consider herself a Black feminist, but a mother, wife and daughter who had opinions and knowledge to pass on and who participated in paid and unpaid care work in her home, church, and community. I read her commitment to centring her own voice and experiences as a Black woman in articulating an entangled familial and institutional history as her recognition of the importance and validity of the perspective from which she wrote—what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “black women’s standpoint.”⁴ She passed on her practice of history writing to my mother, who, like me, had a career that involved caring for children (first as an Early Childhood Educator, then as a Family Home Visitor for a voluntary self-referral program through our municipal public health department, supporting parents of young children in their homes). My mother’s writing and care practices are informed by my grandmother’s, but are also coloured by her training and professional work experience which required an intentional balance of planning and improvisation, of theory (noun) and theorizing (verb)⁵. My mom and grandma’s examples have been an important part of my thinking in this

⁴ Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Unwin Human, Inc., 1990.

⁵ I am drawing on Barbara Christian’s assertion that “western forms of abstract logic” (theories) are different than the active *theorizing* that people of colour—Black women in particular—engage in. See “The Race for Theory.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no.1, 1988, pp. 67-79.

dissertation and though, for a time, I actively resisted being the next in my family to assume the role of historian and reference library, I now find myself drawn to and drawing on this creative and care-full practice in my own professional and scholarly work.

The project I present here is one that is significantly autotheoretical, meaning my own life, career, family and creative practice are central to the questions, methods, analysis and form the project takes. Autotheory, quoting Lauren Fournier, “does not refer to a ‘theory of the self’ so much as to theory that emerges from the self. The autotheorist shuttles between self and theory...using firsthand experience as a person living in the world as the ground for developing and honing theoretical arguments and theses” (35). Though the term has gained popularity since Maggie Nelson’s 2015 book *The Argonauts*, the tradition of centering the personal and subjective has a long history in Black feminist writing and theorizing.⁶ Over the four chapters that follow, I use care-full writing to pursue a Black Feminist project of Black study and care through reading and re-/writing stories of Black life. Moving across genres and into family archives, I study and engage (in) a practice of autotheoretical research creation and Black story which I am thinking about as modes of meaning-making and knowledge-sharing that are not bound to academic disciplines, but that are attentive to Christina Sharpe’s call for those of us working in and studying (in) the afterlife of slavery to “become undisciplined ... [through] ... new modes and methods of research and teaching” (*In the Wake* 13).

⁶ Nelson takes the term from Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Yonqui (Testo Junkie)* (2008/2013). Other examples of autotheoretical texts include: Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2006); Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018); Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); and Christina Sharpe’s “Beauty is a Method” (2019) and *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (particularly Chapter One, “The Wake”).

In Chapter One, I situate my study of care through Black studies, gender studies and the discipline of child and youth care and introduce care-full writing as the method through which I engage my study. In Chapter Two, I use care-full writing to read and record accounts of care, beginning with the archival practices of human service work, where I examine the client file as a genre of text that is intended to narrate a select history of a person or family under state care. I read this genre as falling in the lineage of texts that do the work of narrating blackness as a problem while legitimizing state intervention in Black life as the solution. I then discuss how care-full writing can be mobilized to interrupt these narratives and care-fully tell/not tell/un-tell the stories of Black young people and families on different terms. In Chapter Three, I discuss storytelling as a mode of Black study and pedagogical tool for teaching care. I examine the use of case studies in formal pre-service education as a site for developing a professional identity and practice and then examine my mother's and grandmother's storytelling practices as enactments and lessons of care. In Chapter Four, I use care-full writing to re-narrativize the research in the form of a children's chapter book, through a story based on my family's end of life care for my father. Following the main character, Jamil, on a project of Black study, the book asks us to think about how we can use care-full writing practices, not just as thought exercises, but in service of other modes of relation.

Using formalized education and the client file as entry points to theorize the narrative space of care and care-full writing might suggest that I am embarking on a project of reform by proposing a different way of reading and writing Black life and Black care within formalized care systems. So, let me state plainly that my project is not one of reform, but an intervention toward abolition and an attempt to unthink current care systems

toward their undoing. This work is not being offered to professionalized care workers as a framework for incremental, tokenized or performative change. I do not offer care-full writing as a tool of reform, as a way of writing about young Black people differently within the same systems of oppression that include them only symbolically, as a reference point to prop up existing systems of power and to anchor professional identities. It is not a proposed best practice of writing about Black people within the systems that accelerate our deaths, nor is it a method for teaching African/diasporic Black care practices to non-Black care workers. But here, it is offered as a broad invitation (through accessible language and format) to labour together to remember, to imagine and to practice care differently. There is no saving child and youth care or social work or any of the other state-sanctioned carceral care disciplines—not through diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives; not through representational politics; and not through restructuring. That is not what these systems need to eliminate their harm. To borrow the words of Dionne Brand:

*This does not seek a remedy
 this does not need a balm
 this needs an ending.*
 (“Nomenclature for the Time Being” 19)

Chapter One: Something Called Care

To ask about care is to consider how to be together, how to
forge a way otherwise, how to imagine life and love and
possibility. It's about how to be, how *we* be.
—Ashon Crawley, “After Over-Representation, Care”⁷

“What about the worlds they are making? Can you see them? Do
you apprehend them and the beautiful lives that they make in the
midst of deprivation and terror? Can you hear them—their
sorrow and joy, their pain and refusal, and their insistent desires
and political demands? What are the conditions, the grammars
and the tenses, in which those expressed demands and desires
might be heard and met not with force, but with care?”
—Christina Sharpe “And to Survive”⁸

In 2014, the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) program at Ontario colleges became the Child and Youth Care (CYC) program. This marked the latest in a series of name changes for the relatively young profession and a move to usher in a nomenclature that would garner increased respect for what the field boasts as a unique and skilled approach to offering support and care to young people and their families.⁹ As a working CYW and a

⁷ Crawley, Ashon. “After Over-Representation, Care.” *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, pp. 302-306.

⁸ Sharpe, Christina. “And to Survive.” *Small Axe*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 171-180.

⁹ The professional designation in child and youth care (which has at various times also been: child care worker, child and youth counsellor, child and youth worker and child and youth care practitioner) reflects both the professional practice and the pre-service training programs offered at post-secondary institutions, and the name changes across these sites have not always happened synchronously. Furthermore, there are several longstanding and yet-unresolved debates in the field surrounding the designation with respect to its usefulness and limitations for representing the practice. Outside of Canada there are even more names used to describe the field – Child and Youth Care Work in South Africa and Social Pedagogy in Germany, to name only two. The name debate is not unrelated to the also-ongoing discussion as to whether child and youth care is a profession (or if it is more accurately described as a discipline or simply a *field*) based on factors such as quantity and quality of field-specific knowledge-production and split perspectives on CYC's efforts toward professionalization. I will be using *profession*, *field*, and *discipline* interchangeably to talk about child and youth care throughout this dissertation to reflect those tensions. (To read more about these discussions, see Charles & Garfat, “Child and Youth Care Practice in North America: Historical Roots and Current Challenges” (2009); Gharabaghi, “Re-Naming Child and Youth Care Practice” (2021) and “Re-Naming the

sessional lecturer at the time the name change was initially proposed, I was invited to one of the several roundtable discussions that were held to consider if and what that name change would be. A dominant theme of the conversations throughout the day was how well or poorly the current professional designation of child and youth worker reflected the practice of care claimed by the field. ‘Working’ with young people was vague and some thought that this vagueness contributed to the undervaluing of our specific skill set and the work that we were doing. Another priority that emerged from the discussions was the necessity to maintain a clear distinction between child and youth workers and other care practitioners (like social workers or early childhood educators working in a child care centre, for example). The resulting decision meant that new graduates of both college and university programs would now be Child and Youth Care Practitioners—a reframe to acknowledge a field of trained professionals who not only *worked* with young people, but who performed care as professional practice.¹⁰ Garfat et al.’s “Characteristics of a Relational Child and Youth Care Approach Revisited”—an updated version of one of the most widely taught papers in Child and Youth Care pre-service training programs in Ontario—describes the contemporary practice this way:

A CYC practitioner’s position in the daily life of another person, and/or their family and community, allows the practitioner to intervene proactively, responsively and immediately to assist others to develop different ways of acting

profession Revisited – An epilogue” (2021) Beyond this, there is very little written to document and track the name changes in of the field in Ontario.)

¹⁰ Degree programs in the province already used this language by this time, so this change brought 3-year college diploma programs (Child and Youth Care) and 4-year baccalaureate degree programs (Bachelor of Child and Youth Care and Bachelor of Arts with a major in Child and Youth Care) under the same nomenclature.

and experiencing in the world...There is no other form of helping which is so immediate, so grounded in the present experiencing or, one might say, so everyday....CYC practice is not oriented around temporally spaced and infrequent visits to an office where the ‘client’ meets with a therapist who has little to no experience of the individual’s experiences in everyday life. Rather, it is based on being in-the-moment with the individual(s), experiencing their life and living with it them as it unfolds. (Garfat et al. 10-11)¹¹

Though CYC is often cited as a fairly young profession, Grant Charles and Thom Garfat (2009) trace the genesis of the field in North America back as early as the 1700s. Namely, its roots can be tied to (1) the expansion of church-run orphanages in the 1700s; (2) the recreation and ‘fresh air’ movements of the mid-19th and early 20th century through organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA, which were established to support poor, European migrants and later expanded to run shelters and residential programs; (3) state- and province-run correctional institutions meant to eliminate “deficiencies and deficits” in children (including emotional and behavioural issues as well as cognitive and physical disabilities); and (4) residential schools, with the full weight of their genocidal objectives. The specific mandates of these institutions varied, but they shared a disciplining and assimilative design that depended on the church, then lay people, and eventually on workers with specialized training to run their programs.

The first training program for child and youth care practitioners in Ontario (then called child care workers) ran out of Thistletown Hospital in Toronto in the late 1950s.

¹¹ The paper updates Garfat and Fulcher’s “Characteristics of a Relational Child and Youth Care Approach.” *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice*, vol. 24, no. 1-2, 2011, pp. 5-24.

Thistlethorn itself was established under the direction of John Rich, a psychiatrist, and Lon Lawson, a social worker, as a treatment hospital for *emotionally disturbed* children.

Together they aimed to establish a therapeutic milieu—a practice model that differed from the institutions that it succeeded. The model used daily life events such as mealtime, washing and dressing, hobbies and games as sites for therapeutic intervention. The hospital's residential programming was run by staff—formerly doctors, teachers, social workers and occupational therapists, many of whom were recruited from England—who would be trained as *child care workers*. They would be taught to do this type of relational rehabilitative work as part of a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, nurses, doctors and social workers. In theory, this time together allowed child care workers to pay close attention to children's behaviour and make sense of it as a way of communicating their needs and difficulties. In reality—and despite the stated goals of a less-authoritarian approach to care—children were still living within the existing infrastructure of locked doors and barred windows, and programming retained the residues of pathology and assimilation present in the allied disciplines and foundational institutions that predated child care work. The practice was new to many of the staff, and the training for the new child care workers was being developed concurrently with the implementation of the service model. Written accounts from the first cohort of staff described the early years as chaotic and rife with a general antagonism between the staff and the children who had a range of significant intellectual, behavioural, psychiatric and physical needs—children who

were, according to the written accounts, disruptive, ungovernable, undisciplined.¹² That is to say: many of the staff had no idea what they were doing and the children under their care suffered the consequences.

Over the next several years, the practice and training of child care workers developed under the changing leadership at Thistletown, which continued to be run by white men trained in psychiatry or social work, who collectively established the beginnings of a child and youth care *canon*. The practice expanded significantly with practitioner training programs being offered through public colleges then universities, extending curriculum to include content in sociology, economics, political science and English.¹³ A professional association of Child Care Workers was incorporated in 1969 (as Child Care Workers Association of Ontario) under the leadership of Dennis E. McDermott. The association changed its name in 2015 to the Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care (or OACYC) to reflect the current language of the field and is now the largest child and youth care association in North America.¹⁴

Despite the growth of the field and the aforementioned name change, the discipline remained largely the same. Leadership and membership in professional associations, post-secondary curriculum development, and policy decisions all continued to reflect “a field

¹² Gilmour-Barrett, Karen, and Susan Pratt. “Excerpt From: A New Profession.” J. Shamsie (Ed.), *Experience and Experiment: A Collection of Essays Outlining the Development of Services for Emotionally Disturbed Children in the Province of Ontario*. Canadian Mental Health Association, 1977.

¹³ As of 2023, Ontario is home to 20 post-secondary Child and Youth Care programs at college, undergraduate and graduate levels.

¹⁴ McDermott’s vision for the future of the field was generally a carceral wet dream wherein child and youth workers operated more like the police. See McDermott, Dennis. “The CYC ‘SWAT Team’ and Other Thoughts on the Future of Our Profession.” *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, vol. 15, 2001, pp. 249-252. See also <https://oacyc.org/the-history-of-child-and-youth-care-in-ontario/> for more on the history of the OACYC.

that in North America developed within an almost exclusively white social context” (Gharabaghi “Why are We So White” 6). A small core group of white practitioner-theorists—mainly (and predictably) a handful of affluent heterosexual white men—continued building an insular CYC cannon and the profession maintained its overwhelming alignment with Euro-Canadian framings of risk, resilience, vulnerability, childhood, family, in/dependence, health, illness and protection. Child and youth care practitioners increasingly became part of the interdisciplinary teams in schools, juvenile custody facilities, community-based mental health programs, as well as family monitoring systems (i.e. the Children’s Aid Society), while continuing to have a strong presence in residential programs (shelters, group homes) and hospital-based mental health and addictions treatment programs. Due to the nature of the interdisciplinary and multisite service model, child and youth care practitioners work with young people in nearly every sector that has been criticized for participating in the gross mistreatment of Black and Indigenous communities by way of the administration of state care: health care, mental health and addiction treatment, housing, therapeutic residential care, legal custody, family policing, education.¹⁵ For Black children and their families, this mistreatment is particularly well-documented in the context of excessive and unnecessary school discipline; disproportionate rates of family surveillance as well as more frequent and longer child-caregiver separation;

¹⁵ I am using Dorothy Robert’s term “family policing” that more accurately captures the role of so-called “child welfare” systems in monitoring and punishing families as an extension of the carceral state. See Roberts, Dorothy. *Torn Apart. Basic Books*, 2022.

the neglect and abuse of children placed in group homes and foster placements; and the (further) criminalization of young people *in care*.¹⁶

The explicit turn to the language of care did not interrupt the colonial legacy out of which child and youth care tracks its evolution, nor did it resolve longstanding critiques of the field. Both reform- and abolition-oriented researchers across Ontario have and continue to study, track, describe and contextualize the disproportionate harms inflicted through state-administered education, “protection” and “justice” and the resulting reports and scholarship reflect Black and Indigenous children’s increased vulnerabilities to violence at the hands of care systems, in contrast to the protection and assumed innocence afforded to white children by the same systems.¹⁷ At the same time, a swiftly growing faction of the profession, led by Black and Indigenous practitioner-researchers in and out of Ontario, are challenging the field’s explicit commitment to a professional identity and set of practices that inflicted so much harm.¹⁸

The problem illustrated here and that my project attends to, is that much of what is named and described by the state and its institutions as ‘care’ is actually violence. It is a

¹⁶ See, for example: Edwards et al. (2022), James & Turner (2017); Maynard (2017); Munroe, McCready & Bordon Penney (2019); OACAS, *One Vision One Voice Practice Framework* (2016); Ontario Child Advocate (2019); Pon et al. (2011). Roberts (2022); and Finlay et al. (2018).

¹⁷ See Contenta & Rankin (2020); Green et al. (2020); Teshome & Yang (2018)

¹⁸ Examples of these challenges can be read in the special issue of *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* (edited by Jean-Pierre et al., 2021), which aims to “advance [an] understanding of accountability and commitment to Indigenous, decolonial, critical, experiential, and participatory praxis in child and youth care postsecondary education” (1). See also Amponsah & Stephen (2020) who write in favour of moving away from performative frameworks of white allyship toward active and intentional solidarity work with Black children, youth and families; Ineese Nash’s (2020) intervention into colonial and assimilative constructions of disability through Indigenous (Anishinaabek) perspectives; Munroe (2019, 2021, 2022) whose work focusses on the challenges and strategies of Black children and families navigating K-12 education, with special attention to queer and trans young people; and Gharabaghi (2017) and Saraceno (2012) who have brought explicit challenges to the pervasive and overwhelming commitment to whiteness in child and youth care education, practice and leadership.

violence unevenly distributed across race, gender, class, and place, and extensively documented as such—far beyond what should easily satisfy even bad-faith demands for “proof”—and yet it is continually re-narrativized as safety, protection, treatment, welfare, or support. Over the past three years, the calls to defund the police have often come with a call to reinvest in social programs. However, without looking at the how those social programs are engaged in the same forms of carceral and colonial violence that are being critiqued in policing, or how social services work *with* police to deploy violence *as* care, then what we risk is a continual reinvestment of financial, energetic and political resources into systems that are designed to reproduce domination, as if they could ever be the solution to their own violence. Without that critical recognition, what’s at stake is replacing police with what Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie call “soft police”— which includes child and youth care practitioners and other authority figures such as “medical professionals, social workers, and government bureaucrats [who] engage in policing in their own right, and [who] are often entangled with traditional law enforcement” as they regulate and staff state care systems (“No Soft Police” 140).¹⁹ The narrative strategy of conflating a coordinated set of practices known to hurt and kill Black people with a *care system* is an example of what Christina Sharpe calls the dysgraphia of disaster within the orthography of the wake.²⁰ The misnaming is one of many practices that actively work to mask domination and thereby reproduce antiblackness within and beyond state care systems. One result, as

¹⁹ This sentiment is echoed in the billboard that was installed in Harlem in 2021 that read, “Some cops are called caseworkers #AbolishNYCACS” (New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services). See Megan Conn, “Pressure Builds to Reduce Racial Disproportionality in New York’s Child Welfare System.” *The Imprint*, 19 Jan 2021. <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/new-york-calls-grow-address-racism-child-welfare/51073>

²⁰ *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016)

outlined here, is that the word *care* now evokes such conflicting meaning across and outside of academic study and professional practice, that the significance of the word itself can fall—and has indeed fallen—apart.

In this chapter, I establish the context for my engagement with care and care work by first situating it through the theories and conversations happening across and between Black studies, gender studies, Black feminisms, and the child- and family-serving professional care disciplines (primarily in terms of child and youth care practice, which works across many child- and family-serving institutions). I then introduce and theorize what I am calling care-full writing as a mode of care work and as my method for studying, teaching and enacting care through writing. That is, I am theorizing care-full writing as a praxis and pedagogy of care. I mean praxis here in the Black feminist tradition of grounded and relational active theorizing; and pedagogy for its method of Black study that engages “a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires” (Harney & Moten 11). As a Black studies project, the goal of my intervention is not to re-/establish a unifying or universal Truth about blackness or Black people—or even about something that might be described as *Black care*—but rather to investigate dominating “truths” in narratives and texts used to teach, define and regulate care work and their relationship to chattel slavery’s ongoing project of unfreedom.

Species Activities

I begin my study with Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher’s important contribution to feminist studies of care that defines care as follows:

...in the most general sense, care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. [...] Care is about meeting needs, and it is always relational: the skinned knee of a child who fell off his bike isn't only about scrapes and germs, it is also about creating the conditions for him to feel safe in the world. (Tronto *Who Cares?* 3-4)²¹

I am intrigued by the phrase *species activity* even as I extend Fisher and Tronto's assertion of what comprises 'our world' to the posthuman constituencies covered by Puig de la Bellacasa's figuration of more than human worlds, including humans (ourselves, people we know, people we don't), non-human animals (those we see and know, those we don't), the environment (plants, land, water, air; built and destroyed environments; as well as the structures, systems, and institutions that make up our societies), spiritual forces (those we engage with, those we don't), and technologies in use, disuse, and development.²² While the expansive definition focuses on interdependence as central to theorizing relations that are human and more-than-human, it is limited and limiting in a number of ways. To begin, the assertion that care is *always relational* points not only to the interpersonal, interspecies, and technologically-mediated interconnectedness fostered through acts of care, but is also a reminder to consider the broader social relations that structure the context out of which

²¹ Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto first offered a definition for care in "Toward a feminist theory of caring" (1991), which Joan Tronto has since built upon in her subsequent work in the area of feminist political philosophy. See Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993) and *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics* (2015).

²² See Puig de la Bellacasa, "The Disruptive Thought of Care." (2017)

those acts of care are born. For a study of care relative to Black life, the structuring relations that beg consideration include all of those imposed upon captured and displaced people through genocidal projects of nation-building.

In “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang insist on the importance of being attentive to the specificities of “the colonial apparatus that is assembled to order the relationships between particular peoples, lands, the ‘natural world’, and ‘civilization’...” noting that “[in] North America and in other settings, settler sovereignty imposes sexuality, legality, raciality, language, religion and property in specific ways” (21). In this context, the characterization of care as a *species activity* evokes both the neo-Lamarckian narrative that claims sympathy and care as the evolutionary accomplishments of those who are *hereditarily* white,²³ and the liberal humanist project that relies on “the black body [as] an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and measure of human progress” (Jackson 46). Both rely on the racial coding and colonizer/colonized relationship articulated through the secularization of the European Judeo-Christian social order to figure Black people at and as the limit of care. The secularized racial order maintained the existing gender hierarchy, figuring (white Christian heterosexual) *Man* as citizen and the overrepresentation of the human, (white) woman as (his) dependent, and the captured (now Black) Africans as well as the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as the referent of the less-than-human/non-human other.²⁴ Though sex

²³ Cotton Seiler, “The Origins of White Care.” Hobart, Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani, and Tamara Kneese, eds. *Radical Care, special issue of Social Text*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020.

²⁴ See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257-337.

differentiation remained, the imposed non-human status rendered Black womanhood incomprehensible. As such, “Black female flesh function[ed] as the ‘limit case’ of the human” (Jackson 4) which placed Black woman/hood beyond this limit.

The human/non-human distinction was foundational to chattel slavery’s project of turning people into property that could then be stolen, sold, purchased, traded, marked, shipped, beaten, discarded and killed without guilt, shame, remorse or regret and often completely within the bounds of the laws. Imposed relations of property stripped captive bodies of western reading of gender and enforced kinlessness as its requirement. Spouses, siblings, parents and children could be and were separated from each other, disrupting existing social and familial relations and breaking up linguistic groups in order for slavers to assert their status as “owner.” The process of *ungendering* and the disruption of familial connection dually moved enslaved women outside of the dependent-protected status that white European women occupied relative to their male counterparts and established the circumstances for particular modes of racially un/gendered subjugation integral to slavery, particularly the regular use of sexual violence as a mode of capitalist re/production.²⁵

Despite the differences between the structure and scale of chattel slavery in Canada and the United States, reproductive labour and the violence of its implementation were present in both contexts. Similarly, in both contexts, children were the property of the enslaving white master from conception. Robyn Maynard writes that on the lands now known as Canada, “under slavery even Black women’s wombs were not safe from the reach of their white masters or from the violence of being reduced to property” (22). Care born out of this

²⁵ Weinbaum (2019) *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*. See also Adrienne Davis, “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery.”

context necessarily responded to transatlantic slavery and its descendent institutions that continue their violence into the present.

Black studies scholars have written extensively about perpetually re-institutionalized relations of domination and their material impacts on Black life. This scholarship includes the conceptual language that allows us to engage with slavery as a present and expansive project evidenced in the contemporary care industry. Saidiya Hartman writes of *slavery's afterlife* as the present and ongoing conditions of “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (“Lose Your Mother” 6). Similarly, Christina Sharpe writes of Black life *in the wake* of slavery, taking up the multiple meaning of “wake” to conceptualize the contemporary manifestations and consciousness of and Black resistance to—slavery’s ongoing violence,²⁶ while Katherine McKittrick writes of *plantation futures* to describe how the logics of the plantation extend into and are reproduced in the present, in the spaces and systems that organize social life.²⁷ Each offers a theoretical framework for tracking and naming slavery’s significant and ongoing role in shaping our ongoing and dis/continuous physical, spatial, political, and social contexts for care—which allow us to recognize and name these dynamics in professional/institutional care settings, and to recognize how the human/non-human species distinction continues to provide the framework for an intelligible, rationalizable break between who deserves care (Man, consanguine and “beset” white kin) and who falls

²⁶ Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

²⁷ Katherine McKittrick “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*, vol. 42, 2013, pp. 1-15. doi: 0.1215/07990537-2378892

outside of the universe of moral obligation (referent of the projected Other). Or, put otherwise, a separation between those who should live and those who can be left to die.²⁸

A Violence Called Care

One spring day in 2011, I was working as the intake worker at a residential youth program / community centre in a neighbourhood outside of Toronto populated predominantly by Black families and older east Asian adults. It was a densely-populated area with several high-rise apartment buildings and the centre was always well-attended by community members. On this particular afternoon, the community centre was full of children and adults playing games and sharing time across various activities—playing badminton, colouring, joking and negotiating with program staff for extra time on the computer. Snacks were being handed out in the kitchen. A young person anxiously waited for me to retrieve them from the reception area for their intake interview. I arrived on the main floor of the building to greet them just in time to watch Peel Police officers chase a community member, a fifteen-year-old Black boy into the centre. Initially driving after him in a tactical unit van, the cops pulled onto the lawn and then followed him inside on foot—rifles drawn—and pinned him against the wall. The rest of us were ordered not to move. Naturally, people were terrified and angry, not the least of them being the child who had an assault rifle pointed at his back. The police kept him there for several minutes before lowering their weapons. Someone ran to his home to bring his mother to the centre, and she arrived before he was put into the police cruiser.

²⁸ Michel Foucault. “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. See also Cotton Seiler, “The Origins of White Care” and Christina Sharpe, “Lose Your Kin.” *The New Inquiry*, 26 Nov 2016.

I anticipate that upon reading this story some may ask, *but what did he do?* A question that repeats the violence of the police by seeking a way to justify it. And I could share the nature of the charges that were subsequently laid in an attempt to legitimize this *lawful capture*, but this information is irrelevant. Whatever this child had been accused of doing could never terrorize us the way this violation by way of state protection had. None of us were kept safe from harm or injury that day, as is promised by the language of ‘protection’ ubiquitously touted as the mandate of the police (to serve and protect). Instead, we were subjected to a violent invasion and the apprehension of a member of our community—a child—the effects of which were felt long after the tire marks on the lawn had faded.

I remember that day and think of Calvin Warren’s discussion of care in the context of metaphysical violence—what Warren describes as “violence ...in which black being is incessantly stripped, ripped apart, and humiliated. This violence is without end, without reprieve, without reason or logic [...] violence constitutive of a metaphysical world (the violence sustaining the world’s systems and institutions)” (37). This world-sustaining violence registers injuries on a level deeper than the body—what Hortense Spillers calls “the flesh” and what Warren refers to as “the constitutive elements of a person’s being” or (quoting Rev. Herber Brown III) “the spirit, soul, psyche”²⁹—but does not translate as harm within state “care” systems. Metaphysical violence demands care that recognizes that anti-Black violence is not a symptom of a broken world, but an indication that the world is

²⁹ See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s baby, papa’s maybe: An American grammar book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65-81. See also: Calvin Warren, “Black Care.” *Liquid Blackness*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2016, pp. 35-41.

functioning as it is meant to do. Thus, Fisher and Tronto's notion of care that is concerned with *maintaining, continuing and repairing our current world* so that "we" (the species that cares) can live in it as well as possible, does not actually propose an end to ongoing unfreedom, to surveillance and regulated movement, to disrupted kinship, to separation and abandonment, to capture, detainment, or incarceration. Nor does it offer an end to the metaphysical violence of an anti-Black world, but instead pursues a framework for its preservation.

What then is care that would attend to the injury inflicted upon the *spirit, soul and psyche* of the Black child who was chased, pinned, cuffed, searched and captured as his friends and neighbours looked on; as the (primarily Black) staff in the building stood by, speaking evenly to reassure him as the police shouted, yet unable to come to his aid? What is care for the other Black children who were present that day and for whom the community centre would forever feel slightly less safe? For the apprehended boy's mother who "must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of [her] child" (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 78)? For the Black staff who despite their desire to intervene were rendered powerless to stop the assault? Warren offers Black care. Black care does not attempt to eliminate metaphysical violence (knowing that it cannot be eliminated from the world it upholds), but instead engages an affective, lateral *sharing* of the injury that anti-Black violence registers on the flesh. It is care oriented toward collective survival (or as Warren puts it, *endurance*)—a communication that registers and addresses and affirms personal and collective injury through "a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic...as a lateral practice" that includes such untranslatable modes as laughter,

crying, dancing, moans and shrieks (Warren 44). And, I would add, through sucked teeth, rolled eyes, and strategically-held, knowing gazes from across the main floor of a community centre.

The affective-collective orientation of Black care runs counter to the logics of state care in at least two ways. First, the neoliberal care industry's double-barrel model of charity and self-improvement depends on the separation of self and other to advance its project of self-discipline under the pretext of *helping youth to help themselves*. Second, as Warren notes, it is mobilized through communicative forms that exceed translation or deciphering, which state care systems rely on to construct narratives about a knowable (surveillable) object of care around which an industry can operate.

