We Are All We Need: Practices of Belonging

by

Sofia Marie Sue-Wah-Sing

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design Program

Ada Slaight Hallway Gallery, 100 McCaul St., February 25, March 1, 2026

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2026

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This document is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

You are free to: Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms: Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Notices: You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation.

No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material.

Abstract

Since colonialism serves to disconnect a people from one another and from their land, the issue of belonging is prominent and the lack of it has broad implications. *We Are All We Need* is a research project that investigates the impacts of colonialism, capitalism, and the consequential isolation on my wellbeing with an aim to find ways to heal from the damage these cause and to build belonging and connection. I approached this project with an autoethnographic focus, observing my past in order to create a deeper understanding of how a lack of belonging feels as well as how it manifests in life events and mental or physical sensations. I analysed my findings with secondary research on critical race theory, Caribbean history and healing traditions, as well as decolonial theory. This research yielded various findings about the ways people of colour, or marginalized people impacted by colonialism, can work through the wounds caused by isolation, heavily referencing Caribbean healing traditions - connection with nature, community, dance, herbal remedies, ancestral worship and communication, etc.

Key words: Belonging, Healing, Caribbean Culture, Caribbean Healing Traditions, Decolonization, Holism, Spiritual Healing

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that I work from the land of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishinaabe. This work would not be possible without the land that I work on and I am grateful to be able to make connections with it even though it is not *my* land.

I would also like to thank my ancestors and family members, who not only made it possible for me to be alive today, but who support me and guide me through my life, research, and creation. I would particularly like to acknowledge my grandmothers and great-grandmothers – Savina Zandona, Emma Zuccato, Jacqueline Sue-Wah-Sing, and Violet Seth – who serve as inspirations in my pursuit of art and creativity. I am also grateful for my parents, Patricia Zandona and Charles Sue-Wah-Sing, who were also crucial supports on the journey to finishing this work.

Thanks to my thesis supervisors, Kathy Moscou and Camille Isaacs, for their guidance in this process.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends – Rochel, Sade, Jules, and Yifan – who supported me in numerous ways over the course of this project, creating a community around me that helped this research on belonging flourish.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 1

My body has learned to brace for the unsafety of the world.
As if under constant threat, the natural status of my body
tense and rigid,
like a rock pushing up against an oncoming stream.
I feel it in my furrowed brow.
I feel it in my clenched jaw, as it resists
opening with every crack and crunch and pop.
I feel it in the heads of my shoulders, which must be told directly to rest
lest they rise up to hide
the soft pulsing of my neck.
I feel it in the entanglement of tension wrapping itself
around my torso, squeezing my stomach.
I feel it in the pops of my hips and cracks of my knees.
I feel it in the incessant bounce of my legs or restless shifting of my feet.
Someone told me once that I must not say
what I feel. There's a tension in asserting
who you are when
others do not know
and it reverberates through all my muscles and nerves.
Like a puzzle piece being jammed into the wrong place, I
feel the edges of the square I am being pushed through.
A square not big enough for all the feelings of a life. How
can I say what I feel? And to who? These aren't the pieces I fit into. But a whisper from the wind
said that I am following the right footsteps, and
the stars show me that it is not as hard as it seems to find home.

Introduction

Starting this writing has proven challenging, precisely because of the topic I am covering. Belonging – knowing who you are, where you come from, who you come from, where you fit in – has eluded me most of my life. So how can I write about where I come from? How can I write who I am? Writing about how belonging failed me feels like writing about negative space. There was nothing there – no community, culture, connection. What is there to say about nothing? Emptiness?

But the truth is, there is a lot in that nothing. There is pain, discomfort, alienation, isolation interspersed with moments of love and hope. Writing absence is the challenge here. Writing what was not in my life still requires me to reflect on what was there and how that nothingness came to be.

The following research concerns these questions:

What are the characteristics of healing and belonging for someone who is haunted by a colonial past and isolated by a colonial present? How can I create a space for myself and others that promotes healing and belonging in a world inherently structured by colonialism?

I am doing this research as a multiracial person of colour – a person of Guyanese and Italian heritage. I am also doing this research as a neurodivergent, queer non-binary person. While I am focusing on race and culture for the majority of this research, all facets of my identity have impacted my approach to this project, and the counterhegemonic values that carry this work. I am Guyanese on my father's side and Italian on my mother's. I grew up knowing my grandmothers closely – my grandma from Guyana, Jacqueline Sue-Wah-Sing, and my nonna from Italy, Savina Zandona. My nonno died while my mother was a teenager and my grandfather, Charles Sue-Wah-Sing, died when I was 9. My grandmothers, therefore, represent the earliest parts of my family tree that I know closely. I was always curious about who I am and

who and where I come from. My great-grandparents on my dad's side, none of whom I met, represent such an intricate web of cultures and memories that I have always wished to access and understand. My Italian ancestors are even more of a mystery, due to language barriers and the nature of immigration. The blockages between myself and my family tree left a well of unanswered questions about my identity, preventing me from knowing exactly how and where I belong. This complicated history, and how it interacts with and informs my identity, is what began this research on belonging.

Since the following research pertains to ideas around land, belonging and colonialism, I also want to acknowledge that I am writing and making from the land of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. While I not only know, but feel, that this is not my land, I have come to connect with the earth itself by visiting the forests, rivers, and lake near my home. This connection has contributed to my ability to feel that I belong somewhere on this earth. It feels as though the land has accepted me even though it knows I come from elsewhere. I have never touched the lands where my ancestors come from. This is the only land that I have known. But I am grateful to be able to forge connections with it as part of this journey towards belonging.

Theoretical Frameworks

Considering the relevance of colonialism to my research questions, the theoretical frameworks that guide this research are decolonial and critical race theory. Decolonial theory deals with colonialism specifically and links the historical events of colonization to current injustices and inequalities that impact colonized peoples, especially Indigenous nations.[1] In his book, *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard illustrates just how connected decolonial theory and activism is to land specifically. He highlights "…settler-state policies aimed at explicitly

[1] Ali Meghji, "Towards a Theoretical Synergy: Critical Race Theory and Decolonial Thought in Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain," *Current Sociology* 70, no.5 (2020), 650.

undercutting Indigenous political economies and relations to and with the land…" as a method of colonial control.[2] He connects these policies that create barriers between Indigenous people and land directly to the colonial project's goal of eliminating Indigenous peoples. Hence, decolonial theory starts with and is especially relevant to Indigenous peoples, although when looking at the Caribbean specifically, I expand the boundaries of colonized peoples to include others impacted by colonialism such as the Africans brought to the Americas through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, as well as indentured workers from India and China. I look to the colonial past of the Caribbean to inform how belonging is impeded in the present day and across the diaspora by larger societal structures.