An Industry Called Care

Thinking specifically about Black young people, the narratives advanced by municipal, provincial and federal governments to explain “the problem” being addressed through policy and funding are thinly-veiled (if veiled at all) attempts to further their system of carceral control. Since 2006 in the province of Ontario, there have been five major “youth strategies” advanced by the provincial government, all of which are less strategy and more funding packages: Youth Opportunities Strategy (2006)³⁰; Ontario Youth Action Plan (2012);³¹ Ontario Indigenous Children and Youth Strategy (OICYS) (2013);

³⁰ See McGuinty Government Providing More Opportunities for Youth (<https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/83423/mcguinty-government-providing-more-opportunities-for-youth>)

³¹ See Ontario's Youth Action Plan (<https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgroundunder/21884/ontarios-youth-action-plan>)

Enhanced Ontario Youth Action Plan (2015);³² and Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (2017).³³ With the exception of the OICYS, the strategies all have a focus on reducing youth crime—language that sometime shifts toward addressing “risk factors”—through increasing funding to policing and police engagement programs. These have included securing permanent funding for the Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) and the Provincial Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (PAVIS); doubling the Crime Stoppers reward for tips that result in the seizure of guns; expanding the Youth in Policing Initiative; and investing over \$20 million into 21 additional programs to prevent “bullying and violent crime.” (“Support for Communities”) The last strategy was initiated despite reporting that provincial and national crime rates were down 17% and 10% respectively.

The programs reinforce individual responsibility while downloading the responsibility for systemic issues to the individual. For example, the Black Youth Action Plan (2017) begins with an acknowledgement that systemic racism exists, but then offers no plans that address systemic issues, nor a mechanism for evaluating the plan’s effectiveness. (And why would there be? A government is not going to fashion the tools to undoing such a lucrative industry.) Instead, once again, we see a plan for promoting *anti-violence* and *supporting at-risk youth*, euphemisms for facilitating a process Saidiya Hartman describes as internalizing the whip, whereby in the afterlife of slavery, Black people are socialized and disciplined into policing themselves to such a degree that external

³² See Ontario's Enhanced Youth Action Plan (<https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/33405/ontarios-enhanced-youth-action-plan>)

³³ See Ontario Increasing Opportunities for Black Children, Youth and Families (<https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/44052/ontario-increasing-opportunities-for-black-children-youth-and-families>)

“motivational” violence—the whip—is internalized.³⁴ Of course, with the constant flow of money into policing, the external force only increases.

The same is true of the family policing system in Canada (and beyond) as part of a long history of pouring resources into disciplining Black families, rather than providing them with the resources necessary to address the actual issues they face. For example, Robyn Maynard notes in *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, that with respect to Black families involved with Children’s Aid Societies in Canada, the majority of family separations are based on assessments of ‘neglect’ rather than physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Neglect is assessed as a “lack of food, space or parental presence” (Maynard 197) and is often a symptom of poverty or underemployment, posing no immediate threat to a child’s safety. However, Black families experiencing poverty are regularly disciplined by the family policing system for a “lack of material resources [which] is presumed to place children *at risk* of future parental maltreatment” (Roberts 69; *emphasis mine*) rather than for an evidence of current harm.

The *potential* for maltreatment then is what keeps Black families (especially poor Black families) under the watchful eye of the state. As Dorothy Roberts points out, many of the services poor families rely on to meet their needs are staffed by mandated reporters. Mandated reporting (or ‘Duty to report’) of suspected child abuse or neglect is a requirement under section 125 of the Child Youth and Family Services Act 2017 (CYFSA 2017) for “persons who perform professional or official duties with respect to children, such as health care workers, teachers, operators or employees of child care programs or

³⁴ Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

centres, police and lawyers” (OACAS, “Duty to Report”). This wide net of professionals who have a legal obligation to report anything they *suspect* could put a child at risk, extends the carceral web of antiblack surveillance that disproportionately disciplines Black women for such unremarkable actions as speaking loudly (Abdillahi 2022), packing roti for lunch (Maynard 2017), or following too far behind a speedy toddler racing through the park (Roberts 2022). The logics of the plantation repeat as Black women are kept in long-term involvement with the family policing system, subjecting them to ongoing surveillance and the constant threat of their children and any potential future children being apprehended into the *care* of the state.

“Black youth,” “at-risk youth,” “high needs youth” all become synonyms for the fungible object of care central to the youth tier of the care industry. That is, the indiscriminate and constantly replaceable target around which care programs (also called children protection, skills training, prevention/early intervention, anti-bullying/-violence/-gun/-*whatever* initiatives) coalesce. The individual young people and their circumstances are not important, but their function as a renewable resource is crucial. There is no care industry without an object of care and Black women’s reproductive labour continues to be an involuntary and essential component thereof. What is a \$20 million violence prevention strategy in an era of declining crime without a Black youth population always *at-risk* of criminality? What is a Child Protection Worker without endless *at-risk* children in need of “protection”?

The carceral and capitalist care industry evinces a state logic of life-making that is always already simultaneously a death-dispensing project (make live, let die). Therefore care that is oriented toward fixing this world—that is, systems and practices that are

invested in re-forming, amending, tweaking, adjusting, but materially continuing the discursively constituted, empirically institutionalized relations that structure our present world—only serves to reproduce its violence. Care for Black life can thus be understood as the terms of engagement for survival. Care as practice of survival turns its resources toward Black life lived in slavery’s wake, rather than to the institutions that carry out slavery’s ongoing project of domination. Which means that care is enacted through peer support and resource-sharing networks like a Black Womxn’s PhD WhatsApp Group, not through the performative inaction of the Dean’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee. So, whereas Joan Tronto reinvests in care as a framework through which to undertake a project of democratic and social reform, I am invested in the care that Saidiya Hartman describes as *the antidote to violence*.³⁵

Antidotes and Abolition

Studying care and care systems from the settler colony of Canada, I have found much value in the feminist theorist Bonnie Honig’s definition of care, which she describes as cultivating “anticipation of another world and [living] now dedicated to the task of turning this world into a better one.”³⁶ I read Honig’s description of care as consistent with abolitionist frameworks oriented toward building a better context for our collective living, over continually re-investing in systems and relations that are known to usher in premature death. The work of Black feminist abolitionists Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Robyn Maynard, Andrea J. Ritchie and others, has helped me conceive of

³⁵ Saidiya Hartman, “In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe.” (2017)

³⁶ Honig, Bonnie. “What White Supremacists Want” (<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/bonnie-honig-members-only-president/>)

abolition as the care that Honig describes—as a generative practice of imaginative world-making. Care, as a part of the constellation of strategies known as abolition, is dynamic and changes with time and context to reflect and respond to dominant socio-political ideologies and institutionalized hierarchies of domination. This includes all prisons and policing, but also child removal and family surveillance, locked psychiatric units, house arrest, and programs operating within the logics that designate certain people (Black people, poor people, queer and trans and mad and disabled people, fat people, displaced and migrant people) as always already deviant/criminal and which advocate for their state-sanctioned abandonment. It is not simply a reorganization of what already exists in a different form (re-formed)—for example, surveillance and criminalization by way of social workers and other *soft police*.³⁷ Abolitionist care actively seeks to divest from and dismantle carceral systems (and their institutions) through the building of different modes of relating that are grounded in an understanding of “the violence of organized abandonment” (Kaba & Ritchie “Black Feminist Musings” 275).³⁸ It is imagining what we want another world to look like and actively, intentionally working towards it every day through new and recovered modes of relation.

Mariame Kaba explains this practice as the discipline of hope.³⁹ Hope as an energetic thrust toward world-building is not a case for optimism, but is a commitment to practicing the relations that are incompatible with carceral institutions’ modes of control, punishment, isolation, surveillance and exploitation. Kaba reminds us that change can happen in any

³⁷ Kaba and Ritchie “No Soft Police”

³⁸ See also: Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007.

³⁹ Kaba (2021) “Hope is a Discipline.”

direction and abolition asks us to work actively toward creating the world we want, to practice those relations *now* understanding that the colonial nation state is fundamentally at odds with life-making systems. Abolitionist care recognizes the iatrogenic nature of carceral state care systems and their component practices, working against these formations by “[practicing] and [fighting] for conditions that will create safer communities and bring us closer to liberation” (Kaba and Ritchie, “Black Feminist Musings” 276).⁴⁰ The ‘us’ brought closer to liberation though abolition is the ‘everyone’ made free through the destruction of systems that oppress Black women, trans and gender nonconforming people as declared in the 1977 Combahee River Collective Manifesto, “A Black Feminist Statement.”

Ruth Wilson Gilmore illustrates the collective benefit of abolition through her discussion of abolition geography in “Making Abolition Geography in California’s Central Valley” (2018).⁴¹ Gilmore animates the Black feminist practice of contextualized action and collective care as she recounts being part of a group that, in 1999, tried to stop the construction of California’s twenty-fourth mega prison. The work was advanced through building relationships with other “already-organized people” to make sense of the issues central to their organizing and the interconnectedness between prisons, agriculture, the environmental, and the economy in California. In doing so, they were able to identify and articulate how building the prison threatened the air, land and water; human, animal and

⁴⁰ Iatrogenesis refers to the causing of illness or harm by medical intervention, error or neglect (Dictionary of Sociology, Encyclopedia.com) and is extended here to include the harms caused by care interventions, broadly.

⁴¹ <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/21-space-activism/interview-making-abolition-geography-california-central-valley-ruth-wilson-gilmore>

plant life; as well as job availability and employment security. Together the abolitionists—in collaboration with farm workers, environmental justice advocates, public sector employees, and labour unions—attended to the collective needs of the expanded group (which were not homogenous, but not unrelated). In the end, the prison was still built, but the process took three times longer than usual.

In another example, movements toward the abolition of the family policing system across North America demonstrate what Savannah Shange describes when she writes, “Abolition is not a synonym for resistance; it encompasses the ways in which Black people and our accomplices work *within, against and beyond* the state in service of collective liberation” (10; *emphasis in original*). Efforts toward abolition have not only included public demonstrations such as marches, rallies, and petitions, but also publications, talks and teach-ins and a renewed attention to the historical precedent of Black people’s self-organized care arrangements, such as extended family networks, kinship care (within and outside the formal foster care system), and other collective and queer care arrangements.⁴² Efforts have been coordinated by parents, researchers, young people and child protection staff who have witnessed the failure of child welfare reforms to increase safety for Black children and to decrease the state’s control of Black families. Dorothy Roberts puts it plainly: “Reforming family policing results in more family policing” (284). Even widely lauded reform initiatives such as “One Vision, One Voice,” have ultimately become part of the ongoing system of family regulation. The initiative, which was originally intended to be a short-term project led by Black researchers and care workers and guided by Black

⁴² Following Cathy Cohen, I am using queer here to signal all of the relationships that fall outside of the narrow scope of white, Christian, monogamous heteronormativity.

community members to reform child welfare in Ontario, was granted \$800 000 of ongoing annual funding in 2021 by the Ministry of Children Community and Social Services, ensuring the continued policing of Black families.

By contrast, the unplanned experiment in abolition that took place in the state of New York during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic offers useful lessons on the necessary infrastructure for dismantling family policing. Roberts explains that when the lockdowns in early 2020 forced the family policing system into significantly reduced contact with families, community groups stepped in to attend to families' self-identified needs. The federal government issued financial aid directly to families without the intermediating regulation of transfer payment programs and children "remained equally safe in their homes during the shutdown as when family policing was in full effect" (Roberts 291). The experiment was an improvised dance of relating differently to meet each other's needs. That is not to say that abolition is a *cure* for the carceral and capitalist arrangements that underwrite care systems, but rather that it is attentive to the contextualized violence of those arrangements in the imagining and rehearsal of a different set of arrangements. It is a process that "demands specificity" (Shange 10) in the implementation of those arrangements. Or, restated differently, abolition does not have the goal of fixing/curing this world (a futile endeavor), but to disrupting the relations that sustain this world by building the relational infrastructure that would support a new one.

In the foreword to Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Rehearsals for Living*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore returns to the central principle of her lecture "Meanwhile: Making Abolition Geographies" that states (in part) that "abolition is life in rehearsal" (10). The efforts toward abolishing the family policing system—the ones that work and the ones

that fail, those intended and unintended—are a rehearsal of the world and the life we want. If you have ever been to the rehearsal of a play, you know that a rehearsal is an *active* process of bringing something to fruition. It requires setting the stage, stepping into a role, coordinating spacing and timing with the other actors. Rehearsals are messy—full of mistakes and missteps and frustration, of taking it from the top (this time with feeling!), scrapping the line that doesn't work, entering from a new angle, taking direction and growing more confident as the intended production starts to take shape. It is exhausting. And even when there is a plan, sometimes rehearsals involve improvisation. Rehearsals are collaborative endeavors of practicing something until the stage, the cast, the crew have transformed into the thing you've been collectively working toward.

Perhaps then, despite the contradiction in language, I conceive of abolitionist care in terms of what Jared Sexton's describes as *treatment* in his opening remarks presented (by proxy) at the 2023 Strategies of Critique Conference: Care and Cure, in which he states that “care aims at cure (and usually misses the mark); treatment aims at transformation (and succeeds even when it fails).” He proposes that our task is to care less (that is, divest from the urge to cure) and figure out how to *treat each other and ourselves* in the service of transformation. Critical disability scholars and survivors also warn against the inclination toward cure (restoration, rehabilitation) describing cure as “a concept that has deep roots in ableist ideas that when there is something wrong, there's either cured or broken and nothing in between, and certainly nothing valuable in inhabiting a bodymind that's disabled in any way” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 226). The disabling force is in the structures of capitalism, not the “bodyminds” that navigate a world designed to exclude them. Cure, then, attempts to repair something that is not broken, whereas abolitionist care (or treatment toward

transformation) works to establish and inhabit relational practices of meeting needs that refuse logics of assimilation and exclusion, even as the world is structured by *violence without end, without reprieve, without reason or logic*.

Lena Piepzna-Samarasinha's analysis of care webs illustrates this through the example of Loree Erickson's care collective, a group of disabled and non-disabled people who share the work of supporting her daily tasks (dressing, bathing, transferring to bed and toilet), the administrative work of arranging appointments, and training new "care shifters" including those who join her collective temporarily when she travels. The model figures Loree's care collective as a site of community and political organizing rather than a model of charity, and her access as "something she both needs and deserves, and as a chance to build community, hang out with Loree, and have fun—not as a chore" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 45). Care as survival and care as abolition are, therefore, not antithetical but part of the same project toward collective liberation built on relationality, attentiveness and imagination, operationalized through the strategies that produce the conditions to survive this world until it is no more.

It is worth taking the extra time here to emphasize that I am not using care or care work as a euphemism for a branch of undervalued/under-compensated, gendered and raced work that "*nobody wants to do*" as it was described by a lecturer at a summer seminar I attended some time ago. The responsibilities of caring have often been relegated to the members of society who have the least access to full citizenship and recognized humanity, and so I acknowledge and agree that gender, race and class all figure significantly into the responsibility and labour distribution of care work. However, I am speaking about care work as the ways we engage relationally to understand and attend to our interrelated and

collective needs. And specifically, I am thinking about how care is enacted in response to heteropatriarchal structures; in the midst of quotidian and spectacular violence; and in the wake of capture, enslavement, colonization, and genocidal nation-building—all which signal a need for a different set of organizing relations.

Care-full Writing

If care is the antidote to violence, then *care work* is the means by which we administer the tonic. And care-full writing, then, is what I am theorizing as care work in the narrative space of care. Care-full writing is a methodological intervention into the narration of Black life and a Black feminist mode of study that is invested in the meaning-making that occurs through the process of writing (and re-writing and over-writing) texts with attention to Black being. I am using the term as a taxonomy for a range of writing practices that intentionally engage with the personal, the affective, and the uncertain as sites of knowledge and to signal a praxis of Black feminist writing as theory- and care-in-practice, activated through “forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic... [and]... pithy language that unmask[s] the power relations of [our] world” (Christian 68). Or, put otherwise, care-full writing is a practice (action, exercise, rehearsal) and praxis (embodiment of theory, active theorizing) of writing with and as care.

Care-full writing is thus part of a larger project of Black studies that pushes back against the ways “we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter has called our ‘narratively condemned status’” (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 13). It is my attempt to describe and follow in a tradition of Black feminist writing that holds centrally a consideration of the

life being written about and an intentionality about the audience for whom the text is written. The approach requires critical, patient, curious attention to the sounds, signs and silences in accounts of care for Black people, and also to the context under which that care and those accounts come to be. I draw on Black feminists' modes of refusing objectivity and Black studies' resistance to the disciplinary distinctions imposed by the academy to theorize the experimental method I activate in this project to investigate the narrative space of care.

I therefore approach this project as a counter to the imagination-limiting standardization of professionalized care through care-full writing as *method-making*.

Katherine McKittrick writes that method-making:

...dwells on and thinks about the questioning and overturning of normative systems of knowledge, and thus what it means to be human, by situating the process of inquiry as the analytical framework through which to study. Method-making compulsively moves with curiosity (even in frustration) rather than applying a set of techniques to an object of study and generating unsurprising findings and outcomes. Methodology is disobedient (rogue, rebellious, black). ... Methodology that is relational, intertextual, interdisciplinary, interhuman, and multidisciplinary honors black studies..." ("The smallest cell" 44)

Curiosity, imagination, play and experimentation are critical to modes of study that respond to Christina Sharpe's imperative to *become undisciplined*.⁴³ So, instead of identifying a

⁴³ (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 13)

single writing *technique*, the term care-full writing describes a range of discursive and embodied practices that labour to disarticulate violence from care.

For example, I argue that Sharpe writes care-fully in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, “as a *counter to abandonment*,” using Black annotation and Black redaction and as a way of making inevitable a different seeing and reading of Black life (117; *emphasis mine*). Reading and extending Sharpe, K’eguro Macharia writes that “[c]are pays attention to how we *are known to ourselves and to each other*. Care lingers at the *ordinary*: notices it, names it, creates it, inhabits it, pursues it, practices it” (“Black Beyond Negation” *emphasis in original, denoting Macharia’s engagement with Sharpe’s work*). Care as a lingering, noticing, naming, creative practice uncovers the *ordinary* relations of Black life that complicate imagined distinctions between carer and cared-for; between academic, personal, and political; between past, present and future; and between writer, audience and subject—distinctions that are necessary to uphold and narrate the roles and power dynamics of the carceral care industry. Sharpe’s move toward another kind of sense-making insists on a way of seeing that is not synonymous with surveillance by the state or its (self-)deputized citizenry, but as a *countering force* of recognition, noticing, attentiveness and presence.⁴⁴

Savannah Shange brings this recognition to her care-full and disruptive approach to writing *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, + Schooling in San Francisco*. In her explicitly abolitionist project, Shange “[dances] a Black girl text” (11) by weaving Black English, the local dialects of San Francisco and what is commonly accepted as *academic prose* into an ethnographic study with an investment in authenticity and Black

⁴⁴ See also Sharpe’s most recent book, *Ordinary Notes* (2023), which is an extended demonstration of care-full writing as presence.

autonomy. An example of this is illustrated through her description of constructing pseudonyms for the students in the study:

Within Black naming traditions, the genres stay the same: Arabic-derived names are replaced with the same, while Black vernacular names are likewise remixed with the assistance of the most common Black names on the census registry plus a dose of my own creativity. Place-names (Kinshasa, Savannah, Asia) are relocated, while biblical names stay somewhere in the Good Book. Across the board, I tried to alter the number of syllables in a name such that John might become Elijah and Chauniqua might end up as LeNae. My assiduous attempts at retaining a sliver of participants' "real names" also point to my convoluted relationship with Black autonomy... (Shange 49)

Shange's writing practice relies on noticing and naming how the students and staff at Robeson and the community in San Francisco are known to each other. It demands the specificity that she recognizes as necessary for abolition and the presence required for care. The deliberate attention to Black naming traditions structures the reading of the text and demands a type of recognition that runs counter to the many other ways that Black people—and Black girls, in particular—are too often called outside of their names.

In another example, M. NourbeSe Philip engages in a method of care-full writing in *Zong!* to attend to the violence of the Zong massacre. Utilizing the legal decision in the *Gregson v Gilbert* court case, she undermines the report's attempt to objectively, logically, rationally, selectively and unemotionally account for the deliberate drowning of 150 abducted and trafficked Africans as a matter of insurance claims and property loss. Philip deconstructs—or as she describes it, *mutilates and murders*—the document that does not

record the extermination of 150 African lives as murder, using the text as a bank of pre-selected words to “tell the story that can only be told by not telling” (Philip & Boateng 191). Her notes reflect a writing practice that is also a performance—an embodied practice through which she strips the text of its violent ordering: “The legal text parallels a certain kind of entity—a whole, a completeness which like African life is rent and torn. This time though I do the tearing [...] I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem...” (192-193). The resulting work is a poetic intervention that is not meant to be read for understanding, but for “something else” (193). A *something else* that may be part of the differential reading practices required to engage narrative and poetry, described by Dionne Brand in “An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk”: “I suggest the reader interrogates Narrative but Poetry interrogates the reader. And here is poetry’s power. The reader’s response is tangential to poetry, whereas it is crucial to narrative. Poetry requires a deciphering of meaning whereas narrative enjoins, hails the known world” (59). By intervening in the narrative in the court transcripts, Philip makes the familiar unfamiliar and the intelligible unintelligible to contend with the impossibility of language to make sense of or communicate the metaphysical violence registered through the atrocities surrounding the Zong.

Saidiya Hartman theorizes her care-full writing practice, *critical fabulation*, as a method of speculative non-fiction and a labour to imagine what else may have taken place beyond what is accounted for in the historical archive. The method rejects the unrelenting surveillance and translation of Black life as it labours to undercut the authority of the

archival narrative. Far from claiming to recover a singular lost truth, Hartman engages the subjunctive, a grammatical tense that opens up the possibilities for what may have happened. She explains her method in her essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” as one that requires “[n]arrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure ...[and]... the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourses of Man” (12). Writing in this way—as imaginative possibility, as uncertainty, attentive to a different set of relations than those structured by Euro-western grammars of violence—runs counter to the normalizing and standardizing conventions of professionalized care systems and the academy in which care workers are trained.

In the chapters that follow, I perform care-full writing in the service of unthinking current state care system. Care-full writing makes evident the goals of state institutions and how those goals shape the nature of care services available to and forced upon Black young people and their families by disentangling surveillance and punishment from regard and relation. I attend to the task of this project as a collaborative study with these and other care workers inside and outside the academy who model practices of deliberate, attentive, curious, disobedient, relational writing as care—many of whom (as Saidiya Hartman says of Edouard Glissant and others in a November 2022 episode of the podcast *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism*) are not always explicitly cited, but *are* “always on the page with me” (“Scenes of Subection at 25” 0:07:23).⁴⁵ Drawing on the theoretical and methodological

⁴⁵ Indeed, many of the texts that have contributed to my thinking, theorizing and method are not cited in the dissertation proper. I have attempted to capture as many of those un-cited contributions as possible by

contributions of those named and unnamed in this chapter, I engage my own practice of care-full writing as *wake work*, to “think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state...” (Sharpe, *In the Wake* 20). Each of the strategies I build from offers a means for interrupting the harm inflicted through knowledge systems that uphold the narrativization of abandonment, dispossession, separation, isolation, surveillance, detainment, and physical force as expected, acceptable and even necessary aspects of care. The resulting work is an auto-theoretical experiment in collaboration and a *deeply personal and deeply social* ethic of working across texts and disciplines, inside and outside the academy to care for Black life.

including a more comprehensive Works Referenced list, rather than Works Cited. Any omissions are unintended.

Chapter Two: Case Notes / Care Notes

I worked in direct-service care settings (shelters, schools, community counselling programs, custodial group homes) for more than twelve years and regardless of the position or population I was working with, case notes have always been my least favourite part of my job. Case notes—also called progress notes—are the written records that care workers keep of any pertinent client information gathered through significant interactions, observations, and direct report.⁴⁶ Each one is an addition to the running story care workers write about young people during their time in care and about the context and content of that care. *Was the young person present at wake-up? Back by curfew? Chores completed? Meetings missed? Any updates to note? Goals? Assessments, interventions, outcomes, referrals, next steps.* Though they are mostly composed electronically now, I was taught to write case notes by hand, dating each entry and signing my name at the end. Unfortunately, my handwriting is pretty big and loopy and its legibility quickly deteriorates as my hand fatigues. I would often make spelling errors or miss words as my brain composed the note faster than my hand could record it. And since case notes are legal documents, corrections to handwritten mistakes had to be made by crossing out the error with a single line and initialing the change. Alternately, an additional case note could be written to correct an error in the former. Either way, all of my mistakes crowded the page, exposing me and forcing my colleagues and supervisors to really work at understanding what I had written.

⁴⁶ While this is generally true across state-funded care services, I will be grounding my discussion here in the context of child, youth and family care services.

As a centralizing point for co-ordinating care services, keeping accurate, up-to-date and intelligible case files is generally understood as an essential professional responsibility, and the importance of writing clear and thorough case notes was regularly reinforced to me through professional development and clinical supervision. In *Writing Matters: An Introduction to Record Keeping & Report Writing for Front-Line Workers*, a text used in many Child and Youth Care pre-service education programs in Ontario, Glenys Acorn lists seven reasons for writing case notes and reports: “1. tracking patterns of behaviour, 2. [increasing] practitioner recall (a lot can happen in one shift), 3. [helping] assess client behaviour, 4. [tracking] the professionalism of an agency and its staff, 5. [creating] stability and consistency in the workplace, 6. Accreditation, 7. Communication between staff members” (Acorn 13). While all of my professional training articulated documentation as a fundamental part of care to ensure continuity and quality of service, many of the “best practices” reinforced a framework that held *providing* care and *writing* care as two related but separate undertakings. This is evident in the recommendation that case notes be written as soon as possible after contact with a young person.⁴⁷ The standard assumes that care providers first meet with the young person and then later, once they are gone, the care worker documents what took place, any information shared of decisions made and the plan for what comes next. Or, put differently, providing care was a part of the relational, in-the-moment work of child and youth care that is tailored to the needs of the individual (or family, as the case may have it), while writing care was an administrative task of *narrating*

⁴⁷ Best practices for case note writing tend to range from 12-48 hours post-contact, but these standards are not universal and vary among institutions. See for example: Government of Northwest Territories (2020) “CFS Standards and Procedure Manual”; MCYS (2016) “Ontario Child Protection Standards”; and Toronto Shelter Standards (2015).

that care via the standardized parameters of the case note—objective and concise. Acorn notes that “practitioners who work in residential setting deal with the dilemma of whether they should spend shift time typing reports, or being with the young person in their charge. [...] It is important to stress that being with residents is the priority, but notes are necessary to grasp a clear understanding of what happened during a shift” (13). It was a subtle bifurcation wherein writing case notes was articulated as a critical part of my job as a care provider, but critical as reliable and timely evidence of care, rather than as an integrated part of it. The implications of that separation—the contradiction between relational practice and so-called *objective* reporting, the insufficiency of standardized documentation to reflect ostensibly individualized care, the reliance on the presumed credibility of practitioner memory to recall important details and verbatim quotes—were rarely addressed. And case files bear such enormous legal influence and are regularly referenced to make life-impacting decisions for young people and families, that the potential consequences of writing case files in this way warrants more careful consideration than limiting the time permitted between an interaction and its documentation.

This raises for me a question, asked by Barbara Christian in the context of literary criticism: *for whom are we doing what we are doing?*⁴⁸ Or, rephrased for the context of this chapter, *for whom are we writing this care in this way?* The question is at once one of audience and of benefit. *For whom are case files written? To be read by whom? In whose best interest?* The assumptive logic at play is that case notes are a neutral account of facts,

⁴⁸ Christian “The Race for Theory” (1988)

that the client file isn't always already saturated with the uneven powers of surveillance and that the practice is not always already violence.

In Part I of this chapter, I examine the genre of the client file as the presumed *official* account of care and an assertion of the authority of the professionalized care worker (as the extension of the state) over the client (the fungible object of care). I attend to the client file as a narrative tool that serves to re-enforce the relations of domination that underwrite state care systems (and therefore forecloses the possibility of care) through the stories professionalized care workers write about Black people and the care that attends to their needs. To do so, I read publicly available case notes from a much-studied child protection case involving the transracial adoption of six Black children who were abused, neglected and eventually murdered by their white adoptive parents, followed by Katherine Mariner's engagement with the story through her own method of care-full writing in "American Elegy: A Triptych."⁴⁹

In Part II, my focus is on accounts of care written for and from the perspective of the cared-for, where the narration troubles the distinction between carer/cared-for or crosses the boundary running between *within* and *beyond* state care systems. I explore Saidiya Hartman's intervention into the historical archives of state care in "Riot and Refrain" (*Wayward Lives* 2019) as well as my own performance of polyvocal and vulnerable care-

⁴⁹ There is no shortage of child maltreatment cases in Canada that could be the subject of analysis in this chapter, however I have chosen to engage with this US-based case precisely because of the many different ways it has been written about. The child protection investigation report was made public after the children's murder and the breadth of public and scholarly writing about the family and the case provides multiple sites for investigating the discourse of care and violence at various points during and after the children's lives. And while the specific laws and policies that govern family policing systems in Canada and the USA differ, the interplay between private and governmentally-regulated care systems in both countries similarly results in the disproportionately negative outcomes for Black young people and families, as discussed in Chapter One.

full writing in *Son* (2020) to uncover the ways that domination and care are made visible when the storytellers refuse the colonial logics of objectivity, the violence of discipline (carceral violence and credentialization), and the binary of carer/cared-for.

Part I: Case Notes

“... and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they’ll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy.”
—Nikki Giovanni, “Nikki-Rosa”

I am reading case files (alternately referred to as a ‘client file’ or ‘chart’) as a genre of sociological text concerned with narrating and archiving state-funded services called care for courts, regulatory bodies and funders. Though files are most often accessed by direct care providers, the prescribed form and style of the genre reflect its fidelity to the larger criminal punishment and family policing systems. Since reports can, at any time, be subpoenaed for use in a child protection case or other legal matters, they must be able to withstand the scrutiny of legal processes. In the case of a residential youth program, intake forms and primary assessments detail personal financial, medical, familial, legal and housing information which are meant to represent a comprehensive overview of the young person’s *official history*.

Functionally, case files reinforce and extend the relations of domination foundational to state care – the service user as the fungible object of care; the practitioner as an extension of the state, empowered to dispense violence and tell itself that it was care. Through case

files, professionalized caregivers assert their authority to author and archive the story of another, to claim exclusive access to read, amend and interpret the contents of the archive, and to set that archive—inaccessible to the service user—as the primary referent in care decisions and as the site for assessing good care. Thus the context under which personal details are solicited, collected, recorded and stored — that is, the context of a neoliberal welfare state replete with terrors of organized abandonment, systemic anti-blackness, and capitalist, carceral notions of care — must be considered when reading cases files and understanding the work that they do. That context must be considered as the file is self-referentially used to inform and archive practitioners’ decisions to grant or deny privileges and rights; to draw in or discontinue external services; to assess compliance; to justify withholding of care; and at all times, to serve the dual function as a site to assess and communicate risk which would warrant (further) imposed intervention and/or *protection* by state care practitioners. That is to say, I read the client file genre as falling in the lineage of sociological texts that do the work of narrating blackness as deficit, disease, and problem while articulating relations of power that legitimize state intervention in Black life as necessary, as treatment, and as solution.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Some examples of this long history include Daniel P. Moynihan’s widely-critiqued pathologization of the Black family in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (more commonly referred to as “The Moynihan Report”) and James Coleman et al.’s (1966) *Equality and Educational Opportunity*, which finds (among other things) that “Negroes in schools with a higher proportion of whites have a greater sense of control [over their own destiny]”—a factor the report ties closely to student achievement. The latter report was presented to the president to the United States and US congress in response to section 402 of the Civil Rights Act, 1964, but resonances of the assertion can be read in Sociology textbooks into the 21st century. Chapter 14, “Race and Ethnicity” in the text book *Sociology (Fourth Canadian Edition)*, revisits Canadian psychology professor Phillippe Rushton’s racist and controversial research that claimed a stratified racial intelligence in which Asian people are more intelligent than White people, who are more intelligent than Black people. The section titled “Does Race Affect Intelligence?” acknowledges the baselessness of biocentric theories of intelligence, but ultimately concludes that *cultural patterns matter*, stating that the difference between Asian folks with high IQ scores and Black folks with low IQ scores is that “Asians...have

Case files comprise three interrelated stories: the first is a continuously-updated contemporary history of a person under state care—including their eligibility or appropriateness for services rendered; the second details how and why care has been administered or not, its effectiveness, value and limits; and the third places that care in the context of the professional scope of practice for the care provider—both individually and at the level of the institution. All three aspects are authored by service providers through the collaborative narrative practice of clinical documentation and together are taken to be the most factual account of care. A case file may contain any combination of documents, including: “(1) consents and releases; (2) histories, assessments, and diagnoses; (3) problem-oriented service plans; (4) progress notes; (5) treatment outcome documentation of various types and levels of rigor; (6) referrals and follow-up notations; (7) supervision and consultation reports; (8) termination summaries; and (9) critical incidents and situations in which standards of care or ethical priorities are compromised” (Kane, et al. 201). The detailed archives, containing sometimes years of extensively recorded personal information and narratives of something called care, are gathered through ongoing surveillance and compiled by state-funded providers in order to “[produce] an account that adequately documents [...] that both the individual practitioner and the organization have properly discharged their duties and responsibilities” (O’Rourke 2010, qtd. in Hardy 114). That is, case files are written to be evidence of good care and to do so in a manner that will result in remuneration for services rendered. However, because disciplinary standards, institutional particularities and Ministry mandates dictate documentation protocols, case files differ

been raised to value learning and to pursue excellence... [whereas] African-Americans...carry a legacy of disadvantage that undermines self-confidence and discourages achievement” (Macionis & Gerber 350).

widely from program to program with respect to their format and the specific information they contain. Acorn writes, “Although agencies, facilities, and practitioners use a variety of record-keeping systems, and their client files might vary in composition and content from one workplace to the next, the writing style is a common one, *objective and professional*” (xvi; *emphasis in original*). Files at an in-patient psychiatric unit of a hospital, therefore, may house and prioritize different information than those at an emergency youth shelter or an open-custody program.⁵¹ Despite the difference in composition, the documents in the file, when read together, tell a story of the person *in care*, about the care services they have received, refused, declined, and—when read carefully— about the care that has been withheld.

Objects of Care

In the context of youth work (and in the family policing system, in particular), the object of care is the *child-in-need-of-protection* (alternately, the *child-at-risk* or *at-risk youth*). The construction of such a subject through the clinical documentation in the case files establishes and evidences the rationale for state-intervention-as-care by describing the circumstances under which a child or young person has become *at-risk*. However, the term *child-at-risk* operates as a floating signifier for an “extremely complex and ambiguous” subject that “can be considered and constructed in radically different ways in child welfare and protection practice” (Roets, et. al, “Framing” 454). The child-at-risk is typically articulated in terms of the child being the target of or witness to one or more circumstances that increases their vulnerability to danger or neglect of basic needs: abandonment, threat of

⁵¹ See Acorn (2016) and Carol Stuart, *Foundations of Child and Youth Care*, 2nd Ed. Kendall Hunt, 2009 for further discussion on this.

violence, poverty, (exposure to) substance use, or another risk factor determined through a discipline- or program-specific assessment process. At other times it is articulated as a personal attribute or identity, rather than an experience of circumstance—*at-risk* becomes synonymous with *a risk*.⁵²

The language of risk and protection along with the notion of *in the best interest of the child* have become international and transdisciplinary nomenclature for care providers and courts to signal that any actions taken within that context are to be understood as that which are necessary for the safety, wellness, maintenance, or protection of the child-at-risk. The language is present in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)—the most widely-ratified human rights treaty in history—which states that, “[t]he best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children” (UNICEF).⁵³ Though vague, this phrase is often used as a part of (also highly-subjective) assessment processes to legitimize the protection-interventions mobilized by state-designated agencies and the authority of care providers acting on their behalf.⁵⁴ In the family policing system, the authority of the care provider includes the right to surveil families and the power to remove or rehome children. Where children are

⁵² For further discussion of this, see Stanford, Sonya. “‘Speaking Back’ to Fear: Responding to the Moral Dilemmas of Risk in Social Work Practice.” *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1065-1080. See also: Roets et al. “Framing the Child at Risk in Social Work Reports.” *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2017, pp. 563-469.

⁵³ The UNCRC has been ratified by 196 nation states since its adoption by the United Nations in 1989. The one very notable exception to this ratification is the United States of America. (ACLU, UNICEF)

⁵⁴ In Ontario, for example, the governing legislation is the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (2017), which asserts that its “paramount purpose ... is to promote the best interests, protection and well-being of children” (Subsection (1)). Under this, Children’s Aid Societies (including societies mandated to serve specific demographic communities, such as Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and Jewish Family and Child) are legislated to hold “the exclusive responsibility to investigate concerns about the safety and well-being of children and youth under 18 and to provide child protection services” (OACAS “Child Welfare in Ontario” 3).

assessed to be at significant, imminent and/or ongoing risk of harm, and when it is deemed to be in the child's best interest, the state is empowered to terminate, assume and reassign parental rights. That is, to take *ownership* of children-at-risk.⁵⁵

In the Best Interest of the Child?

In July 2013, the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) received an anonymous report about six children (ages 7-14) who were suspected to be victims of neglect at the hands of their caregivers. Markis, Hannah, Devonte, Abigail, Jerimiah, and Ciera Hart (spelled “Cierra” in the report) are named as the subjects of a five-day safety assessment regarding their care by adoptive parents, Jennifer and Sarah Hart. The 30-page assessment report details multiple accounts from neighbours, teachers, family friends, and the children themselves of restricted access to food and unreasonable punishment. It reveals allegations of abuse from child protective services (CPS) investigations from when the family lived in Minnesota—two of those allegations were “determined/founded” (meaning that after an investigation, CPS determined that abuse or neglect did take place), of which one resulted in Sarah Hart being charged with Malicious Punishment of a Child.⁵⁶ The safety assessment goes on to report that shortly after the conclusion of the Minnesota CPS investigation, Jennifer and Sarah Hart withdrew the children from school, sold their house and moved out of the state. The investigation by Oregon DHS took place over five months

⁵⁵ For Ontario, this is outlined in the CYFSA (2017) Subsection 101 (1).

⁵⁶ Despite Abigail's report that her abuse was enacted by Jennifer Hart, it was Sarah Hart who assumed fault. The original charge was dropped when she agreed to plead guilty to Misdemeanor Domestic Violence Assault IV and Attempt to inflict Bodily Harm to Another. According to reports, her 90-day jail sentence was stayed and she served one year of probation. For further discussion on this, see Walsh (2018), “Years of abuse allegations gathered on Oregon parents who drove over ocean cliff with kids.”

and was closed in December 2013 with a disposition of “Unable to Determine,” meaning “there are some indications of child abuse or neglect, but there is insufficient data to conclude that there is a reasonable cause to believe that child abuse or neglect occurred” (Oregon 24). The CPS worker’s assessment concludes by listing each of the children as “safe.” Less than five years after the Oregon case was closed, another report of suspected neglect was received by child welfare authorities on March 26, 2018, in the Hart’s latest home state, Washington. A few days later, on March 28, 2018, Jennifer and Sarah Hart murdered their six children and killed themselves.

This is not the whole story.

The Hart children were six Black children from Texas who were adopted out of state by two white women strangers. One set of ‘birth’ siblings—Markis, Abigail and Hannah—came into the custody of the state when their mother ~~voluntarily~~ relinquished her parental rights. (Many things done voluntarily are also done under enormous circumstantial duress.)⁵⁷ The children were adopted by the Harts in 2006 and moved to live with them in Minnesota. The other three biologically-related children were removed from the custody of their birth mother, Sherry Davis, and bounced between family care arrangements at the direction of CPS, each time because of suspected or confirmed contact with Davis. One day during a time when the children were in the temporary custody of their aunt, Pricilla Celestine, a CPS case worker made an unannounced visit. Davis happened to be providing

⁵⁷ I have carried over my practice of crossing out and re-writing from my case note training—a practice that allows the reader to see past and current iterations of the text as they read. Coincidentally, Kathryn Mariner’s writing on the Harts that I discuss later in this chapter also involves the work of analysis through visible in-text amendments—an example of Sharpe’s Black annotation—and has been very helpful in my thinking and writing.

childcare on that day so Celestine could go to work. The case worker removed the children from the home and took them into the custody of the state. The Davis-Celestine family appealed the decision, pushing for the children to be returned to the care of the family, but their efforts were unsuccessful. Instead, the children were made wards of the state.⁵⁸ Judge Patrick Shelton signed the order terminating the biological parents' rights in 2006 and the children were eventually sent five states away to be adopted by Jennifer and Sarah Hart who would maintain none of the children's familial or social connections. By the time Devonte, Jeremiah and ~~Cierra~~ Ciera⁵⁹ were adopted by Jennifer and Sarah Hart in 2009, allegations of child abuse had already been made against them.⁶⁰ None of this information is included in the Oregon DHS investigation report, though the broader context of the children's lives and the abuse allegations predating the second set of adoptions would have been available through conversation with the Minnesota CPS worker. I have to assume that

⁵⁸ Until 2017, the language in the legislation governing the family policing system in Canada very obviously reflected its colonial and carceral infrastructure. The terminology has since been updated with type of euphemistic rebranding characteristic of symbolic, rather than material change. '*Crown ward*,' was used to refer to children who were permanent wards of the colonial state—an extension of the crown. The Child Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 now uses the term "child in *extended society care*." Similarly, the act no longer refers to the process by which a child is removed from their home as being "*apprehended*," but now frames it as the child being "*brought to a place of safety*." The narrative shift does not reflect a change to policy, but rather an attempt to retire certain terms in favour of "...more inclusive and child-centred language" (OACAS "Information for Families"; *emphasis mine*).

⁵⁹ Ciera's name is spelled at least four different ways throughout court documents, academic writing and news reports. Reading across publications, I understand *Ciera* to be the spelling of her name before she was taken into the custody of the state and that at least one of the subsequent spellings (*Sierra*) was imposed by her adoptive parents. Roxanna Asgarian (2023) writes that *Ciera* is the spelling on her original birth certificate as named by her mother. I will therefore use "*Ciera*" as the spelling of her name from this point forward.

⁶⁰ In September 2008, five months before the adoption of the second set of siblings was finalized, Hannah reported to a teacher at her school that Jennifer Hart had struck her with a belt. The resulting bruise was explained away by the two women when investigated by the police, saying Hannah had fallen down the stairs. For more on this, see Heim, Joe, and Julie Tate. "Abuse, Neglect and a System That Failed: The Tragic Lives of the Hart Children." *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2018.

the worker either did not think this background information was necessary or that it was relevant to include in the report.

The information that *is* included in the DHS report follows the report template, each section designated for a specific type of information. *Alleged Victim. Alleged Perpetrator. Age. Date of Birth. Gender. Race. Language. Tribe? Allegation. Report Narrative* [from which the above-noted historical context is missing]. *Screening Decision Narrative. Safety Analysis Conclusion.* Most fields are filled out, but notably, neither the racial identities of the children nor their adoptive parents are noted. It is not an unimportant detail, however, that the children are Black and their adoptive parents are white. The assessment report makes note of a pattern of Texas-to-Minnesota adoptions through the Permanent Family Resource Centre (PRFC), a now-defunct Minnesota-based organization that facilitated adoptions “even when the Child Welfare office has not supported the placement” (4). In Minnesota, prospective foster and adoptive parents must undergo extensive background checks—history of criminal convictions in local, state and federal law enforcement records as well as state child abuse and neglect registries—before being approved for an adoption or foster care placement. However, the PRFC—which claimed to *specialize* in arranging adoptions of “sibling groups and children of colour”—had a history of significant, repeated violations of licensing standards, including failing to conduct the required home studies for placements. Though it is not confirmed that this was the case for the Harts, in September 2009 (just months after the adoption of Devonte, Jeremiah and Ciera), the PRFC’s operating license status was changed to a two-year conditional license by the state of Minnesota. The centre closed in 2012, shortly after the conditional licence would have expired.

It is not, therefore, unimportant that two sets of Black siblings were removed from the homes of their Black family members and adopted out of state—through an organization that boasted a business specialization in siblings and children of colour—to parents who were not Black, and not only not Black, but white. It is not unimportant because coding Black lives as inherently *at-risk* conditions the risk-assessments undertaken by ‘child protection’ agencies across the USA and Canada (and many other nations with Euro-colonial histories); assessments which reflect and shape the way care workers respond to Black families needing support or Black children seeking protection. Within this framework it is inconceivable that the risk to the children’s health and safety is the two white women, even as teachers reported that the children were so starved that they were going through the garbage at school to find food; even as neighbours reported the children coming to their house in the middle of the night to ask for something to eat, begging them not to report it to Jennifer and Sarah for fear of repercussions; even when a six-year old child was described as looking no older than two. Jennifer and Sarah Hart frame the children’s small stature as a biological predisposition and their persistent hunger as a manipulative strategy, a lingering trait of being *high-needs*, *high-risk* children rescued from their Black families. An excerpt from the investigation report reads:

The Minnesota Child Welfare worker said the problem is, ‘these women (Jen and Sarah Hart) look normal’ and the[y] give professionals the information about all the children being adopted because they are high needs, and have mental health issues related to food, then people tend to assign the problems to the children. Without any regular or consistent academic or medical oversight, and unknown

child welfare reviews through State of Texas for either foster/adopt subsidies, these children risk falling through the cracks. (Oregon DHS 5)

Within the white dysgraphia of disaster, Black childhood is always already written as childhood at-risk, Black caregivers are always already a risk factor, and whiteness appears as normal.

Writing about the ways Black motherhood is shaped by the ongoing and dehumanizing project of slavery in *In the Wake*, Sharpe describes blackness as anagrammatical, explaining the sense-making that occurs within the orthography of the wake as the meaning of words shifts, falls, fails, and is reassigned when applied to Black life and Black people. She writes, “We see it again and again how, in and out of the United States ... *girl* doesn’t mean ‘girl’ but, for example, ‘prostitute’ or ‘felon,’ *boy* doesn’t mean ‘boy,’ but ‘Hulk Hogan’ or ‘gunman,’ ‘thug’ or ‘urban youth.’ We see that *mother* doesn’t mean ‘mother,’ but ‘felon’ and ‘defender’ and/or ‘birther of terror’ ... We see that *child* is not ‘child’...” (Sharpe, 2016, 76). Where ‘child’ is perpetually unavailable to Black children, Markis, Abigail, Hannah, Devonte, Jeremiah and Ciera mark ‘the position of the unthought’ in childhood institutions, and the possibility for state systems to register them as worthy of (actual) care is foreclosed. Jennifer and Sarah Hart use the language of “high risk kids with food issues” to position the Hart children simultaneously as in-need-of-protection and as, themselves, the source of the risk (blackness = risk) and therefore not requiring and/or unworthy of protection from two “*normal-looking*” white women who, by multiple accounts, were actively abusing and starving the children and otherwise depriving them of care.

To be clear, my argument in this chapter is not primarily whether the children adopted by the Harts should have remained with their birth families.⁶¹ What I am drawing attention to are the ways that blackness is marked and not marked within the risk-assessment paradigm central to state care systems; one that assesses blackness as a risk *identity* and which legitimizes the unquestioned supremacy of whiteness as a care identity (read here as *looking normal* despite extensive allegations of abuse) and the key to saving Black people from themselves.

Unreliable Witnesses

It is important to note that nearly every document in a client file is written by and from the perspective of a professional care worker, offering little evidence of the client's own independent thoughts or assessments of their care. In fact, young people in care are rarely granted more than infrequent, pre-authorized, supervised and restricted (time-limited and/or redacted) access to their own personal file. It is yet another indication that the client file is neither authored nor compiled with the young person as the intended audience, nor

⁶¹ There is little information available about the conditions under which Markis, Abigail and Hannah came to be in the custody of the state, so I am unaware if there was other family to whom they were connected that could have cared for them. However, I can easily make (and extend elsewhere) the argument that Devonte, Jerimiah and Ciera should have—and could have—remained in Texas with one of the many adults who wanted to care for them, if the child welfare system was indeed working in their best interest. Sherry Davis' substance use prevented her from fully caring for her children, but she was not the only person who was invested in their wellbeing. Both Nathaniel Davis—Sherry's sometimes-partner, who was a safe, stable and loving father to the children—and Priscilla Celestine (the sister of Jerimiah and Ciera's father) wanted custody. And the children wanted to be with them. The money that the system used to fund the children's several foster care placements and secure treatment programs would have easily covered the cost of childcare for the children who were too young for school (the reason they were apprehended from their aunt's care) or to co-ordinate supervised visits between Sherry Davis and her children (which would have revealed that the reason Nathaniel was unaware of Sherry's substance use was because she was no longer using around or prior to visiting her children). The money also could have paid for therapy and/or substance use treatment for Sherry Davis, if she was interested in that support. Davis, too, was once a child in need of protection, witness to her mother's intimate partner violence—and eventual murder—at age 12, followed by precarious housing and her own abusive relationships--all of which likely contributed to her substance use. In short, the care that the family actually needed to stay together could have easily been provided, initiated, or subsidized by CPS.

for the child's own access or reference. As we've seen, information recorded in case files has enormous implications for young people and families, yet their perspectives are not considered with nearly the same weight as those of professionalized care workers (if they are considered at all). Where young people are given the opportunity to participate in care decisions (as is their right under Article 12 of the UNCRC), they are rarely invited to author or co-author notes for their files.⁶²

Roets et al. (2017) describe a study in which social work students were asked to view a clip from a film in which an arbitrary suspicion of abuse is raised about a family and for which very little information about the actual abuse is provided or observable. They were then asked to write a report on the allegations as though working in the role of a child and family social worker who had been sent by a judge to observe the family. The participants characterized report writing as a process that seeks to “*represent* so-called objective realities” even when their reports clearly positioned middle-class families as the norm and themselves as the experts (458; *emphasis in original*). This perspective positions the child-at-risk as pejoratively subjective and unable to represent truth in the manner prescribed by the genre. In further discussion of the study, Roets et al. (2017) characterize clinical report

⁶² In one study, participants were invited to narrate their own personal history over a series of meetings, during which time their speech would be transcribed live—a technique called “direct scribing” (Toros & Sindi 4). The young people were given the opportunity to correct or amend the narrative before it became a part of the file and were also given a copy for their own records. The study was framed as an opportunity for young people in care to ‘practice identity development’; however, it is unclear the extent to which this account was considered in care decisions. In another study on children’s participation in the development of a Child Protection Plan, Margaret Bruce writes that “despite frameworks for the inclusion of the child’s view there were multiple instances where meetings occurred without the views of the child present. Moreover, on closer examination of the practices where it appeared that the child’s view was available, it was evident that there were a range of factors at play which combined to ‘filter’ the view of children” (518). More often, young people’s voices are included in research *about* their time in care, rather than in the decisions that determine what that care will look like. See Carolyn Leeson, “My Life in Care: Experiences of Non-Participation in Decision-Making Processes” (2007) and Anna-Karina Henrickson, “‘It’s My Life They Are Talking About’ – On Children’s Participation in Decision-Making for Secure Placement” (2021).

writing as a practice of both truth-telling (of fact, evidence) and story-telling (assessment and interpretation), but even within that conceptualization, they acknowledge that the care worker holds the power to decide which aspects are classified as story and which as data points of truth.

In the case of Markis, Abigail, Hannah, Devonte, Jeremiah and Ciera Hart, the result of the objective investigation and report found “insufficient data to conclude that there is reasonable cause to believe that child abuse or neglect occurred” (Oregon 24). The problem, as narrated in the file through two care representatives is that Jennifer and Sarah Hart look *normal* and that they know how to mobilize the nomenclature of the systems to reassign the source of the problem. That they reassigned the blame is clearly articulated in the case file, but it is not the *problem* identified by either case worker. Neither is the abuse that has taken place, but rather that Jennifer and Sarah Hart are “normal-looking” white women who know that invoking blackness-as-risk will contextualize their abuse as care and reframe them as the victims of their own kindness. The report reads, “whenever the parents were confronted about withholding food, or the children's complaints about not getting enough food, the couple always makes reference to the children being adopted, and being ‘high risk’ kids, who have food issues” (5) and elsewhere, “Ms. J. Hart and Ms. S. Hart believe they have been targeted due to being a vegetarian, lesbian couple who married and adopted high risk, abused children, while living in a small, Midwest town” (22). In both cases, despite multiple reports and physical evidence of abuse and starvation, Jennifer and Sarah Hart were able to reframe their actions as a necessary, albeit misunderstood, intervention into the risk-riddled lives of their six Black children, and to position

themselves as the objects of abuse by conservative neighbours and judgmental friends who didn't understand their family dynamics.

The report documents at least six prior direct reports of abuse from the children in addition to physical markings and reports from neighbours, teachers, and friends. All except one of the direct reports were *ruled out* due to a lack of corroborating evidence (or, because the abuse was related to an ongoing investigation, which was later *ruled out*). Children—and particularly Black children—are assumed to be *unreliable witnesses to their own lives*, unable to credibly report on the care they have received or been denied. I take this phrase (and the title of this section) from a passage quoted in Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* in which she attends to biographer Craig MacKenzie's (mis)characterization of Bessie Head as “an unreliable witness to her own life” (85). Sharpe argues that such an assertion “subject[s] Head and her work to a disciplinary regime of authenticity that she consistently rejects” (*Monstrous* 86). The phrase has stayed with me, reminding me of the disciplining logic central to clinical documentation that rejects unsubstantiated truths from service users. That would include anything that has not been witnessed or endorsed by another professional or verified through evidence, such as Abigail Hart's disclosure that she was abused by Jennifer Hart. The case file records the observable marks to her body as fact, but sequesters Abigail's attribution of fault to the realm of uncertainty between a parenthetical addendum and the doubt-inducing preface ‘reportedly’: “Physical mistreatment to Abigail Hart. Abigail had bruising on her stomach area from her sternum to waistband, and bruising on her back from mid-back to upper buttocks, *reportedly* caused by Jen Hart (*according to Abigail*)” (Oregon 4; *emphasis mine*). Abigail is not considered a reliable witness to her own life.

The logics of case files assert the authority of care workers to author the official account of care by assuming a position of professional objectivity through writing that is “[factual], without inserting opinions, insinuations, questions, personal feelings, comments, or thoughts” (Acorn xiii). I cannot read this without being reminded of Avery Gordon’s description of the grammar of slave narratives that demanded “only the believable facts, a balanced assessment with no ‘exaggeration’ and ‘nothing that smacked of ‘the imagination’” (145). The value of both genres *as evidence* is tied to reader believability and in both cases, the subject of the narrative is inherently unbelievable to their respective intended audiences. Slave narratives, as abolitionist texts, were intended to compel a response to the brutal institution of slavery through the presentation of a dispassionate autobiographical case study of a single enslaved person, including their experiences of mental, physical, and sexual violence; and their redemptive potential, demonstrated by acquired literacy or demonstrations of piety. Even when written in the prescribed form, slave narratives required the authentication of a reliable authority—usually, a white abolitionist. Case files, as discussed earlier, legitimize a response to children’s risk of harm and are authenticated through the sole authorship of a professionalized care worker (or the collaborative authorship of a team of professionalized care workers). They must be constructed to factually explicate and archive the circumstances under which a *child* becomes a *child-at-risk* and the possibility for the child-at-risk to become a child again through a particular type of state-sanctioned intervention. (This transformation is, of course, not actually available for Black children for whom the status of child is perpetually unavailable.) Intervention plans, like case files, vary between sectors and are built around evidence-based practices and goals with predictable, agency- and sector-approved

outcomes “which [document] the success a program has with a specific method of working with young people” (Stuart 309). And, as unambiguously noted by an unnamed Black young person in the introduction to *A Hard Place to Call Home: A Canadian Perspective on Residential Care and Treatment for Children and Youth*, “successful treatment for a Black person is to be more like a white person” (Gharabaghi xi).⁶³

In “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman writes that “History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror” (9). Case files, as historical archives in the making, also remain loyal to the terror-produced certainties of fact and evidence through insisting on objectivity in building official archives of care and reinforcing that violence through involuntary hierarchical surveillance (Hardy, 2014). The legacies of slavery’s violence (what Hartman has identified as the afterlife of slavery⁶⁴) that make themselves known as abuse and starvation are registered as non-events, as Jennifer and Sarah Hart are able to inflict seemingly limitless harm onto the six Black children who now *belong* to them under the law. Even as so-called “child protection workers” document their bruises, missing teeth, unnaturally small stature, withdrawal and robotic disposition, the state’s risk assessment tools do not register the violence inflicted on them as abuse or neglect. The markings are indecipherable and constitute what Hortense Spillers calls “a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh ... hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (67). The assessment records, archives the observable injury to their bodies; however, it cannot make sense of, or register the damage to the flesh—to

⁶³ See Acorn, Stuart and Gharabaghi for more on Plans of Care, specifically and Intervention plans, in general. however Plans of Care are legally mandated for children in the custody of the Children’s Aid Society.

⁶⁴ Hartman (2008) “Lose Your Mother”

the children's personhood, to their being—and thus assumes no legal responsibility to intervene on their behalf. As Calvin Warren explains, “anti-blackness renders both metaphysical violence and the ‘spirit, soul, psyche’ untranslatable within ethics, law, and politics since these fields assume a coherent human ontology—and Blacks lack being” (37). As such, the children's bruises and ongoing hunger are deemed “insufficient data to conclude...that child abuse or neglect occurred” (Oregon 24).

Unofficial Accounts

Beyond the state's account, much has been written about the Hart family. The name Devonte Hart may be familiar from a widely-circulated photo of a tearful twelve-year-old hugging a uniformed white police officer. The picture was taken at a rally in Portland, Oregon in support of the protests against the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014. The photo recirculated along with others of the family after the children's (presumed) death in 2018. The season three premiere of Donald Glover's FX series *Atlanta* referenced the Hart family in a storyline that follows a fictionalized version of Devonte Hart (Loquareeous, in the show) and his foster siblings.⁶⁵ There were a number of scholarly and popular writings about the photo of Devonte, and then later about the Harts' abuse, most offering critiques of policing, the family policing system and/or transracial adoption. Kathryn Mariner's “American Elegy: A Triptych” has been particularly useful when looking for another account that *makes domination visible* within the orthography of the wake.