Within the scope of this research, colonialism refers to the displacement, domination, and oppression carried out by European settlers and inflicted on Indigenous people and people of colour generally.[3] Coulthard defines a colonial relationship as a "…relationship where power – in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power – has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority."[4] Since dispossession is at the core of the colonial relationship, a sense of disconnection and a lack of belonging in our present social climate can therefore be traced back to the beginnings of colonization and can have an impact on those effected by this colonial relationship.[5]

In a discussion of Marx in relation to settler-colonialism, Coulthard also links colonialism directly to capitalism, which is relevant to the way that I think of colonialism in this research. Colonizers essentially target non-capitalist social structures, destroying communities

---

[2] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 4.
[3] Meghji, "Towards a Theoretical Synergy," 650.
[4] Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks,* 7.
[5] Meghji, "Towards a Theoretical Synergy," 650.

and removing them from their means of self-subsistence through enslavement, violent displacement, and genocide.[6] Communal lands became privatized in the process of colonization and colonized peoples were therefore forced to join an exploitable labour force to avoid being eradicated completely. The connection between colonialism and land is therefore fundamentally about capital – colonizers finding areas where resources and labour can be extracted for capital gain.[7] This is why the Caribbean was such a targeted area for colonization and enslavement – the Caribbean climates allowed for the production of many valuable goods. I will expand on this history further in the following section.

Critical race theory (CRT), on the other hand, deals with the ways in which the structures of society are built around race and serve to perpetuate racism, especially through the unequal distribution of resources across racial lines.[8] I rely on authors that can be considered part of this discipline – Franz Fanon, bell hooks, Toni Morisson, Dionne Brand – to inform my analysis of my life experiences in relation to larger systemic structures and social norms that uphold racism. In this research, I look at how these systemic structures can serve to foster a sense of belonging for dominant groups, while minorities experience higher rates of loneliness and isolation which can in turn lead to higher risk of health problems.[9] I will expand on the importance of belonging and its impact on wellbeing in a later section.

---

[6] Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks,* 7-8.
[7] Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks,* 7-8.
[8] Meghji, "Towards a Theoretical Synergy," 648-649; Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition*, NYU Press, 2012: 25-36.
[9] Kelly-Ann Allen, Margaret L. Kern, Christopher S. Rozek, Dennis M. McInerney, and George M. Slavich, 2021, "Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73 (1), 3-4; KV Bruss, P Seth, G Zhao, "Loneliness, Lack of Social and Emotional Support, and Mental Health Issues," United States, 2022. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2024;73:539–545.

Caribbean History and Healing Traditions

The Caribbean comprises a variety of islands descending from North through Central to South America.[10] Guyana, where my family is from, is the only English-speaking nation on the continent of South America, and is generally considered part of the Caribbean due to its shared colonial and imperial history with the English-speaking Caribbean islands (having been colonized most recently and notably by the British).[11] The nations of the Caribbean, including Guyana, have rich cultural landscapes and complex histories, informed and impacted by the European domination and colonization of their lands and people.

Labour History

Since first contact with Europeans, colonization has deeply impacted and shaped the Caribbean to be what we know it to be today. Beginning with Christopher Columbus and his arrival to the "New World" as a representative of Spain in 1492, Europeans settled all over the Caribbean, dividing it out over time –Spain and Portugal were the first settlers, followed by the English (arriving in 1591), Dutch (1596), and French (1625).[12] The first major impact of these settlers was carried out through the violent displacement of the Indigenous peoples of those lands (the Taíno, Arawak, and Caribs).[13] Indigenous communities and social governance were weakened and overthrown through military force, enslavement, and the transmission of European diseases like small pox.[14] Once settled, Europeans established plantations in order to produce coveted goods such as sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton.[15]

---

[10] Jeremy Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean: Indispensable for Travellers*, (Little Brown Book Group, 2021), xiii, 17.
[11] Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, x.
[12] Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, 40-61.
[13] Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, 28.
[14] Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, 46.
[15] Black, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, 72.

These European colonizers, interested in the bounties that the "New World" had to offer, developed a system for the production of multiple goods (sugar chief among them) by exploiting countless enslaved Africans and stealing Indigenous land in order to build their plantations.[16] These colonizers began to steal Africans and import them by the millions to the Caribbean as enslaved labourers – sparking the Transatlantic Slave Trade, in which the conditions were horrifying. Many died over the ocean before even landing in the Caribbean. Of the approximated 9 million Africans who survived the treacherous voyage to the "New World," 40% were brought to the Caribbean.[17] Those that made it faced hard labour and oppressive heat and humidity as well as abusive practices. Specifically in Guyana, growing outrage at the conditions of slavery caused uprisings that were costly to white slave owners, prompting a series of negotiations.[18] These uprisings, as well as a growing protest against the inhumanity of slavery from British humanist groups, prompted the passing of an 1807 bill ending the trade of slaves.[19] Slavery was abolished in the English West Indies in 1834. It was 1838 when the freed slaves were fully able to leave the plantations they worked. Once free, most had no interest in returning, even with compensation, due to the horrifying conditions they endured.[20] This caused a steep decrease in production and profit for plantation owners. The indenture trade developed out of the need for labour in the colonies. The Indian indenture system, founded in 1834, involved an agreement (called *girmit*) in which workers committed to 5 years of labour in their destination colony.[21] The terms of their work and compensation were laid out to them in English and in the Indian

---

[16] Justin Roberts, "Working between the Lines: Labour and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations, 1796-97," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2006): 551–86.
[17] Patsy Sutherland, "Cultural Constructions of Trauma and the Therapeutic Interventions of Caribbean Healing Traditions," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2017), 13-16.
[18] David Alston, "The Guyana Maroons, 1796–1834: Persistent and Resilient until the End of Slavery," *Slavery & Abolition* 44, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 292–316.
[19] Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers : Chinese indentured immigrants in Guyana* (2nd ed.), (Vancouver: Cane Press, 2003), 1-9.
[20] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers,* 1-9.
[21] Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire : Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*, (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-4.

national languages, although it is debated how easy it was for them to understand these terms. Hence, many labourers came to the West Indies coerced or kidnapped by recruiters. [22]

The first Chinese workers arrived in the West Indies in 1853 on the *Lord Elgin*, as a response to the demands of the plantation owners, who were dissatisfied with their Indian workers.[23] These plantation owners thought that the Chinese would help them develop a "civilized society" as they were seen as more intelligent and disciplined, as noted in various letters between plantation owners to the British mainland.[24] This preference for Chinese labourers resulted in a higher "cost per head" and multiple shipments of workers.[25]

This history of labour in the Caribbean illustrates how the people, brought to the Caribbean from around the world, were viewed as tools rather than human beings. As will be expounded in the following writing, this reduction of our ancestors to tools for colonial nation building may be a root factor in the experience of a lack of belonging across the diaspora, alongside issues related to health and wellbeing.