⁶⁵ In another form of care-full writing, the episode constructs an alternate ending for the children—one in which they escape the van before it goes over the cliff and Loquareeous returns to his family who welcome him home. The story ends with no certainties, but with the possibility of life—and care—for all of the children.

“Devonte ~~embodies~~ embodied so much of what it means to be Black in the contemporary United States: an existence often shaped by policing and violence, sometimes disguised as love” (Mariner, “American Elegy” 6).

After the Hart’s family van was discovered at the bottom of a 100-foot cliff in northern California, the bodies of the children were not all immediately recovered. (As I write this in 2023, Devonte is presumed dead though his body was never recovered from the water.) As Mariner recounts the process of editing the introduction to her book after the crash, she discusses her own care-full writing practice, one in which her writing and re-writing the verb tense in which she discusses Devonte is central to her analytic project and a way of attending to hauntings. Mariner goes on to say, “I’m haunted by my object of study, and by the world in which it is embedded. I ~~feel felt~~ feel a kind of kinship with Devonte. I’m struggling with how to write ethically, vulnerably, and rigorously about this” (“American Elegy” 7). In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon describes haunting as “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labour or national security)” (xvi). Mariner’s writing engages a practice of attentiveness to Devonte in order to make visible specific manifestations of antiblack violence and its connections to “other forms and histories of American state violence” (“American Elegy” 6) without reproducing that violence.

The story of Devonte and his siblings—by birth and by abduction—has come to be widely known because the nature of the children’s death was considered an act of extraordinary, exceptional violence. Except it was not, is not exceptional—the violent

context in which the children lived and died repeats and repeats and repeats to the point of predictability: Black children who had been taken from their families. White owners of Black children who crossed state lines to select and obtain more Black children, to bring them into their home for entertainment or companionship or comfort, to give them a better life; to give themselves a sense of purpose, an identity. Repeat patrons of an industry built to sever social ties and change names in order for them to become mother, saviour, owner, overseer, officer. Codependent narcissists with a care complex who see it as their responsibility to discipline, to eliminate defiance and hope, to teach them how to act right, to *help them help themselves*—even if that means withholding food, love, education, safety, comfort, and care to break them of their wildness and their will. Mistresses of the house.⁶⁶ Death before freedom. The “inverted SUV-turned-slave-ship-hold-turned-watery-coffin/coffle” (Mariner, “American Elegy”14) found at the bottom of a cliff in California was neither extraordinary, nor exceptional. It was a ghost.

I sit with Mariner’s writing as I work to make visible the violence of emotionally removed, objective reporting in the context of an antiblack family policing system, to undermine the credibility of the case file genre itself. I have taken apart the official narrative of care for the Hart children and put it back together in a different way in order to uncover other meanings. Perhaps also a lingering result of my hand-written case note training, I felt most engaged working with physical copies of the file and spent a lot of time sitting on the floor, scissors in hand, considering possible interruptions.

⁶⁶ I am using *mistress* here in line with the way Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers does in *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, as the feminized equivalent to *master*, to signal a woman who governed over subordinates and who “exercised ‘dominion, rule or power’” with comparable power and authority (xv).

“Per DHS CPS policy I-AB.10, OAR 413-015-1000; the disposition of this referral will be listed as: Unable to determine, which means there are some indications of child abuse or neglect, but there is insufficient data to conclude that there is a reasonable cause to believe that child abuse or neglect occurred”

Abigail going through the garbage at school, and taking other children's (Classmates) food.

Jen had hit Abigail's head against the wall.

Hannah reports her “mom, Jen, hits her all the time.”

Abigail had bruising on her stomach area from her sternum to waistband, and bruising on her back from mid-back to upper buttocks

reportedly caused by Jen Hart (according to Abigail)

Abigail had also said they put her head under cold water, and Jen had her two hands on her neck.

Children in the classroom have been giving Hannah food, and/or she's been approaching classmates for food.

Hannah reported to the School Nurse that she had not eaten today.

As a part of the assessment, Abigail who was 6 yrs old, looked like she was 2 yrs old, and was taken to the doctor, who said “she is just small, and being adopted, we don't know their bio family history.”

The other children were asked about discipline, and what happens when they get in trouble, and the children talked about not getting supper, getting sent to bed without food, being made to stay in bed all day, or stand in the corner for a long time.

whenever the parents were confronted about withholding food, or the children's complaints about not getting enough food, the couple always makes reference to the children being adopted, and being high risk kids, who have food issues

Hannah said Jen shoved a banana in her mouth as well as some nuts.

after a while the school stopped calling the parents about the child(ren) taking food, because they didn't want the children being disciplined or punished

the Hart's pulled the children out of school, and eventually sold their home and moved.

Despite this history, Hannah did not make any disclosures or mention of these events when interviewed and asked about discipline and family functioning.

Despite this history, Abigail did not make any disclosures or mention of these events when interviewed and asked about discipline and family functioning.

[Table 1: These are all direct quotes from the Oregon DHS report, tenses and spelling have not been altered]

In Table I, I question the investigation report's disposition of *unable to determine* (top, in red) by situating Jennifer and Sarah Hart's alleged and confirmed past abuse of the children (in black) alongside the children's current non-disclosure (bottom, in red). On the left is every documented incident of abuse or neglect that was reported or observed by anyone other than the children. On the right are the children's own reports of their abuse. In this context the non-disclosure by Abigail and Hannah ~~could~~ should be read as an indication that they do not feel safe to report. The children know that past reporting has only led to more abuse, further withholding of food and isolation that forecloses opportunities to have their needs met in other settings (e.g. by asking friends for food at school or eating at a neighbour's house). Only a willful misreading of their reluctance could result in a determination that the children were safe.

I also revisited the Minnesota child welfare worker's articulation of *the problem* to name the actual problems at hand. First, through a de-/re-construction of the text:

*The problem is:
Jen and Sarah Hart
medical oversight
child welfare professionals
"these women look normal"*

And then using Black redaction:

[REDACTED] the problem is, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
people [REDACTED] assign the problems to the children. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Sharpe uses Black redaction in *In the Wake* to enact care for Mikia Hutchings, turning up the volume of Mikia's voice and turning down the narrative of the *New York Times* reporter telling her story. By cutting through the noise in the dysgraphia of disaster, Mikia becomes a reliable witness to the violence authorized against her.⁶⁷ In the Oregon DHS investigation report, redaction is used to protect the identities of the child protection workers who did not protect six Black children from widely-known harm. Here it is used to point back to the workers, the doctors, the abusers and the system who collectively failed Markis, Hannah, Abigail, Devonte, Jerimiah, and Ciera.

In the next section of the chapter, I look to accounts of care that are not written for the purpose of surveillance and discipline or with the intention of obscuring state violence, but that instead centre the ways that Black people care for each other/themselves within that violence.

⁶⁷ *In the Wake* (123)

Part II: Care Notes

“You should know right away that everything I say is a lie, a belief, an idea formed from a skewed mindstate, a miserable vantage point. I’m about as trustworthy a narrator you could get. I’m sorry to inform you; I know you value Truth. I want you to Believe, but choose carefully. Belief can turn into the thing that drags you.”
—Krysta Franklin, *Under the Knife*

“I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally.”
—Barbara Christian “The Race for Theory” (77)

“This story is told from inside the circle.”
—Saidiya Hartman,
Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments (xiv).

In the early stages of what would become this dissertation (and more specifically, this chapter of the dissertation), I was writing toward a method of self-authored case notes by young people in care as a means for them to contribute to the process of documenting the care/no care they received. I suggested that young people might use textual manipulation to introduce into the archive a sense of pre- or extra-literacy, invoking the feeling that one has when they are learning to read, but when they are not yet able to decipher the code of written text—a feeling that would be intensified when read alongside traditional forms of documentation that claim to tell a full and clear story. Whereas progress notes would work towards making a young person’s story intelligible, textual manipulation—such as redaction, annotation, or poetic re-construction (as in Phillip’s *Zong!*)—could result in a work that would not be fully comprehensible, but at the same time would be deeply reflective and representative of the effect of carceral care on Black being, which is incomprehensible to state care systems. I wondered how Black young people might deconstruct or re-construct risk assessments, court records, custody paperwork, or

probation orders to represent that which is not captured within them—the young person’s own feelings, assessments, objections, reservations, questions, priorities, reflections, wishes, dreams. How might that engagement give them access to poetry’s capacity “to deposit and unearth plural meanings, with its refusals of a particular interrogative gaze” (Brand “Ars Poetica” 59) and a vehicle to disallow practitioners’ claims to a full understanding of their lives and experiences? How might that operate as a counter to a kind of manifest produced to track young people in the care and possession of the state?

I’ve since moved away from attempting to think about something that might reform existing systems of writing about Black young people’s experiences and lives within current state care systems because I think those systems should end. However, I am still looking to examples of how to intervene in case files in another way and for a reader that is not the state, the institution, or the professionalized caregiver, but the person/people about whom those texts are written. A model in which the texts do not reproduce the us/them binary of service provision and use (the dynamics of state care), but that write from and to each other, for each other from the consciousness of the wake.

From Inside the Circle

Saidiya Hartman attends to this task of care-full narration in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Stories of Social Upheaval*, using a method of speculative history called *critical fabulation* that she introduces in her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts.” In the essay, Hartman addresses the historical archive’s reproduction of the violence of slavery through the continued erasure of the lives and personhoods of enslaved girls and women recorded only as property and sites of violent interaction in slave ship ledgers, legal

documents, journals and cargo manifests by their captors. She does this by proposing a method of historiography consistent with Black feminist scholarship that is invested in the multiplicity of epistemological possibilities, rather than a reclamation of a position of singular Truth. Critical fabulation is advanced through the use of the subjunctive tense, “a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities” (Hartman “Venus” 11) which facilitates Hartman’s project of challenging and exposing the limits of the archive. She writes that by “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by representing the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (“Venus” 11). Hartman activates this method throughout *Wayward Lives* to expose the violence of state care, the insufficiency of its archive and the beauty of Black life that they both attempt to efface.

Over twenty stories of various lengths, Hartman uses archival material—case notes, reports, trial transcripts, journals of social workers, guards and other *professional* care workers—to tell a speculative history of young Black women practicing freedom at the turn of the twentieth century. *Wayward Lives* is written through a method of *close narration*, a narrative strategy that “places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text” (*Wayward Lives* xiii-xiv). The method refuses the separation between *I* and *we* and places the narrator *inside the circle*, turning the case notes and reports produced by professionalized care workers to monitor and regulate every aspect of the lives of young

Black women into a narrative tool to write in a tone of authority from the position of the unthought.⁶⁸

For example, in the chapter “Riot and Refrain,” Hartman writes about the “noise strike” staged by young women and girls confined to the disciplinary building at Bedford Hills reformatory. The girls and women held at the reformatory ranged from age 14-30 and were regularly subjected to abuse in forms such as “handing girls up, handcuffing them, trying them to their cots, and beating them with hoses”—practices that the reformatory matrons considered “treatment, not punishment” (*Wayward Lives* 265). Early in the chapter, Hartman writes about a young Black woman whose picture is embedded in the text without a caption, noting that “...even a century later...I am prohibited from calling her name, less to protect her than to guarantee her disappearance. The state never releases her, but claims forever this part of her past as its property” (264). The young woman’s name is redacted from the story upon legal order *to guarantee her disappearance*. Hartman places the young woman’s picture in the story and brings into our vision the forces that work at her disappearance and the conditions they also attempt to disappear. Throughout the chapter, Hartman introduces us to various other young women held at the facility, painting a picture of slavery’s ongoing and violent presence in the lives of the Black girls and women held there, but also their modes of refusing to accept the violence quietly. In one place she writes about Mickey, “who waged a small battle against the prisons and the damned police and the matrons and the parole officers and the social workers. She was unwilling to pretend that her keepers were anything else. The cottages were not homes.

⁶⁸ Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Position of the Unthought.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2003, pp. 183-201.

Miss Cobb didn't give a damn about her and Miss Minogue was a thug in a skirt. The matrons were brutes and there not to guide or provide counsel or assist the girls in making better lives, but to manage and control, punish and inflict harm" (280). The story makes it clear that the girls and women throughout "Riot and Refrain" are aware of the violence of their circumstances. They are under no false pretenses. They know that the carceral arrangements that isolate them from their kin and regulate their movement, speech and interactions are a manifestation of the mandate of an antiblack world. We are able to read Hartman's care note and see how the girls at Bedford cared for each other, for themselves from that consciousness, exemplified through the noise strike:

It was the dangerous music of open rebellion. En masse they announced what had been endured, what they wanted, what they intended to destroy. Bawling, screaming, cursing, and stomping made the cottage tremble and corralled them together into one large, pulsing formation, an ensemble reveling in the beauty of the strike. Young women hung out of the windows, crowded at the doors, and huddled on shared beds sounded a complete revolution, *a break with the given, an undoing and remaking of values*, which called property and law and social order into crisis. (*Wayward Lives* 283; *emphasis mine*)

Hartman's care note recognizes the noise strike as a call to dis-order,⁶⁹ a demand for another set of relations. It was "a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances—the sonic gifts of struggle and flight, death and refusal, became music or moanin' or joyful noise or discordant sound" (*Wayward Lives* 285). Calvin Warren would

⁶⁹ Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond" in *The Undercommons* 7

call the noise strike an instance of Black care, a lateral acknowledgement and sharing of the injury to their bodies and flesh that was considered *treatment, not punishment* by the reformatory staff. The strike was the girls' and women's refusal to accept violence and call it care. It "[provided] form for an indecipherable violation" (Warren 46) through an affective, untranslatable sonic practice of attentiveness that differed from, but could not put an end to, the force of the state.

Close narration is itself a practice of attentiveness, and a praxis of care that is only possible through inhabiting a deviant relationship to the archive, to discipline, to History and through a commitment to a different reading practice. Utilizing documents that frame Black girls and women as a problem, Hartman is able to tell a story from another vantage point—one that understands and registers the source violence; one that hears a cottage full of crying, laughing, shouting Black girls and women as music.

In the Best Interest of the Child (Part II)

Dear Son

*It is a beautiful and terrifying privilege to watch you grow. [...] I am so grateful that you have managed to stay a child in a culture that demands that you grow up quickly. Especially if you are Black.*⁷⁰

Son is a multi-media installation I created as my final project in a graduate-level performance class and subsequently developed and showed at the Eco Arts and Media festival at York University in spring 2020. My goal in this project was to write-tell-show a story of care by bringing into close proximity a selection of still and moving images and the

⁷⁰ Juanita Stephen, *Son*. 2020, York University EcoArts and Media Festival, Toronto.

voices of Black parents parenting Black boys under similar contexts of colonial violence (including my own). I wanted to paint a picture of the life I was living with my child—not to make our lives understandable or redeemable to someone, but to situate something very personal and specific in the broader context of care. I wanted the story to attend to the affective register as well as the labour of care, to share the beauty as well as the suffering without reproducing the source violence. What resulted was a story of Black parenting as non-homogenous communal praxis.

The installation featured 180 black and white photographs of everyday household objects—a laundry basket, a sink of dishes, a roll of toilet paper, a kitchen corkboard full of reminders and messages—representing relatively unremarkable tasks of domestic care. The photographs flank two videos playing alternately on a loop from either end of the room. The first video is an open letter I had written to my son, Shayne, in response to James Baldwin’s famous letter, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.”⁷¹ In Baldwin’s letter, he asks his nephew not to allow the racism that permeates American society to destroy his soul. My letter asks something similar of my son with respect to the ways that state-sanctioned anti-Black violence manifests along gendered lines within our own context of space, land, and time. I wrote my letter shortly after Shayne turned 16 years old and shortly before the summer of 2020, during which the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and white supremacy came to a head, magnifying already critical issues of state violence and racially systematized abandonment. I wrote it to warn him of the potential for increased surveillance and

⁷¹ James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.” *The Fire Next Time*, Vintage International, 1993, pp. 1-10.

vulnerability that he may be subject to as he grows. As the letter is read in the video, it is redacted several different ways. The second video brings the perspectives of other parents of Black sons into conversation with my own as they answer the questions: What is your greatest hope/joy/fear for your son? The voices you hear are my family and friends, each one the parent of a Black son (most of whom appear unidentified within the video). Their responses to my questions are fractured and pieced together—never quite overlapping, but allowing very little space to discern when one voice, one thought has ended and another has begun, or to tell which voices belong to whom. The conversational collage forms the soundscape for the video, which is made up of photos and short video clips of Shayne—alone, with friends and with his family—taken throughout his sixteen years of life. The video offers no context for how he is related to whom and uses audio from some of the video clips to punctuate the soundscape and allow Shayne’s actual voice to have presence in the room and the conversation. His voice and mine are the first and last voices in the performance, and at several other points we hear his laugh or his thoughts. His voice annotates the narrative and the audience is compelled to think of Shayne as an active figure in his own care.

Originally, *Son* was an installation-performance and I redacted the letter live. The unredacted letter was printed onto a transparent sheet and projected onto a blank wall using an overhead projector. I would trace selected words onto the wall as the slideshow video and soundscape played, moving the projector down the room, projecting the text in a new location and tracing a different message. Many of the redactions had been predetermined (such as “Gentle child, clench your fists [figure #]), but a few were improvised during the performance (such as the addition of “you may need to” as an annotation not present in the

original letter [figure #]). A few of the improvised redactions, such as the example given here, made it into the digitized redaction video that was included in the revised version of the installation.

I developed the redactions thinking with Christina Sharpe's *Black annotation and Black redaction* and also with M. NourbeSe Philip's work in *Zong!*. In Philip's work, her manipulations of language force the reader to look differently at what the language is trying to communicate, care-fully deconstructing the court records from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* court case to tell "the story that can only be told by not telling" (Philip 191). Her intention is to make the story *less* plain, *less* intelligible, *more* nuanced and complex in order for the reader to feel less sure of their mastery of it. In choosing/finding the redactions for *Son*, I was aware that the letter, though it was written *to* Shayne and *for* Shayne, was going to be read/witnessed by a wider audience—at the very least, by the other students in my performance class. I wanted to gesture to the story of care I was presenting as one that is incomplete, that there is more on the page than meets the eye, and that what is there is not meant for everyone to see or know. The letter can and must be read in more than one way—the feelings held within the letter are more than what language can express and, certainly, more than can be understood by reading the letter once, as written. I wanted to point to what else I may say to Shayne that isn't in the letter, what I might add quietly—whispered in his ear or at home at the dinner table—that I might not say out loud, in the presence of folks who may not understand why anger is sometimes the appropriate response to unyielding violence. *Gentle child, you may need to clench your fists.*

Dear Son,

It is a beautiful and terrifying privilege to watch you grow. There is something that happens, I think, when your child turns 16 that is different from when they turn 13 or 18 or even 21. You are now old enough to drive — opening the door to more independence, more freedom. Presumed by the province to be old enough to handle the responsibility that comes as a part of that package and at the same time, you are still considered a child — not yet old enough to have a voice in politics, to enter into a legal contract, or even to miss a day of school without my permission. You are now somewhere in between adulthood and childhood. And yet, to me, you have embodied this tension for some time.

Your huge, gentle heart that feels everything right along with those closest to you has been your source of otherworldly empathy and compassion, and has always exceeded what should reasonably be expected of someone your age. It is also likely the source of your enduring innocence. I marvel at how you have been able to maintain that for so long. Your priorities are exactly what they should be — avoiding homework, playing rugby, music and video games, baking cupcakes with your grandmother, and helping your granddad fix bikes for younger kids in the neighbourhood. I am so grateful that you have managed to stay a child in a culture that demands that you grow up quickly. Especially if you are Black.

I was only three years older than you are now when I became pregnant with you and believed certain things about the world then that I now know to be false. About safety and danger and what the people who are supposed to keep us safe see when they look at people who look like us. When they look at someone who looks like you — with your skin and your presumed gender and your hair the way you wear it now. And though everyone who knows you or who loves the rarity of a Black boy who has managed to grow up slowly can look into your face and see your mother, you are growing up and filling out and to the rest of the world you look less and less like a sweet boy in-between adulthood and childhood and more and more like what they have taught themselves to fear.

And it is not just your hair or your skin. The world doesn't understand gentle, Black boys — it comes as an assault on how they think of masculinity and what they conceive of Blackness. But I hope that their fear doesn't change you. I hope it doesn't give you the sharp edges they expect or clench your fists so that they no longer hold cupcakes. I hope their gaze doesn't blind you to the strength in your softness or bridle your tongue so that your words fall out jagged — severing you from these last moments of childhood.

Grow slowly, my love, and drive carefully — I can't keep you safe when you are far from home.

Figure I: Unredacted Letter from *Son* (2020)

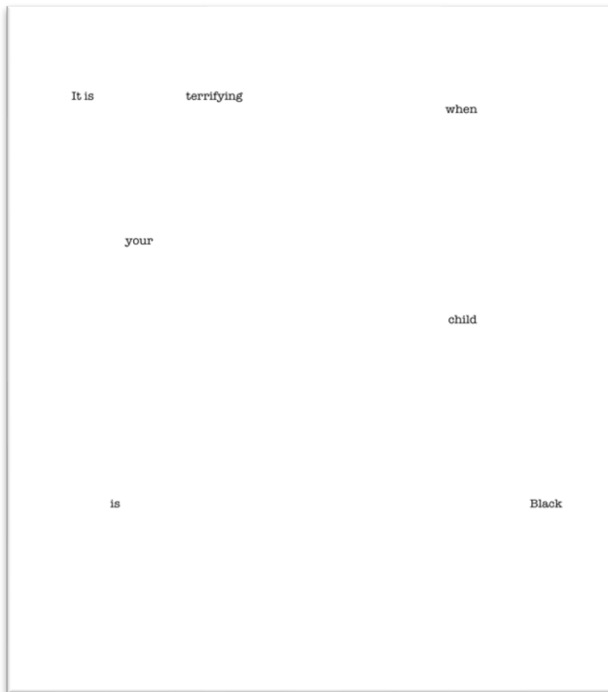


Figure II: Redacted letter from Son (2020): “It is terrifying when your child is Black.”

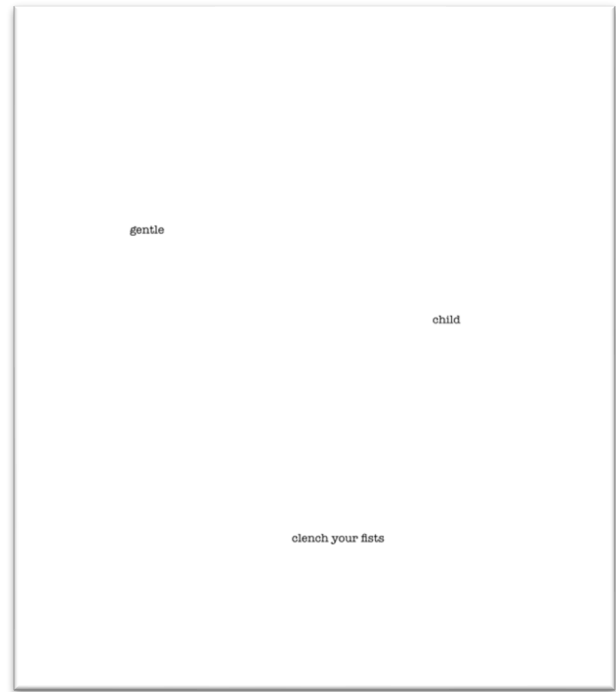


Figure III: Redacted letter from Son (2020): “gentle child clench your fists.”

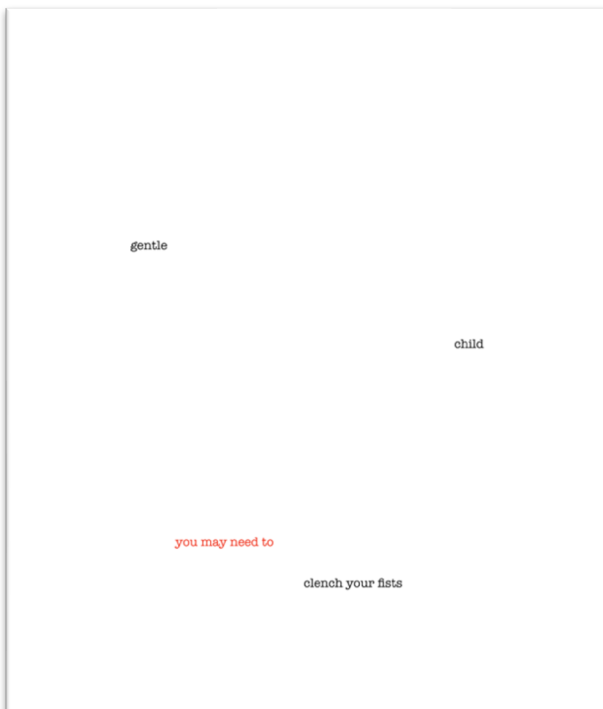


Figure IV: Redacted letter from Son (2020): “gentle child you may need to clench your fists.” The text in red is an annotation not present in the original letter.



Figure V: Redacted letter from Son (2020). It reads, “I hope my love can keep you safe”

Writing to Shayne through an open letter meant serious considerations of how to care for him and us while sharing our life with an audience I couldn't control, how to think through processes for selective disclosure as a counter to surveillance. My classmates were a group of multi-racial, multi-ethnic graduate students—most of whom were cool enough. However there was one student who, in a notable display of antiblackness, had demonstrated that she could not be trusted to regard my son—or the beauty and terror of our lives—with care. At the same time, I wanted to tell the story I wanted to tell—all while refusing to make our life palatable and legible within the grammars and aesthetics of violence. This dynamic necessitated deliberate choices about which redactions were made public and which were not (but are still on the page nonetheless).

Son is a care note from inside the circle. Co-authored by Black parents of Black children, our account is written for each other. We have placed our children and each other at the centre of our care and attention and *Son* is our record of what and how we have survived. It is a reminder that *we were not meant to survive*, and yet we have⁷²—through being in relation to each other and attending to each other's needs; by sharing the untranslatable hieroglyph through the ways shown and unshown in the text and images and videos and sound.

Writing/making *Son* was a practice that begat theory, furthering my understanding of my own care-full writing practice as an embodied labour of care. In the initial installation, the space between the photographs on the wall was measured by the size of my hand (an unplanned feature that developed when I forgot my measuring tape at home). As the

⁷² Audre Lorde "Litany for Survival"

installation progressed, I recognized that the process of spacing images with my body established a hyper-personal metric that echoed a hyper-personal rhythm for the otherwise generic tasks of care that fade into the background of my life and yet continue, day after day, in times of joy, hope and fear. It is a part of the installation that is imperceptible if it is unknown and also means that this *specific* story of care cannot be told by anyone else. As I move into the next chapter, I recognize this to be true for my mother and grandmother's similar, yet distinct forms of archival practice that tell their own stories of care. I read them within the chapter's larger conversation of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for teaching about and to care.



Figure VII: During setup of Son at the Eco Arts & Media Festival, York University (2020)



Figure VI: Two of the 180 photos that lined the walls of the installation.

Chapter Three: Teaching (Others to) Care

“Storytelling*

(*How my people remember. How my people archive. How we inherit the world.)”

—Koleka Putuma, *Collective Amnesia*

“Black Studies inspires and requires a refusal to be disciplined. Black Studies inspires and requires a kind of fearlessness, and provides a map for making one’s way in an unjust world.”

—Kathryn Mariner “On Needing Black Studies”

My mother, Bertha (McAleer) Stephen, a retired early childhood educator and the single most caring person I have ever known, was my very first teacher—at home and at school. She made space in our home for childlike wonder, creation, mess, noise, and exploration. She preserved artworks made by tiny hands with boundless imaginations. We went for adventures in the rain and jumped in puddles, got curious, invited elders into our classrooms as our grandparents and walked through the graveyard on the way home. *Cemeteries are a great place to do math*, she still says. As a child, every moment with my mother felt safe. She built her career and our lives around principles of care. The first principle was, ‘listen to children.’ And my mom listens with her whole body. Through her careful attention, we learned that our thoughts, our feelings, our words, our artworks, songs, jokes, and joy were important and necessary. She made space so those things could flow abundantly in our lives. And story time was always a time of deep wonder, listening and curiosity.

My mother taught my brothers and me to read books a million different ways—to be curious about everything on the page, the pictures, the characters. To make up stories when we didn’t yet know how to coax one out of the jumble of letters. She encouraged us to

notice patterns and clues, to remember, to freestyle, to extend the story beyond the page. I remember reading Ann McGovern's *Stone Soup* in our nursery school classroom.⁷³ At my mother's request, each student brought a different soup ingredient to the class—onions, carrots, barley. Mom brought out a large stone and, with a theatrical flourish, pretended to slip it into the pot to make the soup base. Over the morning (and likely with the help of volunteer parents), we proceeded to wash and cut the veggies we had brought, adding them to the “stone soup” that we all happily ate for a snack. While we took turns cooking and playing and eating, we talked about working together. We spoke about cooperation, thought together about how everybody's contribution was important and for our mutual benefit. Inside and outside of her classroom, story with my mom was an invitation for conversation. She asked questions, we asked questions. And we enthusiastically worked to find or imagine the answers—and sometimes more questions—together. She was like that at home, in her classroom, everywhere she interacted with children. And although my mom is someone who generally prefers to be out of the spotlight, when it comes to reading or making up stories with children, she is a performance artist. She taps in to the boundlessness of childhood imagination — her eyes widen, voice softens and you feel compelled to lean in.

⁷³ Stone Soup is a folktale that has been told, as folktales often are, with many variations. McGovern's version is about a hungry man who is passing through a town and looking for food. He knocks on a door and is turned away by a woman who says she has nothing to spare. He asks for a stone, claiming that he can make a delicious soup out of it. Intrigued, the woman gives him a stone and boils a large pot of water for him, into which he puts the stone. Over the story, the hungry man keeps insisting that the soup would be made better by various ingredients—vegetables, spices, etc.—that the woman finds and brings, despite her initial claim that she had nothing to spare. At the end of the story, the traveler has made enough soup to feed them both and he carries on with a full belly and the stone in his pocket, prepared for the next time he finds himself hungry in an ungenerous town.

My mother's engagement with story disrupts many lies that structure Black children's lives: that children know less than adults, that because of this imagined difference they are less important. That they should be quiet, obey without questioning, endlessly defer to these so-called-grown ups. That Black children cannot trust their own instincts about their experience in the world. That their hopes and fears are silly. That stories are not real. That their stories are not real. But with her, story is a collaborative endeavour of noticing and curiosity; it is a portal for discovery, reflection, and practicing a different set of relations in which Black childhood is theirs for the constructing.

Stories and storytelling are part of a long tradition of Black relational and intellectual practice of questioning what we are expected to know to be true—which is to say, Black study. In “The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis,” the final chapter of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Moten describes study in the following way:

“...study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. ... The point of calling it study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. ... To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case—because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, *alternative history of thought*.” (110; *emphasis mine*)

Story has a prominent place in that history of thought. Joshua Myers writes about the stories that African peoples brought with them through the middle passage, the stories of

survival and self-definition; practices of teaching and remembering through stories; stories told and protected through words, music, food (*Of Black Study* 53). Black story (which I will use as shorthand to mark the stories and storytelling that fall within this tradition) is both a site and practice of knowledge making and transfer. It is both a site and a practice of refusing “the knowledge of the world as it was given to us by those committed to colonial and racial order” (Myers 8). It is both a site and a practice of illuminating the *lies* of disciplinary knowledge and a discipline called care.

In the chapter that follows, I examine stories of Black life that function as instructive texts in the studying and teaching of care. First, I explore case studies used in college and university programs as a narrative tool for demarcating the limits of state care for Black life and extending the *narratively condemned status* of Black people seeking care. Next, I mobilize care-full writing in the service of Black story as pedagogy, offering counternarratives of the practices and relations that attend to Black life. At times, I engage a speculative practice that approaches Saidiya Hartman’s method of close narration. I then draw on the archival tradition of my mother and my grandmother to animate care-full writing as a practice of relational engagement over time. Their method of Black archival practice care-fully labours to pass on the strategies that Black people (known and unknown to us) have used to build systems that address the material, emotional, and spiritual needs of Black children, their families and communities and to survive the *care* of the state.

How Violence Becomes Care, How Care Becomes Violence (or The Making of a Professional Care Worker)

In 1992 in an open letter to her colleagues at Stanford University, and by extension in the US academy (and elsewhere), Sylvia Wynter discusses the discursive practice used by the Los Angeles police and courts to communicate and contextualize various manifestations of anti-Black police violence as within the scope of police work. The acronym “N.H.I.” (No Humans Involved), was used by members of the judicial system in reference to “any case involving the breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos,” to denote that all actions taken by police officers should be understood as a non-breach of human rights (Wynter 1). No *human*, no breach. The classifying logic unwriting the acronym reflects a shared understanding of who is human and, therefore, to whom the members of the judicial system and citizen participants in the judicial processes (e.g. the jury) owed a mutual obligation to protect. Wynter’s open letter published in *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* in 1994 emphasizes the role of the academy in re-inscribing our present social hierarchy through the training and certification of people working within that system and can easily be applied to other disciplines that constitute state care.

In child and youth care, one strategy used in the process of training and certification is reading case studies for lessons of care. I am referring to stories of care-in-practice that are used as the scene for a hypothetical professional intervention. Case studies are commonly used as a tool through which CYC instructors and students engage the narrative space of care in formal pre-service education. They can be thought of as a discursive

practice lab for care-workers-in-training that allow for a perceived low-stakes engagement with an imagined object of care; and thus as a site for interrogating and defining professional identity. Case studies are regularly used in and beyond child and youth care as both a tool of teaching and assessment as they allow educators to control (for) particular objects of study by narrating a care story as specifically as necessary for the activity at hand. Students are presented with a scenario and then are tasked with engaging a set of questions or prompts for reflection and discussion. When used in conjunction with a physical practice lab or similar activities, students may even act out their responses to the scenarios. In both cases, the written scene and responses are discussed, analyzed and labeled: *care, risk, safety, therapeutic intervention, institutional protocol, best practice*. It is one of the ways students learn to articulate a professional identity and scope of practice that falls within the parameters of their discipline. As with many other care disciplines, empathy is central to this formation.

As a sessional lecturer in CYC over several years, I most often taught pre-developed courses. One of the courses I was hired to teach focused on working with families and the course design included a mid-semester class-long exercise in empathy. The activity had students in small groups, reading case studies by way of newspaper articles reporting instances of significant child abuse. Students were supposed to reflect on and discuss the question “when would I...?” finishing the question with whatever the caregiver had done in the story.⁷⁴ The one stipulation for the activity was that students were not allowed to say *I*

⁷⁴ For example, if reading an article reporting on the abuse inflicted by Jennifer and Sarah Hart on their adopted children, the students would generate and reflect on questions such as, “When would I...withhold food from my children?” or, even more horrifyingly, “When would I...intentionally drive my entire family to their deaths?”

would never do that. Instead, they were encouraged to stay with the discussion until they were able to articulate the conditions or circumstances under which they would enact the abuse they were reading about—no matter how grisly. The scenarios I was provided for the activity did not distinguish between harm caused by under-resourced families in which caregivers were trying their best to meet their family’s needs and harm administered by caregivers who maliciously abused children as a form of control and punishment. As it was explained to me, the activity was meant to help students develop the skill of empathy that would enable them to work with and support any caregiver—regardless of how morally opposed they were to their actions—by seeing themselves in their shoes, capable of inflicting the same harm in the same manner. Hartman’s critique of empathy applies here—care as professional practice was learned and taught through this activity by effacing the fungible objects of care, who are all but irrelevant to the scenario, except to provide a scenario to step into and an object to map oneself onto.⁷⁵ *When would I...?* becomes especially violent in the cases where white student-practitioners disappear caregivers in order to make sense of intentional violence directed toward Black children.

In a general sense, case studies are a tool through which students learn that care is a *job*. As professional care workers, they will be instilled with the authority of an institution of state care and thereby with an obligation to it—and the priorities of the state by extension.⁷⁶ In order to do this work, CYCs are taught to separate their personal and

⁷⁵ Hartman’s critique of empathy with respect to the fungibility of the slave can be read in her book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997).

⁷⁶ Child and youth care practitioners work in multidisciplinary practice settings that include, but are not limited to: schools, hospitals, group homes, community counselling programs, shelters and transitional housing programs, as well as residential and community mental health programs – all of which are covered by the term ‘institution of state care’ because they are funded and/or regulated by the state and therefore beholden to it.

professional selves, to not identify too closely with those we provide care to as a professional service. *Clients are not your friends, they are not your family.* Perhaps this is so that personal feelings don't prevent practitioners from calling Children's Aid if they suspect a child is *at risk of harm*—as is their professional obligation.⁷⁷ Maybe it is so that care is applied equally to all young people, available equally to each family they come in contact with. Or perhaps it is so practitioners are more willing to call the police on children displaying 'aggressive' behaviour—as is taught as a *last-resort* option (but an option nonetheless) in the fourth week of classes in the same CYC program that is so deeply invested in walking in the shoes of another/an Other. The development of a professional identity and practice therefore relies on a relational and proximal tension at the convergence of the place-taking necessary for empathy and the separation required to discipline. This tension, often referred to as professional boundaries, is a psychic gravity that keeps care in the orbit of the state through the unequally yoked service provider/service user dyad and is a defining characteristic of professionalized care.

To explore case scenarios further as a narrative site of teaching about care for Black children and families, I have chosen a practice example from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS)'s publication, "Ontario's Quality Standards Framework: A Resource Guide to Improve the Quality of Care for Children and Young Persons in Licensed Residential Settings" (hereafter "the QSF"). The intended audience of this framework and its influence on legislation (e.g. the CYFSA 2017) make it an ideal source from which to draw a case to read closely for how care and violence become

⁷⁷ OACAS "Duty to Report"

conflated while teaching the care that attends to Black life.⁷⁸ Though the QSF is not a regulatory document, elements of the framework have been proposed as amendments to the CYFSA through the Child Welfare Redesign strategy over the 3-5 years following its release in July 2020. The strategy aims to improve the quality of residential care by prioritizing, among other things, the qualifications and education for people providing direct care to young people.⁷⁹ Short case studies called practice examples are included throughout the framework to “highlight current practices in licensed residential settings across Ontario that are accomplishing the quality standard goal for children and young persons” and to encourage its audiences to “reflect on how these practice examples could be incorporated into the care they provide children and young persons...” (MCCSS 10). The scenario I present here animates *Quality Standard #2: Individualized Care* and features a Black teenager as the youth in need of care. It is quoted in its entirety below:

This practice example focuses on a child named Stephen whose care was targeted towards his individualized needs that cut across the child welfare and youth justice systems.

Stephen is a teenager living in a group home. Stephen shares with his staff that he is struggling with conflicting views of himself culturally as a Black youth. He says that he has been acting the way social media portrays Black men, which has led to some conflict with the law. Staff connected with Stephen’s support worker,

⁷⁸ Primary audiences for the QSF are listed as (1) Children and young persons, (2) Residential licensees, (3) Staff and caregivers, (4) Placing agencies, (5) Adult allies, and (6) Community-based service providers.

⁷⁹ Other priorities can be read in Ontario Regulation 155/18 (2021)-- Proposed Regulatory Enhancements to Support Implementation of Ontario's Quality Standards Framework - Lieutenant Governor in Council Regulation

who facilitated a meeting between Stephen and a representative of the local law enforcement. They talked about the role of police officers, the youth's concerns about policing, and the need for everyone to work together to reduce his risk of coming into contact with the police, and what that will look like should it happen. This meeting was a starting point for staff to further build on ensuring Stephen's needs were being considered in his individual programming around his identity, his strengths, and his future. Stephen told staff that doing better in school was a goal for him, so program staff, Stephen's support worker, his teacher and Stephen got together to plan for his success at school. This was documented in Stephen's plan of care and is monitored and updated as Stephen progresses. (MCCSS 34)

If this scenario was brought into a classroom and used as a case study—either instructive or evaluative—it would be presented with questions geared toward learning goals. Questions such as: *What community resources can you draw on to support Stephen? Who are your partners in practice? What does Stephen identify as the problem/the need? What do the staff identify as the problem/the need? How would you support/care for Stephen? What is assumed in this scenario? and/or How would you document this interaction?* But here, what I am interested in focusing on is what the QSF is putting forward as a standard of care. Therefore, the question I offer for reflection and discussion is: *How did the staff care (or not care) for Stephen?* Let's discuss.

Stephen approaches the staff with developmentally appropriate and contextually specific questions related to how he is making sense of his blackness and his experiences of Black boyhood in the world. There is no indication that the staff engaged in any meaningful conversation with Stephen before passing a message on to his support worker. There is

similarly no indication that they spent any time in conversation with Stephen to find out what representations of Black men he was referencing to anchor the conversation or where those representations fit in the range of ways that Black men represent themselves and are represented on and off social media. The scenario offers no evidence of a conversation with Stephen about how he is making sense of these portrayals, nor any context for how the staff are connecting Stephen's behaviour and his sense-making. There is no discussion of the relationship between any of these topics and Stephen's contact with the police. The practice example instead charts a direct line from the unspoken homogenized imagining of what constitutes Black men's behaviour to a resulting criminality. The swift and implicit conflation is further reinforced by the staff's "care" response. That is to say, when this curious and *conflicted* Black teenage boy came to his state-assigned caregivers with questions about how to understand himself in the world, their immediate response was to hand him over to the police to find the answers.

I read this practice example and became very curious about the use of conflict to represent Stephen's relationship to himself (*conflicting views of himself*) and to the state (*conflict with the law*). The source of both conflicts is attributed to social media's portrayal of Black men—or, rather, Stephen's behavioural alignment with these portrayals. The care plan is built on the premise that if certain actions—which I suspect to be any *expressions of freedom* that could be considered *unbecoming conduct*, including such things as "dress, demeanor, movement through public space, tone of voice, and companions" (Hartman *Scenes of Subjection* 148)—could just be disciplined out, Stephen would resolve his internal conflict and mitigate his conflict with the law.

In the arranged meeting between Stephen and the enforcer of the law, the officer rearticulates the necessity of the police and how they fit into the larger societal makeup. She narrates Stephen into the *everyone* whose responsibility it is to keep Black boys like him out of “contact” with the police and they talked about what that contact will look like. The practice example doesn’t gender the police officer, but I imagine this conversation in the dynamic of the self-absolving power of whiteness compounded by the disciplining authority of carceral care, made manifest in the body of a uniformed and armed, yet assumed-well-intentioned white woman police officer. It is the image most consistent with the legacies of professional discipline-as-care and white women who step in as self- or state-appointed disciplinarians whose contact with Black boys increases their likelihood for premature death. I imagine her as one iteration of white women who assert themselves as the necessary *caring* guidance needed to urge Black boys to *get on track*, or *reach their potential*, or various other euphemisms for *know their place and fall in line*.⁸⁰

Though there are no details, I wonder what this hypothetical conversation sounded like. I wonder how the authors of the practice example imagined a conversation between a Black teenage boy and a representative of law enforcement. Did they imagine that the two spoke of how frequently the police are called by group home staff to make contact with Black youth;⁸¹ how often their disciplinary specialty is included as part of their legally required plan of care? (I also wonder what the distance is between *Black youth*, as Stephen is described, and the *Black men* he is imitating, how close he is to this imagined threshold?)

⁸⁰ For a cringe-worthy example of this investment, see Brockenbrough, Ed. (2014) “Further Mothering: Reconceptualizing White Women Educators’ Work with Black Youth.” See also: Chapter Four: “The Kids in the Hall: Space and Governance in Frisco’s Plantation Future” in Shange, *Progressive Dystopia* (pp. 66-91).

⁸¹ See Finlay, et al (2019). *Cross-Over Youth Project: Navigating Quicksand*.

Did the writers of this seemingly-low-states example imagine a conversation about the force with which police regularly make contact with conflicted Black boys? Was that force imagined as part of Stephen's care? Or was this meeting part of an effort to have Stephen internalize that force as a part of his requisite self-disciplining toward independence; one of his final steps before *aging out of care*? (This a curious phrase, certainly, and one that infers the "double bind of freedom" Hartman describes in which the formerly enslaved were "freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted..." (*Scenes* 117).) I doubt the authors (or the group home staff representing their views) even paused to consider whether this meeting would be something Stephen would want to participate in. Consent can only be given when there is the opportunity for refusal. Refusal framed as non-compliance can be deadly especially for Black *youth*. (Did that come up in the conversation?) The scenario goes on to label this meeting as a first step in centring Stephen's needs in his programing around "his identity, his strengths, and his future" (34).

How did the staff care (or not care) for Stephen?

Ontario's quality standard for individualized care is depicted through a story that explicitly centres carceral care as the recommended practice for attending to Black life. The practice example works on the conflation of criminality and identity to make sense of a carceral response to a Black child's request for care. The best and only imaginable response is to remind him that he must at all times understand himself in relation to the police, to let him know what will (not *could*, *may* or *might*, but *will*) happen should he not be able to keep himself out of the police's way. The teen's nuanced, multi-layered inquiry is flattened

into a matter of poor personal choices and returned to him as call for personal accountability. Discipline is issued in place of care.

As a government-issued standard and a teaching tool, this example leaves little room for imagining non-carceral ways of caring for this Black child. If he *is* the conflict with the state, then all roads to care must have a cop on them. The scenario is unsurprisingly problematic and (also unsurprising) reportedly draws on real experience from care. Stephen is well-known to me in life and as a central archetype in practice scenarios. He is the Black youth, the quintessential object of care, always already understood as criminal and *at-risk* of perpetual criminality. I, too, know the staff at the group home; they all come into being through the imagined-yet-necessary criminality of Black youth. In other words, Stephen is a necessary referent for the development of a professional identity and practice in the industry of carceral care: the approachable and well-intentioned shift staff, the task-oriented support worker, the cop who helps a *Black youth* understand himself and his place in the social order—each with their own disciplinary and disciplining approach to attending to Black life.

Study Note: Stephen

The question then is how to study care in a way that opens up the possibilities for Black life. If Stephen's practice example depicts the standard for state care, then the study I wish to engage must distinguish between what the state calls care and the practices and systems that actually attend to the wellness and safety needs of Black children and their communities. I want to engage the modes and sites of study that do not rely on blackness as pathology to articulate something called care.

Working still in the context of the discussion above, I feel compelled to reiterate that the central character of the narrative is not imaginary, but rather is a composite Black child, conceived of by drawing on experiences of real children in residential care. Stephen, therefore, reflects many Black boys under the care of the state who love and emulate and hope to grow up to be Black men; and who also are constantly re-interpreted and homogenized through the narratives of care systems (as extensions of the colonial state). Our inattention to his needs is not without stakes—especially where that inattention is discursively marked as the aspirational standard of care. With attention to Stephen, I rearticulate the practice example in the context of the carceral relations that underwrite state care in an attempt to turn down the noise that distracts the reader from recognizing that Stephen’s needs have yet gone unmet.

Stephen is a Black teenager living in a group home

Stephen shares with staff that he is struggling

Stephen has concerns about policing

Staff connected Stephen and law enforcement

They talked about the role of police officers

They talked about everyone working together

They plan for his success at school

Stephen has concerns about policing

This was documented in his plan of care

a Black youth

conflicting views of himself

conflict with the law

“the youth”

reducing his risk

contact with the police, what it will look like

(his identity)

(his strengths)

(his future)

In this story, Stephen is not the problem and his concerns (to the extent that we know them) are noted. Rather than foregrounding the staff's assessment of their progress toward fulfilling the provincial guidelines for "quality care," this story brings Stephen's unmet needs to the fore while highlighting the ways that the official archive misrepresents Stephen's care and his concerns.

Archives of Care

The women in my family keep history, memory. Not as a rule, but as a practice. My grandmother, Bertha (Hackley) McAleer, was trained in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church as a historian. She compiled and passed on a significant archive of history of the A.M.E. church in Canada and particularly its largest, Grant A.M.E. in Toronto. From generations of leadership and membership, my family's history is inextricably interwoven throughout these records. Stewart Memorial Church in Hamilton, Ontario, is named for my great uncle; the Elizabeth Hackley Women's Missionary Society at Grant A.M.E. for my great-grandmother.⁸² Since my grandmother's death, the books of her handwritten minutes, statistics, reports and directories live on my mother's bookshelves as a sort of de-institutionalized archive and continue to be referenced to narrate the history of the church and its place in Black Canada. My mother, Bertha (McAleer) Stephen, like her mother, is a keeper of records—church, family, community—she narrates connections and relations through words, photographs, and other materials selectively archived and carefully curated.

⁸² When St. Paul A.M.E. Church in Hamilton broke ties with the connectional A.M.E. church, the new non-denominational church was named after the former pastor, Rev. Claude Stewart.

For reasons unknown to me, my mother neither considers herself a writer, nor someone who ‘thinks outside of the box’. (She is, in fact, both.⁸³) For Christmas 2012, my mother gave me and my three brothers each a personalized scrapbook that she had assembled. Each one is unique and filled with items my mother collected over our lives, punctuated by hi/stories that she wants us to know and remember. Mine is housed in a photo album that holds three standard 4x6 photos per page with lines beside each for a caption. It has a black faux-leather cover, debossed with a verse about familial strength and love. My mother’s distinct script greets me inside:

My Daughter Juanita,

Always know how special you are to me – a gift from God and I love you very much.

Within these covers you will find a wealth of history to be passed along through the years as your Grandmother Bertha McAleer passed it to me.

Cherish the past and look to the future. With God, the sky’s the limit. Psalm 139:14 – “You are fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Love and Blessings Always,

Mom

Her choices within the scrapbook are clearly intentional, though not through a system that lends itself to replication. Its contents are not arranged chronologically or thematically and because of that, I read it differently every time I sit with it: A birthday card with my grandmother’s handwriting; a clipping from that time I was in the local paper; ribbons from school track meets; a poetry award I had won in elementary school and the associated poem; the public health flyer for a breastfeeding campaign in which my son and I were

⁸³ See Stephen, Bertha. “The African Methodist Episcopal Church.” *The Black Church in Canada*. (Ed. Fiona Raye Clarke), 2015, pp. 55-72.

featured; my baptismal certificate; an article on the last segregated school in Ontario. There are photos of my siblings and me as children, with various friends and each other throughout the years, of relatives we know well and those we don't, and of those who became ancestors before we could meet them. There are pictures of my grandparents as newlyweds, captions listing addresses of family homes (some of which are no longer standing), images of weddings and baptisms captured in professional photos and those taken by cameras in less steady hands. Mom's handwritten captions accompany about a third of the photos.

Chicken pox at 3 months old

Mom and Dad at queen's Park, T.O. 1971

(Paternal) Grandmother Christina Stephen ("Mummie")

Great grandfather Rev. A. W. Hackley baptizing in the lake

(Great) Aunt Martha (McAleer) Stewart at site of her father and mother's grave

Bike riding lesson with dad

Mrs. White (volunteer) [redacted] Nursery School. Juanita would sit beside her and rub her arm for comfort.

Mom's relay team, Balmy Beach Track Club

(Great Uncle) Herbert McAleer – born in 1905, forced to retire one year early due to a mistake in documentation

In some places, my mother narrates short stories of how people lived together and where, who cared for whom in times of sickness. She maps relationships, movement within and outside of Canada, involvement in the church, stories of what people grew and cooked and ate, what they did for fun, how they were known to each other, to her, to us. *Care pays*

*attention to how we are known to ourselves and to each other. Care lingers at the ordinary: notices it, names it, creates it, inhabits it, pursues it, practices it.*⁸⁴



In other places there are longer narratives—many written by mother, including biographies of each of her parents and her own one-page autobiography. Beginning with full name, date of birth and immediate relations, her narratives offer succinct, but far-reaching overviews of the aspects of her life and her parents' lives that she found most important to pass on. As my mother worked on assembling the scrapbooks, she also compelled my father to write his autobiography. His narrative is filled with familiar and

⁸⁴ Revisiting K'eguro Macharia's thoughts on care in "black (beyond negation)" (2018)

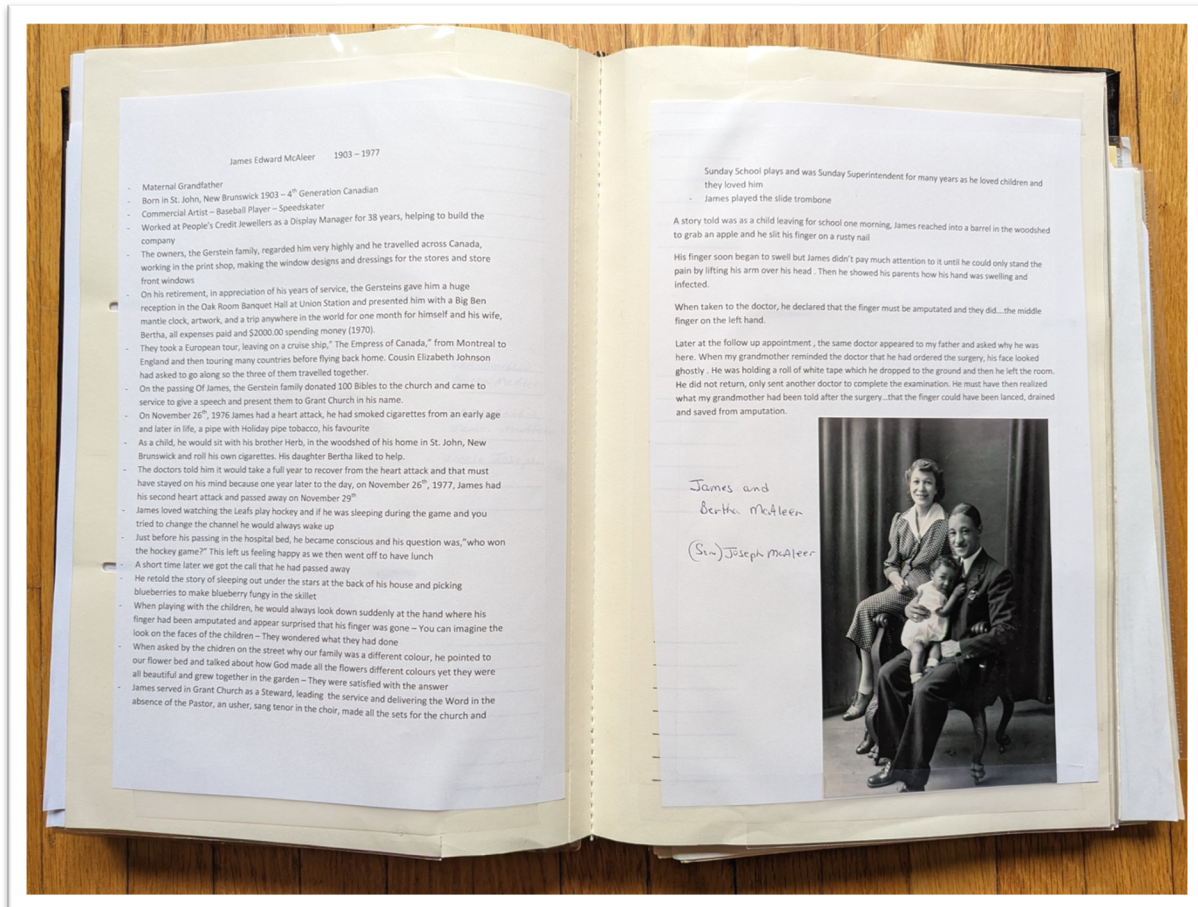
new stories of migration, settlement, studying, making community, finding work, and building family. His relations to time, place, kin are all presented on his own terms.

Mom's scrapbook is an archive of care, a note from inside the circle. It is a story composed of stories told and untold, stories that are discovered when I read with care. That is, when I practice noticing, attentiveness, sitting with the stories as a practice of relation; when I read across the images and texts to look for *the stories that are not hers to tell*.⁸⁵ Some of those stories she doesn't have the words for, some she tells through other people's words, and some are only presented in a way that says *something happened*.

In the biography of her father, my mother tells a brief story of medical neglect resulting in the unnecessary amputation of the middle finger on his left hand. She begins, "A story told was: as a child leaving for school one morning, James reached into a barrel in the woodshed to grab an apple and he slit his finger on a rusty nail ..." It was indeed a story told in our family, and one I knew well. It was often immediately followed by remembering/re-telling how, as an adult, my grandfather would use his missing finger to prank small children by pretending to suddenly notice the missing finger and compelling them to help him look for it. Although I knew the story well, I had somehow forgotten or misremembered my grandfather's age at the time of the incident. He was a child. He was a

⁸⁵ Though this is a common turn of phrase, I'm paraphrasing and referencing a tweet (reproduced with permission) by K'eguro Macharia. See K'eguro Macharia, [@Keguro_] "(many people hold many stories that are not theirs to tell / we need words that can say *something happened* while protecting those people and their stories)." (*Twitter*, 1 June 2021), as well as Christina Sharpe's narrative discretion in the opening pages of *In the Wake*: "There are other stories to be told here; they are not mine to tell" (6).

Black child living in New Brunswick in the early 1900s, who was taken to get medical care by his Black father and his Afro-Indigenous mother.⁸⁶



Before this recent re-encounter with the story and sudden awareness of my grandfather's childhood, I hadn't thought about *his* mother's role in the story. I have very

⁸⁶ For reasons I can only speculate about, my family is not connected to our Maliseet heritage or culture. There is a current and ongoing, extensive and nuanced conversation taking place among Indigenous communities in North America with regard to who can and should lay claim to indigeneity and in what ways. This conversation includes a critique of the way antiblackness has been mobilized to exclude Afro-Indigenous/Black Indigenous/Black Native people from claims to indigenous identity. Much of this has happened in online spaces. (See "Episode 2: Black Indigeneity with Joy Henderson and Shanese Indoowaaboo Steele" *REDSurgence with Riley Yesno*, 2022.) This is not an attempt to enter that conversation. It would be remiss of me, however, *not* to acknowledge that my great-grandmother's experience seeking care for her child was coloured by the compounding effects of slavery and colonization as a Black and Indigenous woman in eastern Canada in the early part of the 20th century. The history of gendered racial violence against Black, Indigenous and Black Indigenous women is too overwhelming to not note.

little information about my great-grandmother. She died before my mother was born and therefore, my mother had limited information to pass on. I knew that her name was Violet Dymond, that she was the mother of my maternal grandfather and his four siblings, and that she was a Black Maliseet woman born in Fredericton, New Brunswick in 1882. I knew what she looked like—my mother's scrapbook holds about a half dozen pictures of her, including one of my great aunt at the site of her father's and mother's grave. Beyond that, I knew only some limited genealogical information gathered from the death announcement in the newspaper (included in Mom's scrapbook), birth registries in the public record and oral family history. However, re-encountering this much-told story with thoughts of my grandfather as a child in need of care, great-grandma Violet came into view differently.