Psycho-Social and Cultural Impacts

As with slavery in the Caribbean, conditions for indentured labourers were poor although they had more freedom and agency than the enslaved. Besides being kidnapped or coerced into labour, many Indian and Chinese workers also died on the way to Guyana of illnesses like cholera or committed suicide due to the poor conditions on ships.[26] At times, the conditions caused revolts on board that resulted in brute violence against these migrants. Even when situated on plantations, conditions were poor enough that some labourers committed suicide to escape their indenture.[27]

---

[22] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire,* 3.
[23] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers,* 9; 123-125.
[24] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers,* 9; 123-125.
[25] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 70-73.
[26] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 47-51.
[27] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 47-51.

Both Indian and Chinese migrants lost some aspects of their identities on the journey to Guyana. The indenture system took labourers of different skills and different castes and made them into a fixed and unanimous group of import commodities – referred to as the "coolies."[28] "Coolie," originally used to describe unskilled workers from India, became a slur directed at all indentured workers. This name overrode all previous cultural complexities labourers came with, creating a seemingly homogenous working class in the Caribbean.

Although some Indian practices persisted in Guyana, many Indian workers continued to dream of repatriation.[29] Indenture often involved loss and hardship. Overall, the conditions of indenture were abject for Indian immigrants and some Chinese immigrants as well. Many were brutalized, ridiculed, and underpaid. Indian migrant women – mostly widows and poor women – were often subject to sexual violence.[30] Women were raped by plantation owners and used for the production of a larger labour force.[31] Many Indian workers also lost connections to their families back home, without hope of return.[32]

Contrarily, due to the value colonizers placed on them and their willingness to assimilate, many Chinese migrants were better able to succeed in their new cultural landscape.[33] Many ended up opening shops and businesses after their indenture. Although the Chinese were generally better treated in Guyana, they lost their names. To get British documentation, Chinese migrants had to adopt an English first name and consolidate their Chinese name into an anglicized and hyphenated surname (Sue-Wah-Sing, for example).[34]

---

[28] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 40-42.
[29] Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie woman : The odyssey of indenture*, (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 176.
[30] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire,* 41.
[31] Bahadur, *Coolie woman,* 150.
[32] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 52.
[33] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 173-200.
[34] Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers*, 265-274.

By the end of indenture in 1918, 341, 600 workers were imported, a majority of them from India.[35] Nationalist powers in India called an end to indenture because they wished to maintain the caste system by uplifting the rights of higher caste individuals in the colonies and freeing them from injustice.[36] The Indian labourers, including those of lower caste, were freed from contracts because of this uproar.

The workings and exploitations carried out by European colonial powers created a unique cultural web in the Caribbean, where Indigenous, African, Chinese, Indian, and European cultural influences could intermingle, but also where the repercussions of colonial violence could make ripples through generations. Between the genocide of Indigenous nations, the poor conditions on ships and plantations, the dehumanizing language, and the capitalistic attitude of Europeans that made commodities of all immigrants to the Caribbean, the colonial project was traumatic for the non-white inhabitants of the Caribbean. Due to the trauma caused by colonial violence, healing traditions in the Caribbean are a very interesting and integral aspect of Caribbean history.

Health in the Caribbean

Because the post-contact history of the Caribbean developed out of European control and colonial greed, health and medicine in the Caribbean were also deeply impacted by the realities of the slave trade and indentured servitude.[37] For a variety of reasons, Western medicine was either unavailable, unaffordable, or harmful for non-white people in the Caribbean.[38] The focus of Western doctors was typically directed first to the white population

[35] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire,* 205-230.
[36] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire,* 205-230.
[37] Patsy Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., ed. Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley (Routledge, 2014), 15-17.
[38] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 15-17.

and, with a lack of doctors, this meant that slaves were less likely to receive treatment.[39] Western healing practices also lacked any consideration for the social issues and circumstances that effected the health of non-white patients, resulting in harmful and neglectful practices, as well as abuses of power that impacted non-white populations in the Caribbean deeply.[40] Even in the present day, the imbalance of power between the typical Western medical practitioner and their patients can also cause a reification of racial trauma, that would deter proper healing for patients of colour as well as the integration of traditional healing into a treatment plan organized by a Western medical practitioner.[41]

But healthcare was a highly important necessity given the negligent and abusive circumstances labourers in the Caribbean were subjected to. Especially in areas where the presence of doctors and slave owners was lower, African traditions thrived as the only option available for enslaved people to get treatment.[42] African traditions adapted characteristics of indigenous healing practices already present in the region, allowing the enslaved to find treatments amidst the endemic plant life.[43] These alternative healing practices were necessary for the survival of people of colour in the Caribbean.

Caribbean Healing Philosophy

The philosophy that guides this research stems from Caribbean healing traditions. There are a variety of healing traditions in the Caribbean that developed as creolized practices with influence from Africa, India, China, Europe, and the Indigenous peoples across the Caribbean, but they tend to be united by a few overarching characteristics.[44] The healing traditions that

---

[39] Arvilla Payne-Jackson, "Caribbean Traditional Medicine: Legacy from the Past, Hope for the Future," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., ed. Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley, (Routledge, 2014), 41-44.
[40] Patsy Sutherland, Roy Moodley, and Barry Chevannes, "Introduction," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., ed. Barry Chevannes, Roy Moodley, and Patsy Sutherland, (Routledge, 2014), 1-4.
[41] Payne-Jackson, "Caribbean Traditional Medicine," 47.
[42] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 15-17.
[43] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 16.
[44] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 15-21.

evolved out of this complex cultural web were typically holistic, addressing mind, body, spirit as well as the emotional ties to community.[45] These traditions were not ignorant to the lived realities of slaves, rather they addressed the need to release stress and trauma from the body. These traditions make use of spiritual stories, dreams, visions, imagination, intuition, and movement of the body – aspects that are typically rejected or ignored by Western medicine – in order to provide holistic care. Even if these practices do not always provide cures, they empower patients to take control of their health, explain health challenges in ways that do not blame the patient themselves, and accommodate the challenges patients face in day to day life. The emphasis on the spiritual in the treatment of illnesses created a sense of dignity and control, placing the locus of health problems outside of the self. This allowed for a treatment system that accounted for and did not aggravate issues caused by the trauma of slavery, indentured work, and oppression themselves.