I imagined how worried she must have been at the sight of her son's infected, swelling hand and her dread at hearing the news that to save the arm, he must lose his finger. Did she trust the doctor's assessment? And, even if she did not, what other choice did she have at this point? By the time my grandfather—her child—had alerted her and her husband to the issue, he was already in so much pain that it could only be alleviated by holding his arm overhead. Could she afford the time it would take for a second opinion? Would she have considered this as an option? I imagine her sitting close to my great grandfather while the surgery was underway, silently whispering a prayer for her son to be met by knowledgeable and caring physicians. (Is that where we learned the prayer I would rely on over 100 years later when I had no choice but trust the hospitals to care for my own closest relations?) I wonder if she felt disbelief or anger or grief upon later learning that her son's finger could have been lanced and drained and, therefore, saved. I try to picture what it was like for her to return to confront the doctor at the follow-up appointment; to see his

face drain of colour as he recognized his own careless mistake; then to watch him turn, leave the room and never return. My curiosities are not satisfied by the information in the scrapbook. (I don't expect them to be.) Instead, I follow Hartman's example of imagining into the silences and engage the space of the unverifiable through speculation and placing myself in close relation to my great-grandmother. There has been no new data added about my her since I received the scrapbook, but my multiple returns to the larger narratives my mother has woven builds meaning with each pass.

My mother's care-full writing method centres relationality in content, but also by building interdependence into its form. Each of the four scrapbooks were curated specifically for each of us, but in a manner that foregrounds ongoing connection as a way of reading and knowing the many stories they tell about the ways we lived with each other. Upon gifting the scrapbooks to the four of us, my mom explained how the stories they each told overlapped, that we would be able to find ourselves in each other's books and see one another in our own. She gave them to us with an invitation to collaborate in its ongoing co-curation (one I have happily accepted) and occasionally when visiting my mother, she greets me with a newspaper clipping or photo that might make an interesting addition to our unfolding collective history.

The most recent contribution to our now-collaborative project is an article I discovered concerning the Toronto-based protest against the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The coordinated efforts to have the film banned in Ontario were organized largely through church congregations in the city and led by my great-grandfather,

Rev. Andrew W. Hackley, along with former city councilor, William P. Hubbard.⁸⁷

My mother, unaware of this story when I shared it with her, replied: *I guess that's where grandma got it from.*

My grandmother, too, compiled a scrapbook for me filled with lessons and memories—some hers, some shared—as well as artifacts that she thought beneficial for me to find my way through the world. Her inscription reads “Grandma’s Scrapbook – Compiled with love by Bertha Hackley McAleer to inform, amuse and assist with your journey through life” and sits above four stickers on the inside cover that read: “History,” “Photos,” “Words of Wisdom,” “Helpful Tips.” As her sole granddaughter, I am the only one who received a scrapbook from her. Grandma’s



⁸⁷ Jimena Ortuzar. “Rise Up Against Racism: Black Canadians and D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation.” *Gathering Partnerships*, 29 Apr 2019.

See also: “Coloured People Protest: Ask Province to Stop Birth of a Nation Exhibition” *Toronto Star*, September 17, 1915

scrapbook, like my mother's, is a curated collection of images and texts reflective of both the curator and the intended audience (me). Her choices reflect her life as Black woman and, likely, how she thought about and imagined mine. It includes an article on the value of housewifery next to a picture of my grandmother sorting mail after the war (which she did weekly until the task was automated); an article that both marks the occasion of a new historical site in Toronto (the former home of William Peyton Hubbard) and addresses the myth of Toronto being untouched by slavery. She included an article about a Black Trinidadian student who was prevented from playing bridge in a Toronto-hosted US tournament; an article about Sidney Poitier's historic 1963 Oscar win; a clipping from *Share* newspaper when I was awarded an entrance scholarship to my first undergrad program; one on Lincoln Alexander receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto; and still another on the challenges of running *Contrast*, as a newspaper that attempted to attend to the broad interest and needs of a growing and diverse Black population in Toronto.

My grandmother's scrapbook is an anthology. Like my mother's it is a story told through stories; unlike my mother's, hers has no space for commentary or captions. Instead, her book contains several articles and essays written by my grandmother herself. One such article, "Memoirs From a Minister's Daughter," was published in *The Christian Recorder* (the A.M.E. church's official newspaper and the longest running Black periodical published in the United States) and was included in both my grandmother's and my mother's scrapbooks. Though the article is interesting for a number of reasons, the most remarkable part of it is my grandmother's annotation. In chapters two and three, I have discussed annotation and redaction as Black practices that insist on a different engagement,

that make visible new/different/additional ways of seeing and reading story. In grandma's scrapbook she redacted the weekly salary earned by her father, replacing the amount with "very small." I do not know for certain why my grandmother made that edit, but with the intentionality that has gone into every aspect of the scrapbook, I believe that there was a reason. Her redaction teaches me something about knowability, about choosing to tell your own story differently under different circumstances, to different audiences. The copy of the article in my mother's album is unredacted, but I have since covered the passage with a small sticky note. My reading practice reflects my ongoing relation to my grandmother, and my respect for her insistence that I read the story in a particular way. I accept her choice to amend the story in relaying it to her granddaughter, to put the redacted dollar amount into context for me—*our family lived on very little*—even as the story is further contextualized by family photographs, telegrams and cards sent between loved ones, grandma's Depression-era rations book, her father's handwritten sermons and certificates of pastoral appointment, housekeeping tips, the lyrics to *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, and a handwritten letter on birch bark from her unhappy 12-year-old daughter (my mom) anxiously awaiting the end of camp.

The arrangement of the items in the scrapbook is part of the story. On the page with my mother's camp letter is a *Toronto Star* article reporting on the inaccessibility of the Metro Convention Centre, along with an article on *unpacking white privilege*, and a picture of a smiling white police officer next to a smiling Black woman under a headline that reads "Mugged Wheelchair Senior Gets \$380." In the picture, the woman is holding up some money and another paper of some sort. The caption explains that the 67-year-old wheelchair user, Velma Bowen, had been robbed of sixty-one dollars while outside of her

apartment and that five (unnamed) people had sent donations to her via the police. There is no story beyond what is included in the caption. These four artifacts—the picture, the articles, the letter—are presented side-by-side, just as the rest of the writings and photographs and stories are presented page after page, without comment or adherence to a linear chronology, in close proximity and often juxtaposed to tell a story made of stories. Black life was, is all these things at the same time. It is living in the context of public spaces designed for our exclusion. It is conversations about white privilege, but none about white supremacy or other manifestations of spatialized violence. It is violence-turned-photo opp for white police officers who have neither stopped the violence nor contributed to any processes of redress. And it is also the ordinariness of a homesick child, missing her mother while away at camp. My grandmother knew that as the context in which we make life and take care, and the proximity of the articles, images and writing tells me she wanted me to know too.

My favourite among my grandmother's writings is the essay for which she won a diamond ring in a penmanship contest in high school, titled "Resolve that Corporal Punishment Should be Abolished from the Public Schools of Toronto." In the paper, a young Bertha Hackley writes in favor of *gentleness* over *brutality*:

"[...] Is not corporal punishment to a large extent brutal? Well directed counsel, verbal chastisement and reprimand, tempered with sympathy are more effective than the application of the strap, the sting of which soon passes away and is forgotten, where good counsel is abiding. [...]"

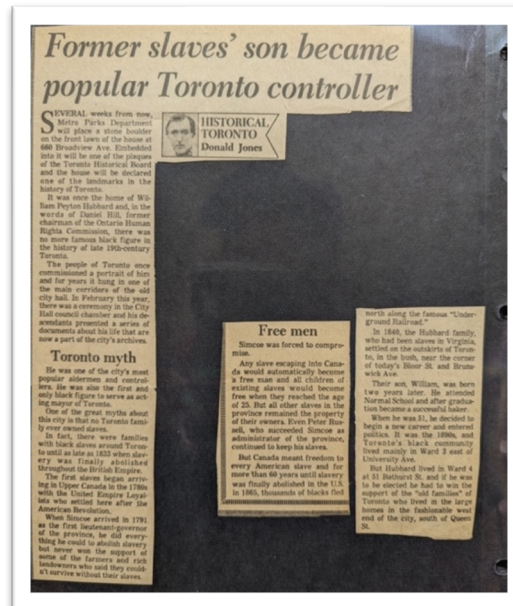
We link our friendship through kindness, patience and trust, not by the rod. Even the most unruly child can be won by kind treatment and patience on the part

of the teacher, where corporal punishment tends to instill a mean disposition and a spirit of revenge. It's a wheel within a wheel and keeps on rolling.” (Bertha Hackley, nd)

My grandmother's inclusion of her own childhood writing echoes my mother's first principle of care: *listen to children*—and specifically here, *listen to Black girls*. It also underscores the fact that she valued her own perspective and experiences, writing without apology or permission: *listen to me*. My grandmother lived her life attentive and attendant to the needs of her family and communities and made a text that reflected the relations that were foundational to her vision of and contributions toward a world built on gentleness. At one point, she was a child advocating for good counsel, and patient, kind spaces for herself and other children as a counter to self-perpetuating systems of brutality in formal education. At another, she was a Black woman, a community-engaged parent and historian with a strong distaste for racial injustice and a dedication to telling our stories on our own terms. Her self-authored stories are enhanced through their placement amongst the other artifacts in the scrapbook that reflect the context for Black life in Canada over the approximate six decades of their collection.

My mother's and grandmother's scrapbooks are not standards of care; they are polyvocal texts that perform and model deliberate, relational writing *as* care. They are a familiar (as in *known to me*) and familial (as in *of my family*) vernacular of proximity, developed from traditions of call and response, collective storytelling, and improvisation. Created explicitly for me as the audience, the two Berthas offer many entry points into a narrative that helps me understand myself in the world. And still more, for imagining/remembering how to sustain meaningful relations in the world. Neither assert

authority as the *only* or *best* way of seeing and knowing and sustaining Black life, but instead the works tell multiple, overlapping, and divergent counter/narratives of our relationships to each other and to existing systems of care/violence-as-care with immediate and material applications for real life.



Study Note: Saying Goodbye

Greetings. Or in true George fashion, let me say: Hello, bonjour, hola, kon'nichiwa, buon giorno, sat Sri akal...

When my father died in 2021, my mother gave me the responsibility and honor of writing his obituary and offering the eulogy at his funeral. And the most significant resource in writing that eulogy was my father's self-authored life story. It wasn't just that the autobiography existed, but that it was there waiting for me when I went to look for it, among the stories and images of his closest relations. Nine years earlier, my parents had provided the answer to a question I hadn't asked yet: *How am I supposed to say goodbye to him?* My mother is not a mind reader, but her care was made manifest in a moment when time folded in on itself, when her knowledge of what would eventually come—death, hers or his, in some form or another, at some time or another—would send her child(ren) looking for the past as prologue.⁸⁸

My dad was born on July 1, 1943 in a village named Biche in Trinidad, WI to Christina Stephen and Vincent Lamb. Dad was the second of three children, though my Auntie Georgie only beat him into the world by five minutes. (Auntie Pam would be along in about six more years.) I can't tell you first-hand what my dad was like as a child, but I know that he had the nickname "Trouble," so I'm guessing he was a lot like he was as an adult....

Pause for dad's laughter

⁸⁸ I believe the original reference for this quote is from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* "What's past is prologue" (2.1.289), though I am more familiar with its colloquial use to identify the historical context for a present or repeating condition.

My father was unable to speak for the last year of his life, which he spent in the hospital, away from his family due to the restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and public health crisis. My dissertation proposal notes that a *careful approach* is necessary for the work that I wanted to do, to study the care our family had provided in order that he might *live as well as possible*. Though he was cognitively astute and able to make his own decisions for most of that time, his mobility and voice were impaired. So, I spent a lot of time making sure we were understanding each other as I asked for his permission to tell this story. An excerpt from the proposal reads:

“I have spoken with [my father] at length, with the help of my mother (his power of attorney and best, most trusted friend) and various communication aids, to ensure that he is comfortable with me sharing some of his personal health information in order to set the context for my reading of care. The conversations with him have happened over time, so that he has the opportunity to reflect, to ask questions and to be clear on the nature of the study before he has granted me permission to use him as a point of reference for my project. ... Though I will not be interviewing him or any other members of my family for the study, his ongoing informed consent is essential to this project.”

Since his passing, I haven't quite been sure how to negotiate the issue of his “ongoing informed consent” which has always been important to how I imagined doing this part of the project. Then again, I never imagined that he wouldn't be around to see me finish. I doubt he did either.

When my dad first came out of the medically-induced coma he was put into upon initial admission in 2020, the nurse asked him a series of question to test his neurological

functions, one of which was to write the names of his family members. He listed his wife and children, then circled back to my name and wrote, *she's doing a PhD*.

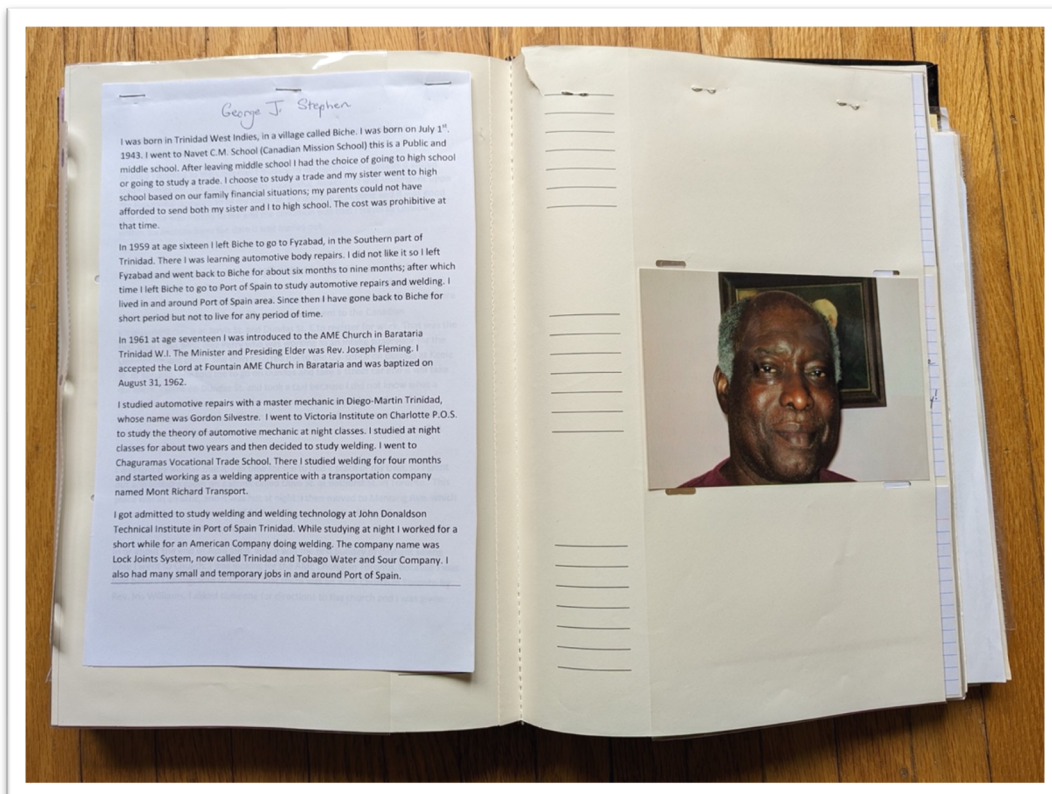
I'm glad I got the opportunity to write this eulogy for my dad because, for most of my life, I've thought of him as just that — My Dad — often forgetting that he had a whole life before I came around (Imagine!) and then, still, had a full life beyond his role as my father. He was George Joseph Stephen. Or perhaps “uncle George” to you. Or Brother George or cousin George. Mr. Stephen to many. Or Boyzin, if you knew him back then. Or perhaps you call him grandpa or papa. Or Georgie...that one is kinda special. If you called him that one with any regularity, you're very likely either his twin sister or the love of his life, my mom. And yes, if (like me) you are one of his children — through birth, marriage or by falling under the net of love he cast so very wide, you might simply call him Dad.

Sixteen months after coming out of the coma—and seventeen months after we were told to say goodbye (the first time)—my dad died with his wife, his twin sister and his youngest child, my brother, by his side. I screamed when I got the call. It wasn't that his death was a surprise. It was that I was twenty minutes away, waiting for an Uber to pick me up from the airport to bring me to the hospital when he transitioned. I wanted to tell him one last time that I loved him, that I wouldn't forget what he had taught us about care and family and protection. About showing up for each other, about doing what you can when you can. I just wanted to say a proper goodbye.

My dad lived a full life that I can't even begin to scratch the surface of here. But what I can say is that my father was deeply loved. I know that because people regularly said to me with a smile, “I love your dad.” One of the

things that happens when someone passes away is that folks start sharing their stories with the family. And I think the reason he was so loved is because of how he loved others. He loved them through laughter — quick to make a joke and to laugh at his own — and through service — waiting to drive people home after church; stopping at the side of the road to offer a boost or help change a tire; by building bicycles for a pair of siblings who lived on my parents' street and didn't have bikes of their own. He just did it because he's Dad. He's uncle George. He's Mr. Stephen. He's grandpa. He is the friendly Trini man who loved God and loved his family and loved his church and his community and friends. And who loved to nap and sing and dance and laugh and laugh and laugh...

There is nothing my father would have liked more than to talk all about his life's adventures in a room full of people who love him. He would have called on his *limin'* *pardnas* to co-sign his tales, he would laugh unabashedly at his own jokes and his friends' gentle ribbing. If he spoke for long enough, his tongue might start to find the shapes he had banished from his mouth as a young man new to Canada. So I eulogized my father in that spirit—taking notes from the collaborative method modeled by mother and grandmother, to stitch together my grief and love with an archive of gathered memories and my father's own words to posthumously co-write his goodbye note.



Chapter Four: Writing (with, as) Care

“...study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice ... the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present ... that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought.”⁸⁹

Study Group: A Note on Form

I return to this quote from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s interview with Stevphen Shukaitis because it is where I unknowingly started and definitively landed in this project of pedagogy and praxis, of study and care. Care was something I did and thought about—at home, at church, at work, with friends—and therefore studied. Care became the official object under study in every degree during my formal education. The discrepancies in how I understood theoretical and practical constructions of care through these two knowledge systems—The University and life lived in the wake—ushered in the questions that animate this project.

I realized pretty quickly upon starting to write that the only way to embark on the project I wanted to do—and to do it genuinely—was to suspend my fidelity to the form of the dissertation genre and abandon the motivational force imposed by the competitive nature of academia that demands everything must be brand new and better than the last thing. This compulsion toward novelty for novelty sake shows up in scholarship applications scored on originality (many of which do not even recognize Black Studies as

⁸⁹ Harney & Moten “The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis.” (110)

an academic discipline); endless ungenerous critique in classrooms and conference halls and footnotes; the ever-quickenning *race for theory*.⁹⁰ So I anxiously tried to fight the internalized spirit of comparison as a self-proclaimed “non-writer” writing about writing, and wrote this project backwards...and a little bit sideways, composing the final chapter concurrently with the rest of the dissertation. The process of effectively writing across four chapters for a year and a half was not an easier process, but it kept my purpose and my audience at all times in my view. That and the sticky note with a truncated paraphrasing of Barbara Christian’s grounding question taped to my monitor: *For whom are you doing what you are doing?*

I wrote and am writing this project through grief, during and after the death of my father, among the ever-increasing reach and deployment of institutionalized global antiblackness. Curiosity, imagination, experimentation and play are not only part of the research design, but are modes of life-making when confronted so regularly with death. The playful and collaborative method that is care-full writing is a means by which I choose to *go about wake work*.⁹¹ Play as care, play as study. Play, as my mother would say, is a child’s work. It the process through which children develop in every area—neurologically to socially, from speech and language to problem-solving.⁹² And so, with the spirit of play, curiosity and mourning, I wrote my final chapter in the form of a children’s chapter book—

⁹⁰ In “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian argues that academic relevance and success has become increasingly measured by one’s capacity to create new theory that is deemed valuable by the assessment of Western academy. This competitive “race” for the newest theory has displaced the value of work by those “for whom literature is...necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better” – particularly Black women, feminists and creative writers (69).

⁹¹ Sharpe *In the Wake* (21)

⁹² Rachel Parker et. al, “Learning Through Play at School – A Framework for Policy and Practice.” *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 7, 2022, pp. 1-12.

a re-articulation of and site for working through the preceding chapters of this project. I chose this form for two reasons: First, I did it to refuse the limitations of the dissertation genre and the academy itself with respect to who my audience could be. Second, I did it as a reminder to myself that children also know and theorize and experiment and practice living in this world. Which means that they have valuable perspectives on how to make sense of the world and imagine a way toward new modes of relating. We (adults, “academics” and care workers in every sense of the term) can only benefit by listening to children and engaging their modes of study to ask (over and over in different ways) June Jordan’s question: *How does this study, how does this subject, relate to the truth of my life?* A question she asked a group of graduating eighth graders in 1969.⁹³

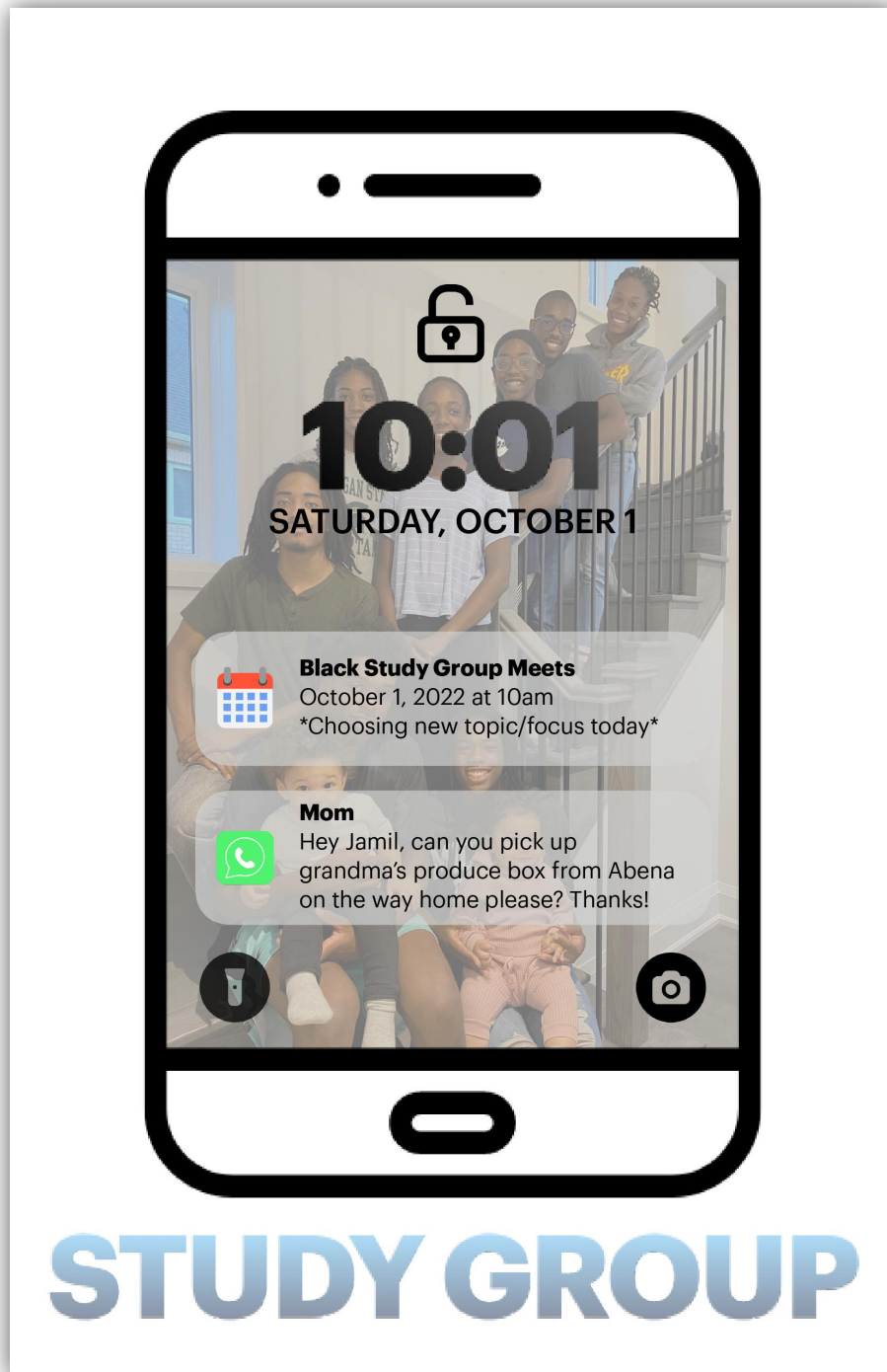
My process for writing *Study Group*, and the larger project of which it is a part, involved playing with other care-full methods as a way to think through and with texts to understand constructions of care relative to power, to offer care where there previously was none, to care for myself through the process of attending to Black life—which inevitably includes attending to the dead, the dying, those left to die, those considered already dead or “consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death” (Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 38). I narrate the story through and with Jamil, practicing Hartman’s method of close narration as autotheory. *Study Group* is and is not a story about my life. It is and is not a story about my family. It is however, in all ways, a story about care that explores the questions that are explored in the dissertation overall—*How do we learn to care? How does violence come to be understood as care? How can we interrupt that violence with another practice of care?*

⁹³ I was introduced to this quote by Josh Myers in *Of Black Study*.

The work of research creation that is the final chapter of the dissertation is imperfect and unfinished—as are my mother’s and grandmother’s albums, and the larger project of imaginative world-building that the dissertation writes toward. Originally intended to be a picture book, the story has grown, demanding more space than I had planned. But isn’t that how it goes with play? Minutes turn into hours, a tiny blanket fort becomes a castle requiring that every pillow and duvet in the house be recruited to form the infrastructure of a magical world of infinite possibility. So, too has the tale of Jamil and his quest to tell a story about his grandpa’s care called for *more*. More play, more time, more than I had to give it in the context of this project. So, what is presented here is not Jamil’s story in its final form. You are being invited to join me in the midst of play, to see the castle under construction. Harney and Moten write that the most important part of play is the interaction. So you are invited to play, too (the text is the invitation). You are invited to collaborate, annotate, experiment, study, discuss, tell your own story. I ask you to bring your imagination and to suspend any fidelity you have to genre. In other words, “Don’t take this too seriously, just go out and play with it...”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Stevphen Shukaitis in conversation with Moten & Harney in “The General Antagonism” (107).

Study Group: The A Story





Author's Note:

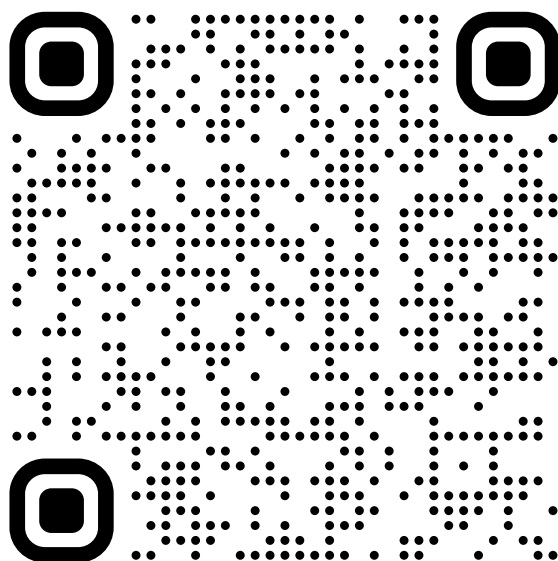
One of my teachers once told me that she flips to the end of books before she reads them so that she knows how to prepare herself for what's coming. I know people don't like spoilers, but I want you to be able to prepare yourself, too.

Jamil is not real, exactly. But all the stories in this book are true in one way or another. The names and the stories are drawn from real people but remixed in various ways to bring the stories close to each other. In doing so, another story is born. That story is called *Study Group* and while it is not a sad story, it has some sad parts. It also has some happy parts, but I have to tell you about them both if I'm going to tell this story at all.

So, start with the prologue and read the rest when you're ready. Okay?

And now that you know,
here we go...





**Jamil's Study
Music**

Prologue: 2020 was a wild year.

That was the year I started planning for the project of which this book is a part. I wanted to write about the violence of care systems and another kind of care that I had learned from my family and community, but also from reading books and stories by people who thought about care in a different way. It was also the year a lot of other world-changing things happened.

First, COVID-19 made its way to Canada and we all went into lockdown. Stores and schools were closed, we had to stay inside, and hospitals started to fill up. People were dying in HUGE numbers all over the world and there was not a lot of clear information about what was safe and what wasn't. Things would open and then a whole bunch more people would get sick, hospitals would fill up and everything would close again. We were constantly unsure of what was going to happen next.

A few weeks into all this, my dad got very, very sick. He didn't get sick from COVID, but it was bad in a different way. He had to be rushed to the hospital and the doctors were not very hopeful that he would get better. And what made it all worse was that, because we couldn't visit him, he had to stay at the hospital by himself. For weeks, and then months.