A Caribbean healing philosophy also prioritizes freedom and liberation in the journey towards health – it is an approach to wellness that is socially poignant and politically charged.[46] It is meant to empower people to live in defiance of colonial ideals and oppression, towards a free and empowered future which also relates to the theoretical frameworks I am applying to this research. Caribbean healing traditions often use dreams, dance, herbs, spiritual rituals, and connection to nature as vital strategies for healing from the trauma of living under colonialism.[47] Dreams were tools for Caribbean healers to transcend the oppressed state of the body and to create knowledge based off sensual experiences that lie beyond the physical.[48] For instance, healers would evoke trance-states, embody spirits, and dance or chant in order to release the

---

[45] Sutherland, “The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions,” 15-19.
[46] Shawn Ginwright, "Hope, healing, and care," *Liberal Education* 97, no. 2 (2011): 34-37.
[47] Sutherland, “The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions,” 19-21; Payne-Jackson, “Caribbean Traditional Medicine,” 42-45; Lisa Wilson, “Dancing Back to the Motherland,” *Dance Chronicle* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 80-81.
[48] Pablo F Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean : Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 70-73.

traumas of slavery from the body and provide relief.[49] By encouraging people to connect with the spiritual world, healers facilitated collective imaginings of liberation or reconstructed distant homelands by manifesting the presence of a community of ancestors. These rituals fostered empowerment by allowing community members to maintain hope for a liberated future and evoked a sense of belonging amidst the spiritual realm.[50] The emphasis on experiential-based knowledge can also be seen in direct opposition to European ideals of empiricism. Our ancestor's embrace of experience as knowledge was revolutionary – it served to validate realities that Europeans tried to silence, demonize, or criminalize.

Caribbean Healing Practices and Characteristics

There are a variety of specific healing practices that are found across the Caribbean. While these practices are not limited by nation's borders, they originate from and are used in specific culturally nuanced areas of the Caribbean. For instance, Santería originates from, and is used in, Spanish-speaking parts of the Caribbean like Cuba, whereas Obeah is an Afro-Caribbean practice typically found in English-speaking areas like Jamaica.[51] Voudoo, on the other hand, is found in French-colonized areas such as Haiti. In places like Guyana and Trinidad where more Indian indentured workers were taken, Hinduism was adapted into West Indian healing practices as well.[52] Each practice has its own nuances and specificities but there are a lot of unifying factors, approaches, and ideas that connect them. These similarities are made possible by the cultural mixing that took place across all areas of the Caribbean.

Rituals are generally used to heal both psychological and physical elements. An example of such a ritual is *jharay*, the Indo-Caribbean practice of brushing the skin with a broom of palm

[49] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 19-21.
[50] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 19-21.
[51] Sutherland, Moodley, and Chevannes, "Introduction," 7-8.
[52] Keith E McNeal, Kumar Mahabir, and Paul Younger, "Hindu Healing Traditions in the Southern Caribbean: History and Praxis," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., ed. Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley (Routledge, 2014), 178.

fronds or feathers while reciting *mantras*.[53] Blood-letting rituals or blood offerings were also used across the Caribbean, especially by early West-African enslaved immigrants.[54] Trance-states, dance and ecstasy are also recorded in multiple traditional healing rituals – used as a method to release trauma from the body.[55] Healers saw their bodies as conduits between the spiritual and physical world and would therefore allow their bodies to act out the role of their ancestors or spiritual guides. Healers would also receive instructions from the spiritual realm through dreams.[56]

Pablo Gòmez, in his book *The Experiential Caribbean,* reveals archived records from the Caribbean where Europeans observed enslaved Africans gathering, drinking, and dancing so wildly that the Europeans saw demons amongst them.[57] Practices of dance to unite people, to mourn the dead, to heal disease or shake off trauma, connect people across the African diaspora. These spiritual practices were even integrated into Carnival and masquerade traditions, combining inherently African cultural practices with the originally European event of carnival.[58] Enslaved Africans enlisted costumes and danced to mock their oppressors, essentially enacting rebellion through this cultural practice. This history even influences contemporary Caribbean carnival. Dance can be seen as integral element of Caribbean alternative healing – a tool for enacting liberation or reconnecting with and experiencing joy through the body.

Herbal remedies are also present in various Caribbean healing traditions.[59] The Indigenous nations of the Caribbean already had herbal healing practices, using endemic plant life, that were eventually incorporated into other healing traditions as their lands were settled

---

[53] McNeal, Mahabir, and Younger, "Hindu Healing Traditions in the Southern Caribbean," 178.
[54] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 36.
[55] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 20-21.
[56] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 150.
[57] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 31.
[58] Frances Henry and Dwaine Plaza, *Carnival Is Woman: Feminism and Performance in Caribbean Mas*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 3-5.
[59] Yuri Clement, "Herbal Medicine Practices in the Caribbean," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., ed. Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley, (Routledge, 2014), 52.

on. African, Chinese, and Indian immigrants brought with them their own understandings of medicine. Often herbal remedies were used in combination with other rituals – chanting or singing, dancing, drumming – like *jharay* mentioned above. Enslaved Africans also combined rituals from their own cultural backgrounds with herbs they found locally in the Caribbean.[60] Herbal remedies in Afro-Caribbean practices such as Santería were also influenced by Western medicine and Catholicism, resulting in a categorization of "hot" versus "cold" ailments and corresponding remedies, based off the European humoral theory of medicine.[61]

Finally, the creation of altars is another common attribute of various healing traditions in the Caribbean. These altars are typically conceptualized as sites for ancestral or spiritual worship and offerings.[62] Statues representing saints, spirits, or ancestors can be found on such altars.[63] Spiritual practices with Hindu origins involve statues depicting Hindu deities.[64]

A spiritual practice found in Guyana specifically is called "Komfa" which is generally thought of as spiritual possession.[65] Komfa is an example of the exact practices I highlight here, incorporating dance, music, and spirit or ancestral communication as well as the creation of altars. In Komfa, spiritual possession is used to channel ancestors in order to learn who one comes from and consequentially about oneself.[66] The proximity to one's ancestors derived from not only learning about, but embodying one's ancestors is intended to maintain a relationship with those in the afterlife that can provide guidance and strength to face present and future challenges. In this way, Komfa is an example of how Caribbean traditional healing features belonging as an element of healing, spiritually and physically.

---

[60] Clement, "Herbal Medicine Practices in the Caribbean," 52-53.
[61] Clement, "Herbal Medicine Practices in the Caribbean," 53-54.
[62] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 36.
[63] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 36; J. J. Peretz, "Komfa Work: Ritualizing Racecraft and Nation in Guyana's Spiritualist Faiths," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020), 3.
[64] McNeal, Mahabir, and Younger, "Hindu Healing Traditions in the Southern Caribbean," 178.
[65] Peretz, "Komfa Work," iii.
[66] Peretz, "Komfa Work," 3-4.

A Brief History of Quilting

Before expanding on what belonging means in this research, I will provide an overview of a major artistic medium that inspired my thinking in this work. The history of quilting and its use by poor and oppressed women is powerful and has inspired my focus on what can be deemed traditional "crafts": embroidery, felting, crochet, knitting, and quilting.

The way that women have approached quilting historically, using quilts almost as documents of their presence in the world, heavily informed how I approached not only my quilts, but all works in the final installation.[67] Quilting specifically refers to the stitching used to secure padding or quilt "batting" between two layers of fabric, creating a patterned texture across the surface of a piece. Quilting has a long history, originating in ancient civilizations. Following a dip in popularity in the 18th century, quilting became synonymous with the patchwork form of quilt work that is known today. Around this time, quilting became more popular in European colonies, especially in North America.

As a textile-based craft, quilting is deeply tied to women's work and an overview of quilting necessarily takes on feminist connotations.[68] Quilting could be viewed as a medium for the indoctrination of women into feminine ideals, but it also provided a form of artmaking that contained the potential for resistance. Although quilting (especially the making of blankets for homes) has a domestic focus, the quilts themselves had a social dimension through quilting groups and gifting.[69] The making of quilts also provided an avenue for women to be remembered through artwork that is meant to be kept, as compared to their often unseen labour within the home.

---

[67] Mavis Fitzrandolph, *Traditional Quilting-Its Story And Its Practice* (Read Books Ltd, 2013), 14-19.
[68] Mara Witzling, "Quilt Language: Towards a Poetics of Quilting," *Women's History Review* 18, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 619–22.
[69] Witzling, "Quilt Language," 619- 622.

Since quilting was popularized in America in the 19th century, its history is also entwined with the histories of enslaved women.[70] Since these were oppressed women making quilt work, the history is not clear and their names are typically not attached to their work. Evidence of their labour can be pieced together through the quilts themselves as well as journals and written records from slave-owning families.[71] Since quilting involves the piecing together of small bits of fabric, the medium was accessible to more enslaved women who could use old clothes and other scraps to create intricate blankets – a glimmer of colour in an otherwise labour-laden life. Enslaved women would collect scraps from their work or from their children's old clothes and bedsheets to make personal quilts. Due to the use of such scraps, their quilts took on a less formulaic look dubbed "crazy quilts." This genre of quilt likely came out of the circumstances of slavery, but was taken up and popularized by white women later on, without any acknowledgement of its origins.

The piecing of fabrics involved in quilting carried with it a sense of freedom, as women could take fabrics they found or bought and arrange them in any way they saw fit, often creating designs inspired by their lives.[72] This allowed quilting to transcend cultural barriers and adapt to the visual languages of varied groups of people. The piecing together of a quilt also echoes the fragmentary nature of women's lives, both the piecing together of their daily tasks to create a good family life, as well as the amalgamation of fragments of time that characterized their days – fragments of time caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and sewing.[73] Quilting provided an opportunity for a woman to take time to concentrate, slow down, reflect, and come back to a sense of balance within her own psyche.[74]

---

[70] Barbara Brackman, *Facts & fabrications: unraveling the history of quilts & slavery* (C&T Publishing Inc, 2010),
11-14.
[71] Brackman, *Facts & fabrications,* 11-14.
[72] Witzling, "Quilt Language," 622.
[73] Witzling, "Quilt Language," 628-29.
[74] bell hooks, *Belonging : A Culture of Place* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 155.

Considering the social factors involved in quilting as well as the freeing aspects of quilt design, quilts have the capacity to be story tellers.[75] They are made to commemorate special events or significant people. They are also made using fabrics that can have different significances or memory attached to them. For example, a quilt may be made with fabrics gifted from friends or fabrics from children's old clothes. The patterns themselves can reflect cultural designs, the surroundings of women such as stars or gardens, or the circumstances under which they were built. Quilts have even been used to display stories, by creating pictures using deliberately cut fabrics. The use of stories in quilting could trigger memory, emotion, longings, and dreams.[76]

The display of quilting as an artform is part of a feminist move to recognize women's work, but even in this change, Black women's work has been continually invisibilized.[77] The acknowledgement and naming of quilters as artists was not applied to Black women. Because of this, discussion of quilt history needs to acknowledge the specificity of Black women's experiences. The complex interplay of oppressive social systems (class, race, and gender) that impact Black women added a level of difficulty to finding the time and resources to create intricate quilts, especially during slavery.[78] These women had to find different techniques and approaches to quilt-making than white women, since there were more barriers to their creative expression. This history evinces the resistance of Black Women, choosing to create personal artwork despite obstacles presented by the dominant and oppressive social structures they lived within and the erasure of their existence.

---

[75] Witzling, "Quilt Language," 620-628.
[76] Jessica Hemmings, "That's Not Your Story: Faith Ringgold Publishing on Cloth," *Parse Journal* Intersections, no. 11 (2020): 4-5 https://parsejournal.com/article/thats-not-your-story-faith-ringgold-publishing-on-cloth/
[77] hooks, *Belonging*, 154.
[78] hooks, *Belonging*, 154-160.

Understanding Belonging and Its Connections to Health

Since colonialism serves to disconnect a people from one another and from their land, the issue of belonging is pressing and the lack of belonging has implications for wellbeing.[79] Belonging and healing are therefore inherently correlated. Consequentially, my focus in the following research is two-fold. The topic is belonging but what I see as a *practice* of belonging is positioned here as an act towards healing. Before I expound on this idea, I will provide an overview of the conceptions of belonging, found in existing literature, that have influenced where I take this concept in this research.

From an empirical psychological standpoint, belonging can be defined as the subjective *feeling* of connection with people, places, and experiences around you.[80] This feeling is a basic evolutionary necessity that originated out of a need to find safety and survival through community.[81] The urge to seek belonging is buried in our human biology, as we are hardwired to engage in behaviours that allow us to avoid danger. It has been found that a sense of belonging in general is as integral to health and survival as the basic necessities of life such as food and shelter.[82]

Since we are social beings, our ability to belong and where we feel we belong makes up our sense of selves.[83] Our social and physical environments inform and interact with our own identities. Because of the interconnected nature of our inner experiences with the outside world, the presence of social structures that oppress minority groups directly impact the ability of members of these groups to find a sense of belonging and therefore a sense of self.[84] In a literature review by Allen et al., the authors outline a framework for belonging based on

---

[79] Allen et al., "Belonging," 1-2.
[80] Allen et al., "Belonging," 1-2.
[81] Allen et al., "Belonging," 1-2.
[82] Allen et al., "Belonging," 3.
[83] Allen et al., "Belonging," 3.
[84] Allen et al., "Belonging," 3-4.

psychological research.[85] There are four components in finding belonging: competency or ability to belong, opportunities to belong, motivations or inner drive to belong, and perceptions of belonging.[86] Since these components that affect belonging are mostly external to an individual, it is clear that the way our society functions will have a large bearing on whether we feel we are able to connect to one another and belong.