And as if that wasn't enough, on top of all that, the cops really turned their cop game all the way up, which only added to the fear and anger and loss we were already feeling. Maybe it was because everyone was home and had time to pay attention to what was happening in the world, but the police violence in 2020 really shook us all up. It seemed like every few weeks the

news was reporting another case of the police killing someone who was just trying to get help or buy something at the corner store. And so many of the targets looked just like me, like my family, like the people I love. Every day felt like a struggle as the world kept reinforcing what we already knew: “care” doesn’t always mean care. Neither does ‘serve and protect’ or ‘in care’ or ‘self-care’ or ‘managing risk’ or many of the other words the government was throwing out during this time of much collective and personal grief. And doing so only to assuage (that means make less intense) any guilt they may feel about reinforcing the power dynamics that kill Black and Indigenous, poor, and disabled folks at accelerated rates.

For over a year, I worked on this project while all of this was going on around me. And it was not lost on me that as I wrote about care, my father was lying in a hospital bed — separated from the people, smells, tastes and sensations of home. As I read and studied with my community, I came to understand that a hospital can be both a place of healing and a place of neglect. And so, it should have come as no surprise that when my father was admitted to the hospital on a Friday night in April of 2020, we were told to say our goodbyes, that he wouldn’t live the weekend. The doctor figured the 76 year old Black man already dead (though he lived for seventeen more months). I should also be unsurprised by the number of times the medical staff asked us to double check with my father that he was sure he wanted to be revived if his heart stops. Yes, he nodded every time. *I want to live.* On dialysis and chronically ventilator-dependent, we knew my father may never leave the hospital. And so, our constant work was to make his life its most liveable.

Every day my brother would call the hospital and then send us a detailed video or voice note with an update. Every. Day. For seventeen months. Since we couldn't be with my dad at the hospital, this was the next best thing. So every day, my mom, my siblings and I, along with my cousin (as my Aunt's tech-savvy proxy) were in a group chat, discussing the daily update and organizing how to care for Dad and each other while he was away. And it's a good thing we did. Because the hospital didn't always do a good job of providing that care and sometimes we had to step in.

In the process, we developed new relationships with ~~a friend of a friend of the family, who is now~~ our cousin. She works in housekeeping at the hospital and stopped by daily to ensure my dad had someone nearby who would see him and speak directly to him (since that wasn't always happening). Someone who saw that he could not use his voice and his body was sick, but he was still very much alive. Until he wasn't.

It was a hard time for everyone, but we cared for him—and each other—through his very last breath. And then some.

This is ~~the~~ a story of his 17 months of care.



CHAPTER 1

A QUESTION OF CARE

Jamil pushed open the front door to his uncle's house and removed his shoes. "I'm here! Sorry I'm late!"

"No problem, Jamil," replied a voice as he rounded the corner into the kitchen. "Alexander is choosing your fate right now."

Jamil slipped off his backpack and sat down at the counter as his brother pulled the day's writing prompt—and the theme for their next month of study—out of a bowl. He read the slip of paper like a question, "*care?*"

"Thanks, Alex. Alright, you heard him. Care it is. Can I please get ten minutes on a timer?" Someone on the couch raised a thumb. "Awesome, free writing starts now. You know how it goes: whatever comes to mind, no edits, and keep writing."

Jamil dug around in his bag for a pencil.

Free writing was how Uncle Joe always ended their study group. Whatever topic they chose would determine their study topic for the next four weeks. It was always chosen from suggestions generated from the group, but this was a tough one for Jamil. It wasn't that he had nothing to write about – quite the opposite in fact. Jamil had so much to say, he wasn't sure where to begin. So he started with 2020.

The rare quiet of a room full of teenagers engaged in their own thoughts was soon broken by the beep of the timer, followed by Uncle Joe's voice. "That's time. Finish the line or sentence you're on and then let's chat. Does anybody want to share part of what they've written or any thoughts about the prompt after writing?"

Tori started, "I wrote about taking care of my dog. It's my job to make sure she goes out in the morning and has a walk after school every day. Otherwise she jumps on the couch and chews our shoes and I get in trouble." Sade chimed in, "I wrote about taking care of my little sister. I also watch her after school—fix a snack and make sure she stays safe and doesn't do anything weird until *someone* is finished teaching." Uncle Joe chuckled, Sade was his daughter and the *someone* she was waiting on each day was him.

Alex piped up. "I wrote: 'I do not *care* about this writing prompt.'" The group laughed. "Okay, we have a different take on the word. Taking care and caring about. Did anyone else think or write about care in another way?" Uncle Joe inquired of the group.

"I wrote a poem," Des'ree said, putting her hand up. "Or, at least, I started one. I'll just share two lines:

*'Don't just give us thoughts and prayers,
It's actions that show us who really cares.*

"I was trying to say, like, how when something bad happens everyone says they're thinking of you or praying for you, but they don't actually do anything to make it better."

Alex piped up, "And how exactly are they supposed to do that? Okay, real talk. I may not care about this writing prompt, but I care if people have food or a place to live. I care if people are safe. I'm also 14, so its not like I can do anything about it. According to you that means I don't really care."

"But you *can* do something...that's the point." Des'ree replied. Alex was insistent, "How, Des? Do you have one zillion dollars to buy everyone a house? Make food cost less? Change the laws?"

Des'ree sighed, "I didn't say you have to do everything, I said you can do something. Obviously we can't change the way the whole world works overnight, but we can do some things to make some people suffer less. Even if it's just the people we see or know. That's all I'm saying."

Uncle Joe got out a piece of paper and started writing down notes from the discussion.

This next voice was Sati's, "I wrote, 'They say that I live 'in care' but it sure doesn't feel like it sometimes.' "

Sati lived in a group home nearby and sometime shared stories with the group about how misunderstood he felt there. Last week after basketball practice, he had told Jamil that he was afraid to go home because the staff said they would call the police on him if he refused to do the dishes again. They threatened to send him to a different group home and told him he would have to make all new friends. He believed them because that was what they had done to his brother. The same staff had called the police when Sati's brother, Aaron, threw a cup at the wall. What they didn't tell the police was that Aaron was upset because staff revoked his community pass for being late doing his chores. They didn't bother to mention that he would now have to wait two more weeks to see his friends and family in the city they were from over two hours away. The staff called, the police came, Aaron was charged and his caseworker had him moved the next day. Now he lives even farther away and Sati hadn't seen him in almost three months.

"See?! Perfect example," Alex piped up again. "I care about Sati. I hate that he has to live with those people, but it's not like I can just tell him he doesn't have to go back there. I can't make it so he can be with his family. And it's not like I can go to the group home and teach the staff how to actually do their job, which is literally taking care of kids."

Uncle Joe nodded as he added to the list, "Anything else?"

His eyes scanned the small group. "Jamil, you wanna add anything?"

Jamil paused for a moment then said, "Um, I wrote about grandpa, but I don't really want to say much about it right now."

Uncle Joe nodded again. Grandpa was Uncle Joe's dad, so he understood what Jamil wasn't saying. He knew as well as anyone what the two years had been like for their family. Joe

CARE

- Humans, animals, anyone/thing else?
- Food, safety, housing
- care about or don't care about
- investment in the well-being of others (principles, morals)
- action – is it necessary for care?
- are material resources necessary for care? (money, stuff)
- things called "care" that are not
- teaching other people how to care
- care as a job
- illness/healthcare

added “illness/health care” to the list and turned back to address the whole group.

“Alright, this looks like a good jumping-off place for your next assignment, which is to write a story about care. You can write it in any form you’d like, but I want you to think about some of the questions that have come up from this discussion, the different meanings of care, the different ways that people understand it. What does it mean to care *for* somebody vs. to care *about* somebody? Can you ‘do care’ even if you’re as broke as Alex?”

Alex playfully threw a pillow toward uncle Joe’s lighthearted jab, which Des intercepted as the group laughed. “I want you to write about one or more of these questions over the next couple of weeks. Or come up with another question that you want you to follow. And then follow it across...”

“...across sites, subjects and systems.” Everyone chimed in with the familiar phrase they had heard many times from their school teachers and mentors. It was the way they were all taught to study and their Black study group was an extension of that.

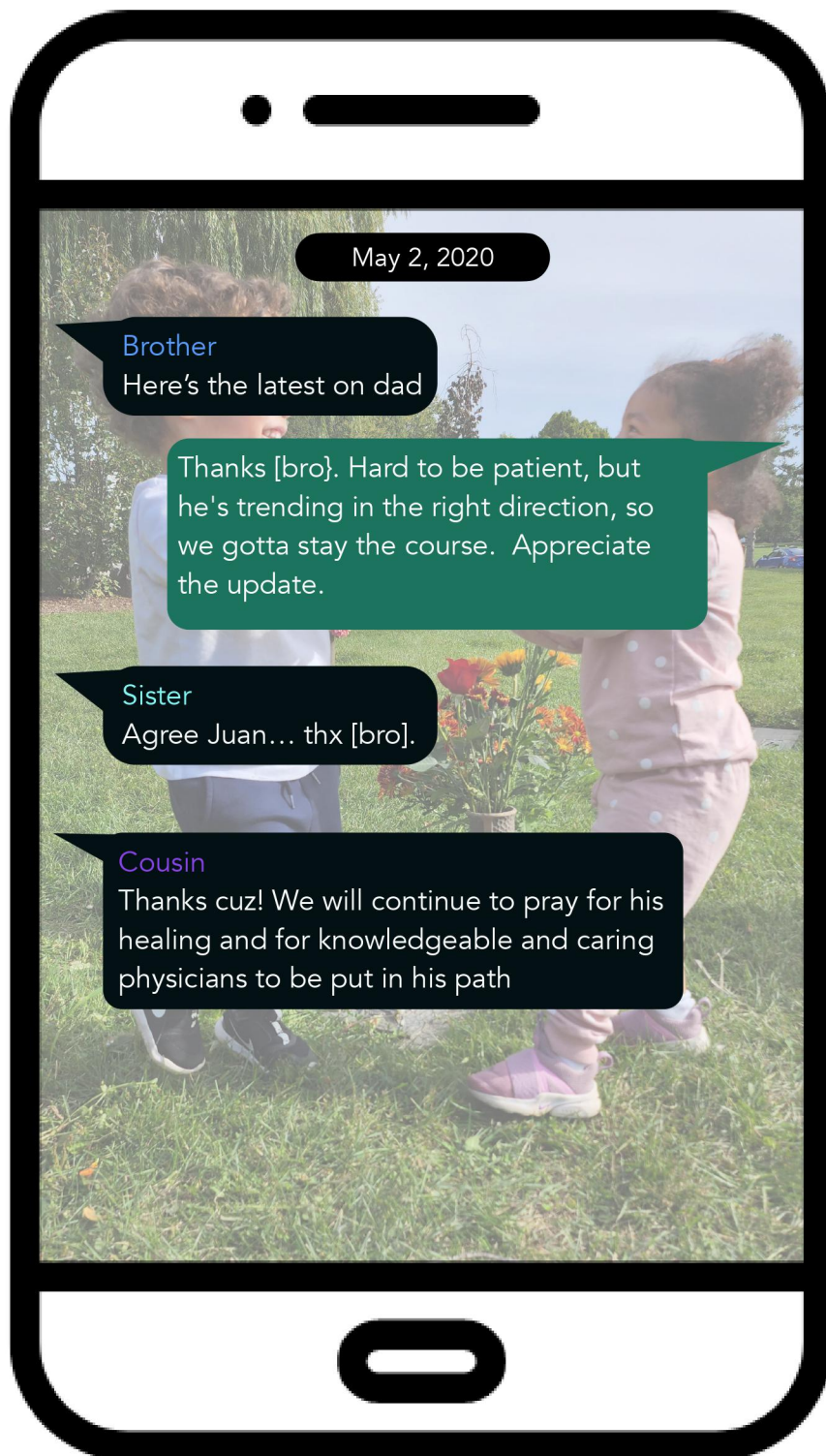
“Well, since you all seem to know everything, then I guess it’s time to play. I’ll see you here again in a couple of weeks with your stories or stories-in-progress. You know where to find me if you want to check in along the way.”

Jamil’s cousin, Des, turned to him as she packed her bag, “I think I’m gonna finish writing my poem for this assignment.

But also, Alex was so stuck on the fact that there's nothing that he can do to care for others, that I think I'm really gonna focus on proving him wrong. In fact, I'm gonna go talk to Abena and Dree right now at the garden. Do you want to come?" Jamil agreed, he needed to pick up his grandma's produce box on the way home anyways.

Des'ree and Jamil headed out the front door as a freestyle cypher started in the kitchen behind them.





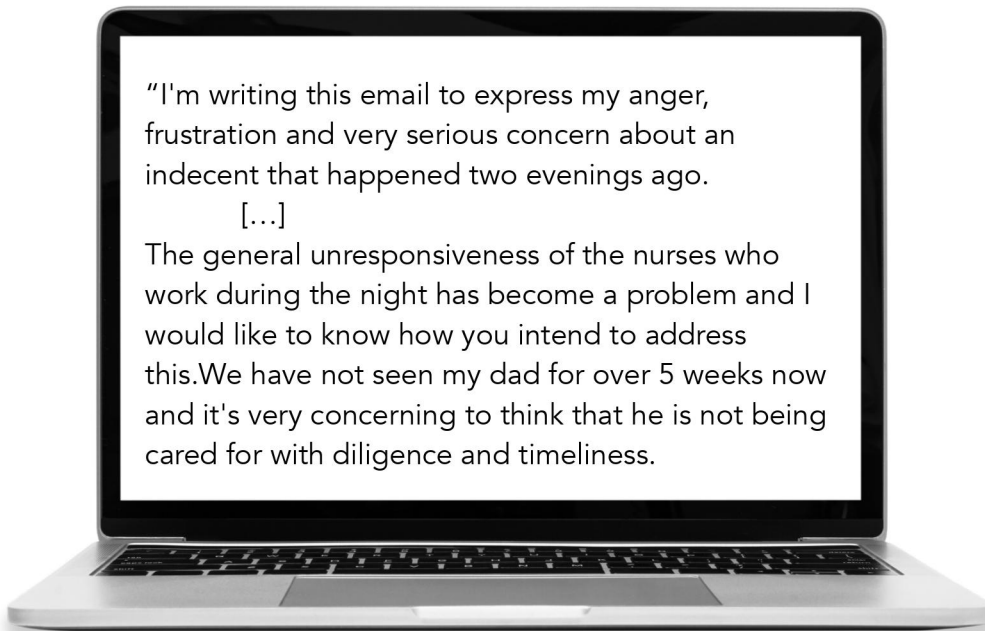
CARE NOTE

May 25, 2020

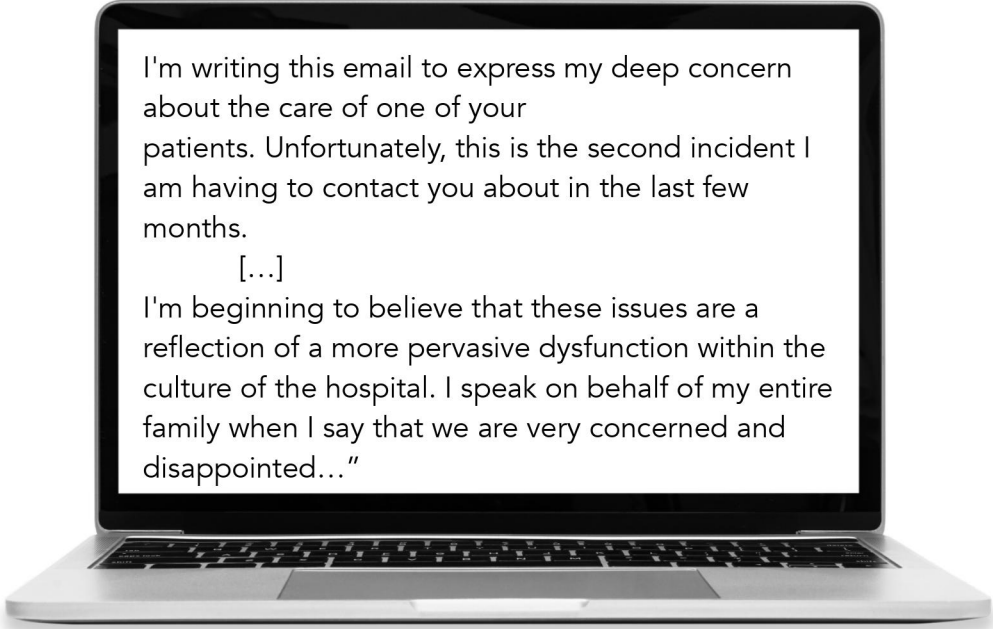
"I'm writing this email to express my anger, frustration and very serious concern about an indecent that happened two evenings ago.

[...]

The general unresponsiveness of the nurses who work during the night has become a problem and I would like to know how you intend to address this. We have not seen my dad for over 5 weeks now and it's very concerning to think that he is not being cared for with diligence and timeliness.



July 25, 2020

A silver laptop is shown from a front-facing perspective, slightly angled. The screen is open and displays a block of text in a black, sans-serif font. The text is an email excerpt. The laptop has a black keyboard and a silver trackpad. The background is a plain, light gray.

I'm writing this email to express my deep concern about the care of one of your patients. Unfortunately, this is the second incident I am having to contact you about in the last few months.

[...]

I'm beginning to believe that these issues are a reflection of a more pervasive dysfunction within the culture of the hospital. I speak on behalf of my entire family when I say that we are very concerned and disappointed..."

July 28, 2020

Mom

Hi Family

I my heard from the manager of dad's unit, who said she heard that I wanted to have a visit with dad. I corrected her and told her that I need to come in to feed him as the staff were leaving him to do it himself and he is not able. She didn't seem to have that information. She gave me permission to go in 3 times a week for 1 hour. She will be speaking to the staff regarding their responsibilities around the feeding. She told me that it shouldn't be my responsibility and I should speak to her about any concerns that arise. I'm going in today at 4:30

Brother

I have an email chain ongoing with the hospital too. They are supposed to follow up with me and confirm specifically how we are to proceed from here so that this issue can be addressed.

Mom

Okay. At least I can be eyes and ears



CHAPTER 2

BLACK STUDY, BLACK STORY

Jamil and Des'ree didn't attend public school. Well, not anymore. After several rounds of school closures due to COVID-19, a lot of the parents in their mostly-Black community decided together to organize a different kind of schooling for their children. Really, COVID was just the final push to move on the plans that had been in progress for quite some time. There had been too many instances of Black students being suspended or sent to the principal's office for unreasonable things. Like few years back when Alex's older sister Gabi was sent home for refusing to complete an assignment that required students to list the positive and negative impacts of colonization. She called assignment and the teacher who assigned it racist and was given a five-day suspension. Their dad was not happy, to say the least. Jamil's mom said the incident was part of a much larger problem of anti blackness and *evidence of a curriculum rife with misinformation and erasure.*

For her, it was the last straw.

When schools re-opened, many of the kids in the neighbourhood didn't return. They now studied and learned together, meeting in large and small groups, at people's houses and wherever else made sense. For some classes, they met at the community garden.

The garden was a relatively new addition to the neighbourhood. In fact, it was one of the first projects that came out of the community school during COVID as a way to feed people who were having trouble getting enough fresh produce. Abena and Dree worked with a group of students to build it and now manage its upkeep. Dree coordinated food boxes.

The new community school was kind of like homeschooling, but coordinated between several families and a number of people who lived in the neighbourhood and wanted to be a part of it. The teachers were all people who had relationships with the students and their families knew they cared. Plus, if you asked any of the kids, they all agreed that their new classes were WAY more interesting.

They took history and cooking classes with the block aunties—those classes sometimes happened together. Abena taught classes on food security, indigenous plants and even foraging. There was music with Mr. Lewis, a community member who could play any song by ear on the piano, guitar and harmonica. Math, art, literature were all taught by siblings and uncles and neighbours from the area.

Lots of elders taught language classes. Some of the teachers used to (or still did) teach at public schools and universities or had other jobs on top of their work with the community school. Others were retired or in training. Still others were learning as they went along like any homeschooling parent would have to. But they all had each other to lean on.

Everyone was responsible for making the school run, and that included the students. The older kids tutored the younger kids, and sometimes the adults, too. Jamil's cousin Patrick was two years older than him and some kind of super genius, so he ran a tech program on Thursdays for little kids and on Saturday mornings for seniors. Mr. Lewis attended the Saturday tech class, but often needed a refresher on the week's lesson. And most music classes either started or ended with someone helping him with his computer or cell phone. Every student was assigned a reading buddy and on alternating Saturdays, Jamil and Des'ree, along with a few of their friends and cousins (and friends who were cousins) met at Uncle Joe's house for their Black Study Group.

Sometime Jamil's uncle called their Saturday gatherings a play group. He didn't mean that what they were doing was unimportant—he made that very clear. He called it that because he wanted the teens in the group to follow the example of children at play. He would say that children learn so much through play because their imagination hasn't yet be watered down by the way you're *supposed* to do it, that they haven't yet learned to doubt their curiosity.

“Little kids are great at finding new ways to be together,” he told them on the first day of the group. “They build entire worlds, trade and share roles, explore, repurpose resources. They collaborate and disagree and sometimes it’s messy. Their questions unlock more questions, they try things out and try again. They move, and make noise and dance and get dirty and have fun. Together. That, is study.”

Study, as they had been taught, was something they were already doing. It was the time they spent together talking and cracking jokes, it was building the garden and organizing the food boxes. When they sewed masks and delivered them to neighbours—all of that was study. They knew more about the world through those interactions. Black study (which the community school was built around) respected those ways of learning and knowing about the world.

Study group was an occasion to explore, to be creative, to interact and collaborate, to look for information beyond a few pre-chosen books and to make connections between their own lives and what was happening in the rest of the world. This latest task—writing a story of care—was just another opportunity for Jamil and the rest of the study group to learn to trust their own curiosity, to follow their questions and to make some sense of the world together.

When Des’ree and Jamil arrived, Abena offered them lunch which they both happily gobbled up while telling Abena about the project. After their bellies were full, Jamil picked

up his grandma's produce box and headed home. Des'ree stayed to talk with Abena a while longer and said she would come by later to cook with grandma. As Jamil carried the veggies and herbs home, he hoped his mom would be able to help him figure out the questions swirling in his head.



Everyone seemed to know how to at least get started on their assignment, but Jamil had no clue. He knew the story that he wanted to write. Or at least, he knew what he wanted to write about, but he didn't know how to write it.

Jamil's grandfather had been in the hospital for a long time—almost a year and a half—and his family was not able to be there with him for most of it. They had to trust that the nurses and the doctors would care for him while they all had to be apart. And now that his grandpa wasn't here anymore to tell his version of the story, Jamil didn't feel right telling it on his behalf. And after the conversation about care at study group this morning, he was even more overwhelmed and confused than he was during the free write.

In late 2020, Khaleel Seivwright created Toronto Tiny Shelters, building small, insulated dwellings meant to keep people living outside warm through the winter. The city considered it illegal

CARE

- Humans, animals, anyone/thing else?
- Food, safety, housing
- care about or don't care about
- investment in the well-being of others (principles, morals)
- action – is it necessary for care?
- are material resources necessary for care? (money, stuff)
- things called "care" that are not
- teaching other people how to care
- care
- illness

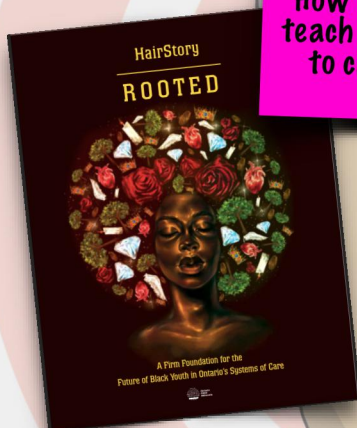


How does harm become known as protection?
Or violence as care?

Toronto police announced on Tuesday that they have made several arrests as city officials supported by police moved to evict people experiencing homelessness from an encampment at Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park. City officials erected fencing

How do we teach people to care?

What is care, for real?



Care is about meeting needs, [...] it is also about creating the conditions for [us] to feel safe in the world"

On November 15 the Progressive Conservative government announced that they would be repealing the *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007* and would be closing the Advocate's office. **This meant that the largest province in Canada would become one of the only provinces without an independent child advocate.**

Charging Practices: Participants discussed the overuse of the police by group home staff for behavioural management purposes. Participants declared that youth were often charged for behaviour that would be tolerated in family home environments. These charges contribute to the ongoing involvement of the youth in the youth justice system. The threat of calling the police is often used to intimidate youth into behaving.

"I have seen group homes who charge for not doing the dishes.....I don't think that it is malicious. I think that it is a lack of understanding."

"Group homes call the police for almost anything." !!

"Mom, how do people learn about care?" Jamil asked as he set down the box and gave his grandmother a kiss.

"What do you mean?" She asked, looking up from her phone.

"Well, the hospital was supposed to be taking care of grandpa, but they weren't feeding him properly. The police are *allegedly* supposed to protect us, but they have no problem killing us for no reason. Or kicking people out of the park and leaving them in the cold to die. And look at what happened to Sati and his brother *in care*." Jamil told his mom and grandma about the writing assignment and the discussion from study group.

"Oh, I think I understand," she said then motioned for Jamil to sit beside her. "Come, let me show you something."

As he sat down, she headed over to the bookshelf, collected an armful of books and came back to join him. She placed the stack down—four or five published books that looked like they might be too hard for Jamil to read on his own and two photo albums.

"Do you remember when you were in third grade, your school had a 'community helpers' day?" she asked, opening one of the albums.

Jamil nodded.

"Good, tell me about it. What did you learn?"

Of course he remembered that day—it was always exciting to do something different than usual. Jamil recalled that the entire third grade gathered in the library to listen to a nurse, a crossing guard, a firefighter and a police officer talk about their jobs. They talked about stranger danger and good strangers. Community helpers were part of the second group of people whose job it was to care for and protect people, so it was okay for kids to talk to them if they needed help. The helpers all came in their uniforms—scrubs and a stethoscope, a reflective vest with stop sign, a hard hat and fireproof jacket, a badge and a gun.

“Hey....wait!” Jamil stopped, surprised by his own story.

“So, if I’m hearing correctly, you were taught that police, nurses, firefighters and crossing guards all do different kinds of helping work because they care about our health and our safety. You learned that police are good and can be trusted. And at the same time, you learned that the cop’s gun is a normal and necessary part of his job, like a stethoscope or a stop sign or a firehose. Is that right?”

Jamil was speechless. He nodded again, slowly.

His mom continued, “well, that is one way we learn what care is. Or, maybe I should say that it is a way we learn to see violence as care. By constantly naming it that, by lumping it in with other forms of care or help or protection until we can’t see the difference.”

Jamil's grandma jumped in, "Community school is a perfect example of a different way of teaching and learning about care. The way you learn looks very different than your friends that go to public school. And it's safe to say that a lot of what you learn is different too. We have care built right into how we learn, what we learn, who we learn from and with. And why we do it that way."

His mom turned to the books she had brought over. "All of these books, in their own ways, can help you to think about writing a story about care. These writers know what you and I know—that Black people have been taking care of each other under extreme violence that people don't always see or acknowledge, even when they are the ones inflicting the harm. They know that violence is often disguised as care."



"What about these?" Jamil pointed to the photo albums.

His mom looked at his grandma, who smiled and answered, "Yes, these too. These albums were made by me and your great-grandmother. They are full of family history. If you read them carefully, they tell you a million stories about care. About who took care of whom during times of sickness. How we celebrated. Stories about what was going on in the world to remind us what our family survived through and how."

Jamil flipped through the books and landed on what looked like a handwritten essay. His grandma smiled, "that was an essay written by my mom, your great-grandmother, when she was not much older than you are now. She entered a penmanship contest and chose to write about abolishing corporal punishment in public schools."

"Corporal punishment?" Jamil was confused.