Belonging is deeply tied to identity, self-perception, and ego and is markedly psycho-social. Belonging is not simply about where you are from or who you are related to but *who you are like* meaning who reflects the same characteristics you possess.[87] Being able to be part of the social group you are similar to is tied to self-worth – you want to be successful in your connections with others and in proving your rank amongst humanity. As social beings, we need to find "safe" people (people who are like us) to form cohesive groups with.[88] But this very idea necessitates an outgroup – a foreigner, stranger, other.[89] Therefore demarcating social divisions has been a foundational tool to build group identities and foster stronger feelings of belonging.

Place is also integral to belonging, which can explain why the dispossession that is fundamental to colonialism can have such an impact on the wellbeing of colonized peoples.[90] Dionne Brand, in her book *A Map to the Door of No Return*, defines belonging through a metaphor of this door of no return – a place both real and imaginary where our ancestors crossed the line into the diaspora.[91] Her writing specifically looks at the threshold that separates the Black diaspora from Africa, referring directly to the moment of the Middle Passage, in the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In a poetic manner, Brand illustrates the disorienting nature of living in the diaspora, knowing that you have connections to places that are unknown

---

[85] Allen et al., "Belonging," 7-8.
[86] Allen et al., "Belonging," 7-8.
[87] Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (United States: Harvard University Press, 2017), 25-33; 67.
[88] Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 67.
[89] Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 67.
[90] Allen et al., "Belonging," 2-3.
[91] Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging, (*Doubleday Canada, 2002), 18.

to you: "The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. Every gesture our bodies make somehow gestures toward this door."[92] This quote illustrates the ever-present need to belong, to know who we are and where we come from even if we have no way of truly knowing. Brand also writes, "The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for a place… To have one's belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction."[93] The fact that we live under this knowledge that we are from *elsewhere* without having the tools to know where that is, causes us to live as "fictions" or to live as bodies "…emptied and occupied."[94] Brand conveys exactly why we search for belonging through outlining this confusion and vacancy that the Door of No Return poses for those of us within the Diaspora.

In a review of both Sarah Ahmed's phenomenological view of othering, and Fanon's relevant exploration of Blackness and space, I found that belonging can also be seen as a question of space and who it is made to reflect.[95] According to Ahmed, many spaces take shape around a certain type of individual – an individual who can fit into the norms of the society they reside in. This shaping creates comfort for some, and blockages for those who cannot fit. Ahmed proposes that this shaping is formed through repetition – the repetition of permissions for some and blockages for others. Brand attributes similar qualities to space, writing "One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives."[96] Both Ahmed and Brand are conveying that spaces absorb the histories of movement through them, shaping who we expect and allow to be free in a space. In the Western world, the person whom space reflects is typically white – resulting in a

---

[92] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 25.
[93] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 18
[94] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 18, 94.
[95] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 110--119.
[96] Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* 25.

society where spaces are inherently racialized, meaning that Black or Brown bodies are impeded from moving freely while white bodies are liberated.[97]

bell hooks, in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, illustrates her understanding of belonging and its importance by revealing how moving away from her childhood home in Kentucky created a "split mind" where her true self clashed with the world outside.[98] She describes being away from home as a shattering of identity and spirit and she attributes this inner turmoil not only to the physical distance of home, but also to her inability to connect with her ancestors and the challenges she faced due to her race wherever she went.[99] hook's idea of belonging and a culture of place posits belonging as connection to and care for *land* and *one another* as a radical act against white supremacy.[100] She writes about how colonial power works to separate us from each other, from land, and from our true selves which results in this sense of spiritual shattering.[101] hooks' recounting of what belonging means to her is therefore heavily connected to healing. She needed to overcome this split mind in order to feel whole again and she proposes that connecting back to the earth and to our ancestors is the way forward.[102] Similar ideas around belonging and the importance of land can be found in the decolonial writings of authors like Coulthard as well.[103]

In Toni Morrison's book *The Origin of Others*, belonging is contextualized in a very different way – as the act nation building by adhering group members together through the use of an outgroup.[104] In this sense, belonging can be seen as a form of assimilation, where differences are abandoned in order to emulate the dominant group. Morisson brings up the

---

[97] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139; Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 83.
[98] bell hooks, *Belonging : A Culture of Place*, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 16.
[99] hooks, *Belonging,* 17.
[100] hooks, *Belonging,* 25, 29.
[101] hooks, *Belonging,* 26, 30-31.
[102] hooks, *Belonging,* 31, 35.
[103] Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks,* 7-8.
[104] Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 20-21.

incorporation of European immigrants in the United States into the "white race" as an example of this view of belonging. The act of finding belonging is therefore posited as a ploy to gain power, by aligning oneself with and trying to secure the status of a social group with more power than one's own but also as a way for the dominant social group to expand its population.

What I am looking at in this research, instead, is a practice of belonging in which I, as a person of colour, turn *away* from whiteness as a dominant social entity in order to connect more deeply with the people I *come from*. This practice of belonging encompasses the various methods I have applied in learning to belong, heavily inspired by Caribbean healing traditions. Similarly to hooks, Brand, Ahmed, and Fanon, I believe that colonialism is the root cause for a lack of belonging across people of colour and across diaspora. Displacement from homelands, the racialization of space, and other methods for othering are all factors that can lead us to feel untethered and insecure – unsafe. Multiple of the authors listed here bring forth the earth itself as a central figure in creating belonging and this aligns with my research on Caribbean healing traditions. My understanding of a practice of belonging involves connecting to nature, sharing knowledge, caring for others, moving and grounding one's body, imagining, dreaming, and learning about oneself and one's family or ancestors.

A Caribbean Theory for Healing Spaces

The way that a space is built, arranged, and designed can have real impacts on the physical and psychological wellbeing of its inhabitants.[105] Therefore, the curation of the final exhibition – a space dedicated to fostering belonging and healing – took on certain characteristics to allow visitors to gain a sense of comfort while visiting. Research has been done on the effects of space and how aspects of an environment can help or hinder wellbeing, creating the foundation for various theories on wellness which can be seen in relation to how the final

[105] Terri Peters and Stephen Verderber, "Territories of Engagement in the Design of Ecohumanist Healthcare Environments," *HERD* (Los Angeles, CA) 10, no. 2 (2017): 105.

space was arranged.[106] Theories such as Living Conditions or Capability Theory posit that fundamental to wellbeing is the feeling that one has the agency and resources to live well. This includes having the ability to choose what one wants to do as well as the conditions to achieve it. These ideas influence the final exhibition, in which I take precautions to provide visitors with options for engagement, and even provide access to essential components of wellbeing such as food, comfortable seating, or mental enrichment in the form of reading or craft materials.