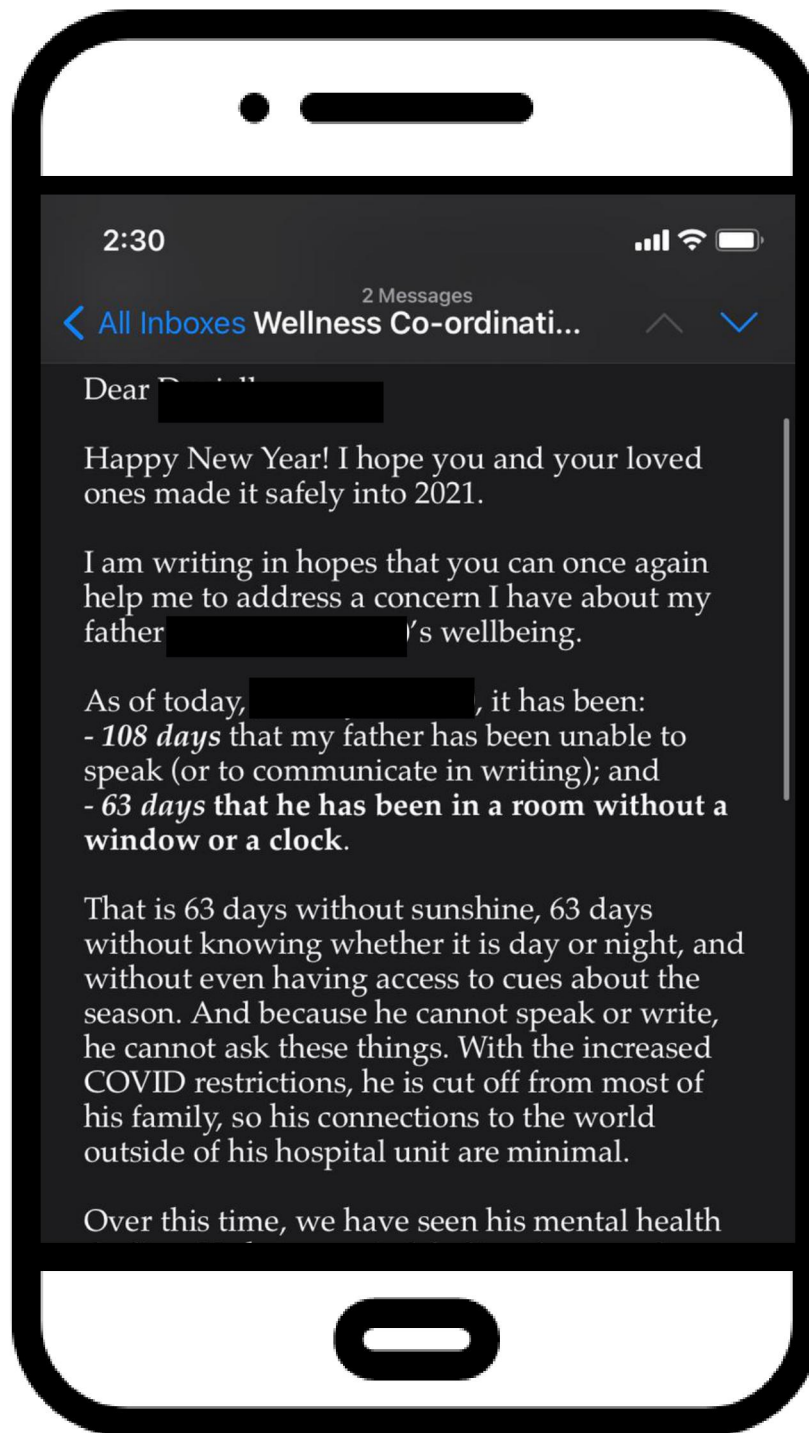
"Yes, at that time, teachers could hit you if you were misbehaving. And your great-grandmother believed that gentleness was a more effective and kind way to encourage children to learn."

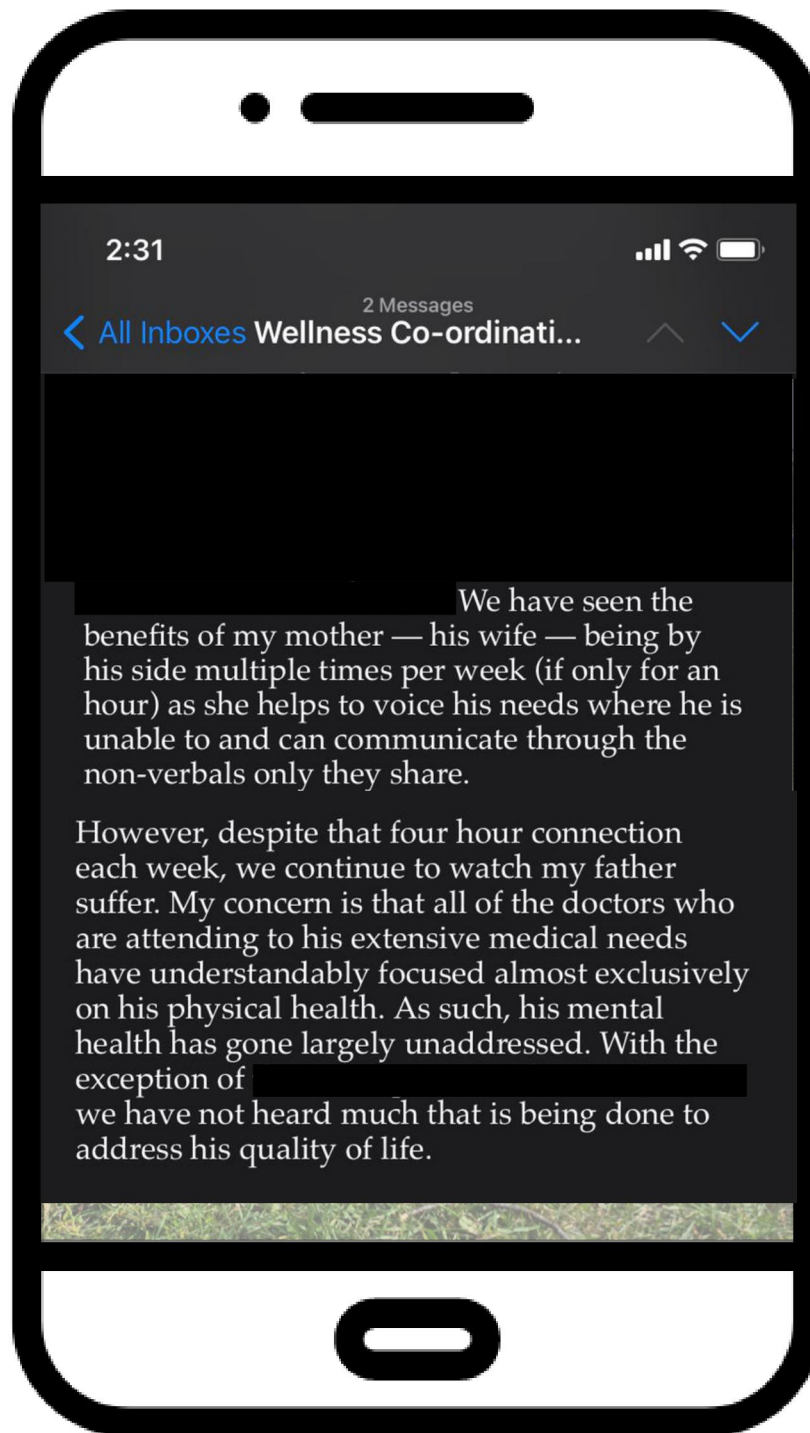
Jamil's mom sat back. "This story is about caring for children rather than punishing them. It makes people really see the impact of corporal punishment even though it was 'normal' and it tells us that children have important things to say...and that we should listen to them."

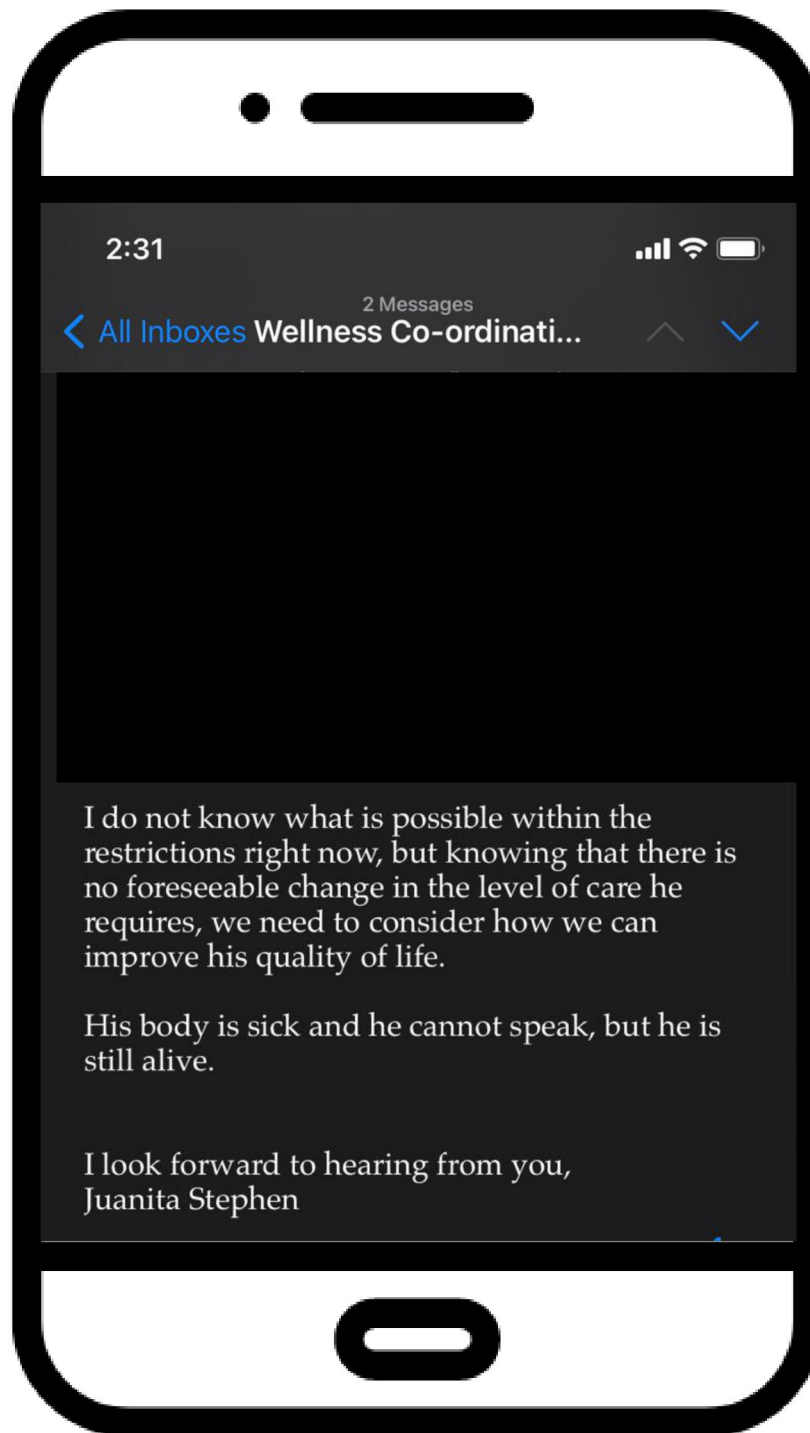
Jamil finally felt like he might have some ideas for his own story. He spent the rest of the afternoon and every evening for the next week reading through and discussing the books with his mom, his grandma and anyone who would read with him.

By the following weekend, the questions in his head were the ones he needed to help him write his story.









January 14, 2021

Brother

Thanks [brother], good summary. Juan, massive respect! That letter was so well written and addressed our concerns so very well. I am very, very proud that you have the ability to do what you do in regards to advocating and having others see other perspective. It is a very useful skill set. Thank you for using it for Dad's betterment.

Brother

Big time

Thanks, we've been a great advocacy team together. And thanks for that summary Pat, I think you hit everything pretty throughly. As we develop a plan of care for Dad over the next little bit, please feel free to send me anything you think should be incorporated.

Including (but not limited to): topics of conversation/interest; songs or artist to play; shows he likes; other ways of engaging his interests; regular updates he should get (date, time, weather...); anything else you think would make dad feel connected/seen/happy/calm

If my PhD studies are good for nothing else, all those papers have helped with this task 🤔🤔

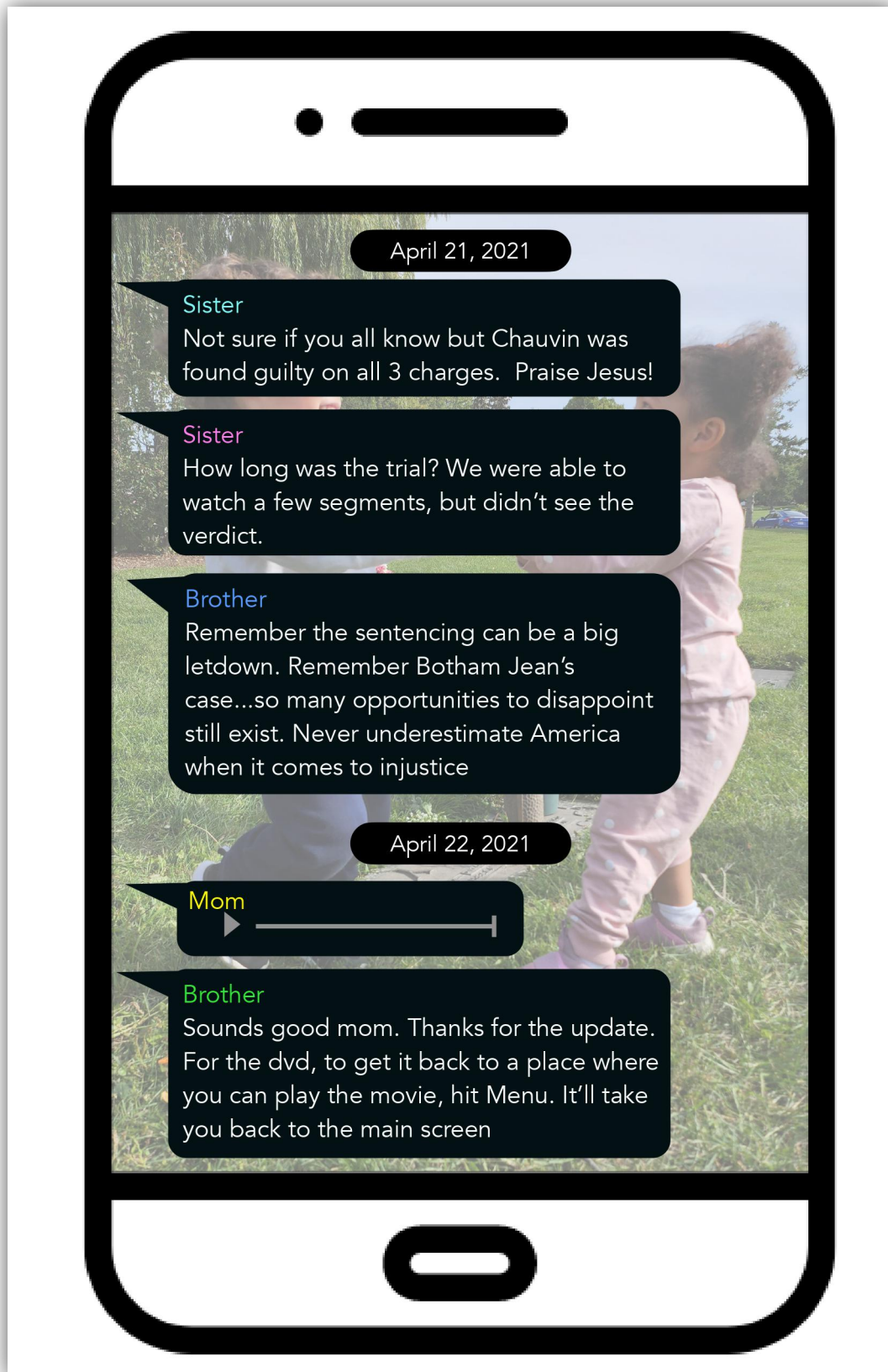
January 15, 2021

Mom

Hi Family

Have a look. Update to follow.

[Picture of dad in a windowed room]



CHAPTER 3

CARE-FULL STORIES

It was story day. Everyone was back and uncle Joe's house this time in the living room, sitting on the couch, on the floor on pillows, leaned up against the wall and each other, looking through phones. Uncle Joe was getting himself a coffee in the kitchen. "So, how did it go?" he asked as he put the milk back in the fridge. "What did you discover as you wrote your care story?"

"That there are a million ways to make sense of that word," Olivia called from the couch.

"Oh yea, let's get some..." Joe made his way to the living room and found a spot on the floor.

Olivia started, "Oxford says care is what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something."

"Its about meeting needs," Alex added.

"Its about seeing each other and sharing in each other's suffering" Gabi, this time.

"It's a way we relate to each other to alleviate that suffering or to counteract harm and violence." That was Jamil.

Bubbles jumped in, "I can tell you what its not— life-saving medication that costs \$1000/month, kicking people out of the park when they have nowhere to live, taking kids away from their families instead of offering the family the support they need to be able to care for the kids themselves."

Then Tori, "It's also not those stupid black squares that everyone was posting on IG for a while."

Groans filled the room, along with choruses of "That was sooo dumb!" and "Seriously, what was that supposed to do?"

Uncle Joe laughed. "Amazing—sounds like you have some grounding for your stories. I'd love to hear or see what you've brought with you."

Des got up and announced, "well to prove Alex wrong, I decided to write a poem about care as a practice. Practice as in an active thing you do, but also a rehearsal. When you practice the guitar with Mr. Lewis, there is some experimentation, some structure, some improv. But you work together to figure it out. And there isn't one song that everyone is going to like, but you keep working at it and you get better. I think care is like that—it doesn't have to be perfect, but we're trying something. It's what we can do even when we can't do everything, even when our actions

will only have a small impact on the people that are closest to us.”

Des’ree read her poem, which Alex was secretly impressed by. He would never tell her that, but when she finished, he said, “I can see how the work that they are doing is care, because anybody can access the food, because we all pitch in together. It’s a way for us to get to know each other and all to participate to make sure that we all eat.”

“Exactly!” Des’ree replied. “The garden was built for our whole community to be able to eat, and to have healthy food because not everybody does. And before the garden, we had to go really far to get fresh groceries, and not everyone could do that, so they didn’t always have, um, you know...good stuff to eat.”

Next up was Olivia. “I was also thinking about Des’s point about care being active. It made me think about Khaleel, the carpenter in the neighbourhood. He’s teaching a bunch of us to build and repair things. In the spring, we built the sets for the play and right now, we’re building tiny shelters for our neighbours. You know, it isn’t the answer to the actual problems—that the shelters are full and the government doesn’t help people who are homeless... instead, they just send the police to clear the park and basically tell homeless people that it’s their own fault if they don’t have anywhere to go. But Khaleel is at least doing what he can do. He knows that he can build things and so he’s using that to help his neighbours. I think that that is care. He’s doing it because it’ll make life less hard for the

people in the neighbourhood. He's teaching us how to do it too, so we can use our skills and knowledge to help people literally survive."

Bubbles had written a story about care by going through a book that was supposed to be a beautiful story about two kids playing together—one who is neurotypical and the other who is autistic. "Most of the book was okay, but some pages had little boxes with 'facts' that made it seem like autism is something that should be fixed or cured. And I don't like that. You can see someone and recognize that they are different from you in some ways without trying to make them more like you. Who says that my brain needs to be fixed? Anyways, I made the book... better."

Bubbles held up the book, *My Friend Has Autism* by Amanda Doering Tourville and flipped through the pages. She had put plain white stickers over the parts of the book that talked about autism as if it was something that was an inconvenience or a problem to be solved. Then she drew toys and books and stuffed animals over top as part of the story.

"And now," she finished "when you read the book, it's just a cute story about friendship and about how two friends learn to play with each other in a way that respectful and thoughtful. Does this count as telling a story, since I started with a story that already exists?"

"Of course!" Uncle Joe exclaimed, "What a creative way to use redaction. You've made us have to read this story in a different way. Very dope!" Bubbles smiled.

Sati was up next. "So, since we were supposed to experiment, I decided to try to play around with one of those found poetry methods we talked about last month. I looked up the standards for quality residential care and made my own story about what being in care is really like. Sati pulled a tablet out of his bag and passed it around.

"This is what they call being in care" he sighed, shaking his head. "The staff at my group home write case notes that say they're taking care of me, but that's not always true. So this is my way of flipping it on them."

Alex looked from Sati to Uncle Joe. "Yo, my mom told me a story that there was a slave ship named care. Is that true?"

"Yes, that's true," Uncle Joe replied. "The ship was called Zong. The word Zorg means care in Dutch, but the ship was mistakenly repainted with an "n" in stead of an "r", so it ended up being called Zong. But, yes, ultimately they named a slave ship 'care'. Also, your mom has a whole PhD in history, so you're fact-checking with me because—"

"It's just so sick...I couldn't believe it." Alex sneered, shaking his head. "It's just like these clowns at your place, Sati. It seems like what we call care here in our community is a lot different than what CAS calls care or ... wherever Dutch people are from."

Stephen is a Black teenager living in a group home

Stephen shares with his staff that he is struggling

Stephen has concerns about policing

Staff connected Stephen and law enforcement

They talked about the role of police officers

They talked about everyone working together

They plan for his success at school

Stephen has concerns about policing

This was documented in his plan of care

(a Black youth)

(conflicting views of himself)

(conflict with the law)

("the youth")

(reducing his risk)

(contact with the police)

(what it will look like)

(his identity)

(his strengths)

(his future)

"The Netherlands, dummy!" Des laughed and rolled her eyes.

"Okay okay..." Joe chimed in, not wanting the conversation to get too far off track. "For the record, it was a British ship, but your point is still well taken, Alex. There are some really terrible things that happen under the language of care. Sati, what happened to you and your brother is just awful. Threats are not protection and I think your poem is a great example of how to make that clear."

Sati nodded.

Finally, it was Jamil's turn. "I kind of wrote a story about a story. You all know that my grandpa—well, our grandpa..." he glanced at his cousins "...was sick and in the hospital for a really long time. And I was thinking about how the nurses and doctors were all taking care of him in the hospital, the *health care* system. What some of you might not know is that the hospital didn't always take very good care of him. But our family kept track of it all—the good and the bad. There was this group chat with my mom and grandma and all my aunts and uncles on it. And every day, my uncle would call the hospital and then he would leave a really detailed message for us about what they said. And we would co-ordinate FaceTime visits and problem-solve together when there was an issue. Like, they were checking in with each other every day. For seventeen months.

Which also meant that for seventeen months we were keeping our own notes about his care and what the hospital staff were calling care.” Jamil saw Alex and Sati nodding.

“For all of that time, in writing and voice notes and videos and pictures, we discussed what sort of things grandpa would like—what he had said before and how we could get that information to the doctors. He had a new doctor every week, but we were consistent. We taught the medical team to read his face so that they knew what his groans and his silence meant. We became quick learners about assistive technology. Bubbles, your mom helped out with that big time. And just like the hospital, we keep our chart. These were like our case notes.”

“You mean *care notes*,” Sati smiled.

“Yes, our care notes! Good one. So, in a way, this story has already been written. But I didn’t know how to tell that story here. Grandpa was kind of private, so I don’t really want to tell all his business. And those notes were just for us, for our family, for grandpa. And yes, many of you already know the story, but....you know, there’s other stuff in there too. So, then I realized that the story I wanted to write wasn’t about the care my granddad did or didn’t get, but about the care my family and our community provided for each other during the two most difficult years of my life.”

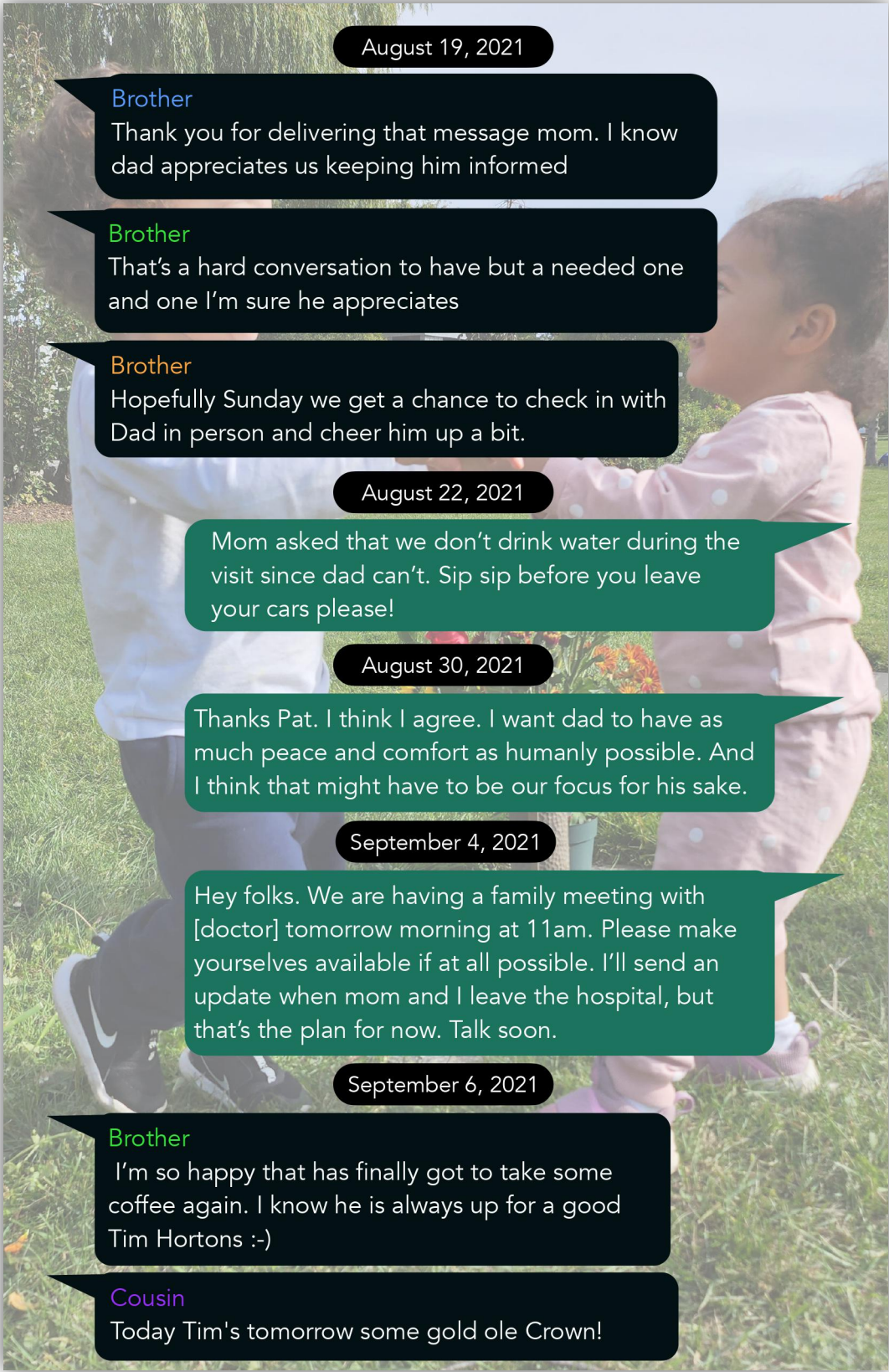
Jamil pulled out his phone, “I can’t tell you that whole story of grandpa because it’s not my story to tell. So instead I told the story of us by piecing together the stories I’ve heard as

we studied care together. And since I'm a man of few words, I decided to draw it. It's basically the story we just told together here today. A story about sharing resources and knowledge; about constantly re-organizing how we take care of each other because we know that we need each other to survive."



By the time each member of the study group had shared their story, they had collectively decided that care was a practice they had been engaged in all along. Their relationships with each other had cultivated a practice of checking for each other, recognizing when something was off and being attentive to each other's needs even when they were different from their own. They looked out for each other and trusted that they had each others' backs. They shared resources and knowledge and time as an investment in something that they were all a part of — the study group, the community, the world that didn't have their backs. They tried to make that world a little bit better for each other, for their parents and neighbours. For the people they didn't know, for the people that would come after them. They knew that they couldn't change the world and that was not the point, they decided. (Even Alex!) The point was to see each other, to practice something else—like the community school, like the garden, like this playful exercise in study—as they learned more about the world and how to survive it, together.





August 19, 2021

Brother

Thank you for delivering that message mom. I know dad appreciates us keeping him informed

Brother

That's a hard conversation to have but a needed one and one I'm sure he appreciates

Brother

Hopefully Sunday we get a chance to check in with Dad in person and cheer him up a bit.

August 22, 2021

Mom asked that we don't drink water during the visit since dad can't. Sip sip before you leave your cars please!

August 30, 2021

Thanks Pat. I think I agree. I want dad to have as much peace and comfort as humanly possible. And I think that might have to be our focus for his sake.

September 4, 2021

Hey folks. We are having a family meeting with [doctor] tomorrow morning at 11am. Please make yourselves available if at all possible. I'll send an update when mom and I leave the hospital, but that's the plan for now. Talk soon.

September 6, 2021

Brother

I'm so happy that has finally got to take some coffee again. I know he is always up for a good Tim Hortons :-)

Cousin

Today Tim's tomorrow some gold ole Crown!

A background image of two children, a boy and a girl, standing in a grassy park area. The boy is on the left, wearing a white shirt and dark pants, and the girl is on the right, wearing a pink shirt and pants. They are both looking towards the camera. The background shows trees and a clear sky.

September 16, 2021

Brother

Happy anniversary Mom and Dad!

Brother

Happy anniversary mom and dad! You and dad have been an amazing example for all of us. I hope you are able to have a great visit today with dad. Love you!

September 30, 2021

Brother

Good morning family. I spoke with mom a few minutes ago and she would like to have a family call as soon as possible. What is everyone's availability today to get on a zoom? Juan, I know you're traveling but is there any access to a reliable internet connection?

Mom

[Aunt], the charge nurse has consented to set up a visit for you. When would you be able to come to the hospital?

October 7, 2021

Hi folks. Mom said that the family might want to arrive at the funeral home at 12:45 today so we have a few minutes with dad before people start to come.

October 21, 2021

Cousin

Hey family! Just checking in on everyone. All of us in our own time and our own way with God's help. There is no instruction manual. I love you all 💕💕😊



Juanita Stephen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Juanita Stephen is the daughter of Bertha and George; granddaughter of Bertha and James (Jim), Christina and Vincent; mother of Shayne. She writes things and makes things and doesn't trust people who are unkind to children.

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