While the arrangement of the final installation can be seen in connection to empirically established theories such as those mentioned above, a more relevant theoretical background for the way the space was built comes directly from Caribbean healing traditions. There is not a singular Caribbean theory on healing but rather a multitude of ideas around the causes of ailments and how to cure them.[107] These theories also represent a coagulation of ideas around health from the various cultural backgrounds that intertwined in the Caribbean – Indigenous healing systems, African and Indian beliefs, Chinese medicine, and European theories. The unifying factors that connect these various healing traditions, as mentioned above, formed part of the theoretical basis that guided the creation of this work. Caribbean healing traditions, typically guided by holistic theories on wellness, explain ailments by looking at natural, spiritual, physical, and mental states together.[108] Issues with health are therefore explained by looking to the machinations of spirits, the presence or absence of ancestors, imbalances in the environment, and the mental strain caused by oppression alongside physical explanations. This holistic explanation extends to our environments and our connections to the natural world. Therefore, the qualities of our surroundings can certainly impact our overall wellbeing, when looking at health through a Caribbean lens. There is also an emphasis on the experiential

---

[106] Tamara Mackean, Madison Shakespeare, Matthew Fisher, "Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Theories of Wellbeing and Their Suitability for Wellbeing Policy," *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Sep 16;19(18).
[107] B.M du Toit, "Ethnomedical (Folk) Healing in the Caribbean" in: Olmos, M.F., Paravisini-Gebert, L. (eds) Healing Cultures, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2001).
[108] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 19.

evident in this holistic approach – allowing one to explain one's own problems based off of one's experiences in the world.[109] This aspect is important, as it entrusts knowledge production to everyone and does not require that knowledge come from an authoritative or dominant force. This experiential emphasis encompasses *feeling* as a methodology for knowledge creation, which relegated Western scientific, religious or capitalist beliefs to the sidelines of human experience.[110] These aspects of Caribbean healing that address knowledge production, are relevant in forming a theoretical basis for the final outcomes of this research, especially as it relates to wellness and how one can address healing in a space. I will expand on how the space was curated to generate healing in a later section.

Research Overview

The goal of my research is to interrogate the role that belonging, or a lack thereof, plays in the health and wellbeing of marginalized, colonized, or racialized peoples by analyzing my own life experiences. Through my study, I developed a space that can foster belonging for myself alongside other marginalized and colonized peoples – including queer people and BIPOC. I reflected on my own experiences, focusing on moments in my life where a lack of belonging created mental, emotional, and physical distress as well as the methods I have found to heal the wounds this lack left behind. Referencing the aforementioned philosophy of Caribbean healing, I created an installation in which the gallery space was filled with hand-crafted objects meant to evoke a sense of liberation and grounding by portraying the different tenets of Caribbean healing (dance, herbalism, holism, communication with spirits, dreams, and the natural world) that I have used in my own healing journey and in developing a practice of belonging.

In the following writing, I will first describe the research methods that went into this work. Then I will discuss the memories that arose as part of this research, conveying how

[109] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 116.
[110] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 117.

belonging (or its absence) has played a role in my life and identity. After this, I will discuss the steps I took towards healing and creating belonging for myself as part of this project, which will include the framework of Caribbean healing traditions mentioned above. Finally, I will discuss the installation artwork that was the culmination and extension of this research.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this work was to create a framework for belonging which would be applied to the final artwork. In order to understand belonging and how we can heal from its absence, I employed an autoethnographic research methodology, reflecting on how belonging has woven through my life. In this section, I discuss how I employed autoethnography. I will also touch on making as its own methodology.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a methodology within which a researcher examines their own life experiences in order come to broader socio-political conclusions.[111] Autoethnography is a reflexive practice, meaning that it allows for a researcher to reflect on how their life experiences intersect with public and social life. This research was conducted using autoethnography and supplemented by secondary research on Caribbean history and critical race theory.

As I used an autoethnographic approach, my research methodology involved qualitative observation of both my memories as well as current experiences and experiments. This process involved mining memories, analyzing artifacts, and exploring emotions as part of my research method. I observed my past in order to create a deeper understanding of how a lack of belonging feels as well as how it manifests in life events or mental and physical sensations. I analyzed moments where my identity was questioned or challenged as well as moments of discomfort and tension due to my identity in order to illustrate how a lack of belonging is created in everyday life. I observed myself in present day as well, noting the impacts of a lack of belonging on my mind and body as well as the impacts of various healing practices. I used a narrative approach in

[111] Tony E Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 13-14.

analyzing the knowledge I collected – weaving my personal story with conclusions about a larger societal culture.

I chose to conduct this project as autoethnographic research for a few reasons. First of all, autoethnography allows me to acknowledge how my personal life, identity and experiences impact my research focus and outcomes. Autoethnography felt like the right methodology to explore this topic, as my understanding of belonging (how it feels to both have it and not have it) is directly informed by my own experiences. Belonging and healing are both topics that deeply resonate for me personally as ideas that have woven through the various moments of my life. To remove myself from my research would be challenging, but I also found that having life experiences relevant to this research topic was really an asset that could deepen the conclusions I come to here.

Secondly, I found that autoethnography had the potential to find similar outcomes to ethnographic research without having to enact a methodology of study that has such an ethically fraught history.[112] Ethnography historically involved a researcher (often white or Western) travelling to a different community that they did not belong to, in order to gather information that they bring home to analyze. This allowed representations and ideas around diverse groups of people to be controlled by a single outsider to that culture. Often, incorrect conclusions were made that still have harmful impacts currently. I did not want to approach this research as simply an observer as I felt this would distance myself from the work, while also reenacting this unethical Western practice. This work is personal, and I use autoethnography to keep it that way.

My approach to this research is to combine personal experiences with socio-political analysis in order to understand how colonialism has impacted my ability to feel like I belong in my own communities. I look to authors such as bell hooks or Dionne Brand who combine very

[112] Adams et al., *Autoethnography*, 22-24.

personal anecdotes with an analysis of how society and various structures of oppression work. In keeping with a lineage of authors who assert that the personal is political, I analyze my own life experiences, looking for how my own personal vulnerabilities, traumas, wounds connect to societal issues and systems that exist outside of my internal world.

In the following writing, I outline various memories that I lifted out from doing this research which relate to what belonging meant and continues to mean to me. Moments where belonging was present or absent. Moments where I encountered the mechanisms that blocked belonging from me. Moments where wounds were formed but also moments where I began to heal those wounds. I use narrative to illustrate the results of this autoethnographic research because it is important to me that these ideas are accessible to a wide audience. Since this topic is also so entangled with human feelings and emotions, especially related to a need for connection, storytelling does better justice to the non-scientific, non-objective aspects of this research.

Autoethnographic Materials

The research process began with a general understanding of the research topics, followed by background research concerning Critical Race Theory, decolonial theory, and Caribbean history and healing traditions especially. This background information helped me narrow down my research questions and also determine what aspects of healing I thought I could be able to enact and observe in myself.

Part of the research materials that were collected in this research was memory. Throughout the research process, I frequently journaled, trying to recall and document memories in which I could remember the absence or presence of belonging in my life. This practice was challenging both emotionally and mentally as these memories also surfaced with deeply contained and sometimes unresolved emotions. I would sometimes follow these emotions, attempting to understand why they were arising and whether there was significant

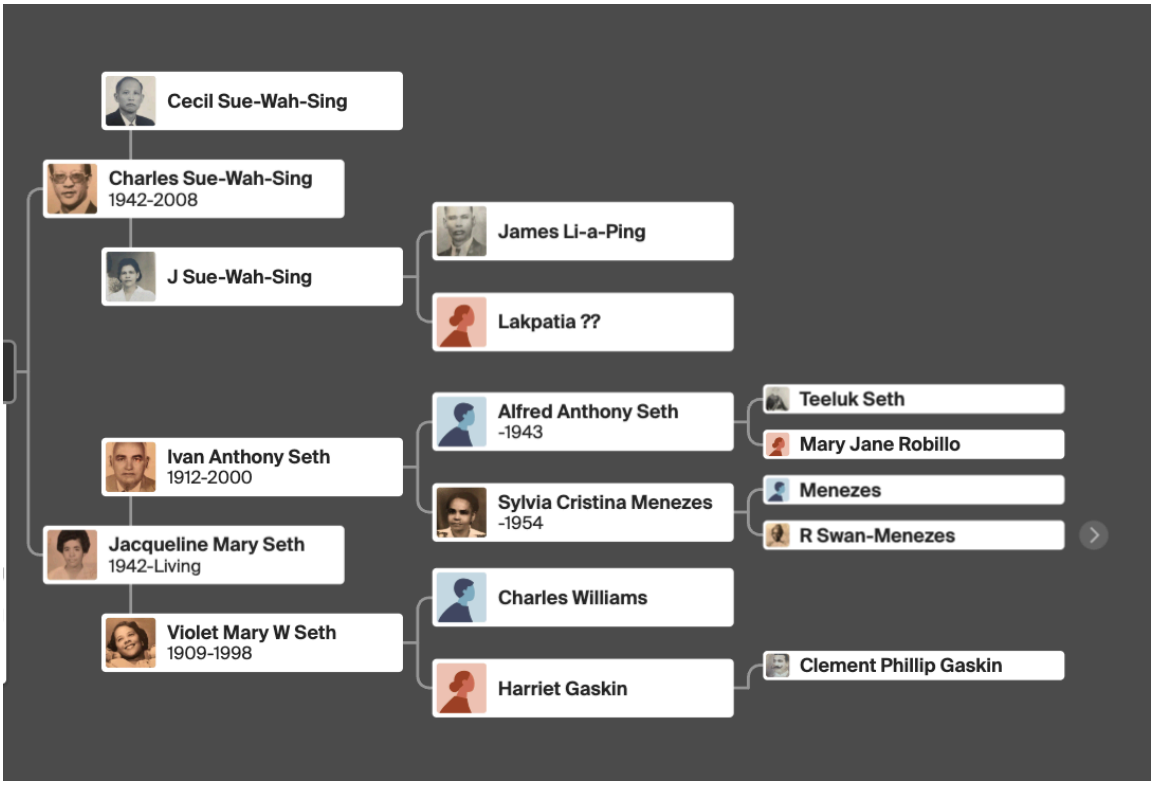

Figure 1. *Screenshot Snippet of Sue-Wah-Sing Family Tree* (Created by Charles Sue-Wah-Sing).

meaning attached to them. I also used old journals to get an understanding of what my thoughts and feelings were at past moments of my life. This allowed me to see how I have changed over time, especially after beginning to focus on healing and incorporating Caribbean healing traditions into my life practices.

Another crucial resource were family photos and artifacts which included furniture and handmade objects, especially crocheted goods. The objects themselves were catalysts for emotion, which allowed me to see and reflect on what family, ancestry, lineage means to me. I was able to learn about and connect myself more deeply to my family in this process – by looking at photos of them or touching work they made with their own hands. Being able to know my ancestors, at least a little bit more than before, had major repercussions for my sense of belonging. Photos and artifacts also provided tangible evidence and support of my recollections and feelings.

I also referenced my family tree often (see Figure 1). My father tried to develop a tree of our ancestors from Guyana and beyond. It is an expansive tree, containing names and memories of people I have never met and will never know. Some of my ancestors are pictured and named, while others are left as blank placeholders. I have studied this tree many times, to see who I come from and to try to know them in my own incomplete way. I recognize how special it is that I have any photos of my ancestors, as many who live within the same diaspora do not. Although my knowledge of my family tree is far from complete, looking at the faces of my ancestors and wondering who they were and where they come from has helped me understand myself and create the belonging that I am searching for in this work.

Although an organized timeline and controlled experimental process may have yielded more empirical conclusions about the usage of Caribbean healing philosophies as a way to find belonging, I allowed my feelings and thoughts to lead the way – findings unfolding through an oftentimes messy and nonlinear process. Therefore, my use of Caribbean healing philosophy overlapped with my introspection and research on the wounds of isolation, overlapped with my study of artifacts, overlapped with my learning on my ancestry, overlapped with my research through making. This research process, a web of convergent musings, reflects the way I think and feel and was generated out of my own humanity. I did not want to override that humanity in the interest of being more academic or acceptable to systems that uphold Western, Eurocentric values (such as universities).

Making as Method

The action involved in making the artwork for the final thesis exhibition became part of my research methodology as I progressed through the work. I found that the tactile nature of making evoked memories or brought forth new insights. Crocheting, a skill I have had since childhood, carried memories of my family but also caused physical sensations and even injuries that informed how the research unfolded. Creating ceramics also became a research

methodology. Constantly working with my hands, relying on tactile sensation to inform how I approached each piece, helped me realize how important touch as a sense was to this work, especially in relation to healing. The realizations that came forth through the process of making therefore cemented creation as a methodology in this research. The importance of making as a methodology will be further illustrated in a later section.

Part 2

The Roots: Growing Up with Identity

Belonging became a topic of importance in my life through the realization that I was other. The way that people approached interacting with me created a sense of othering, through small words or phrases, through looks, through movement. By being questioned and prodded, commented on, looked at, sexualized, ostracized. There was no moment of clarity where I put my finger on why I felt alone. It was an amalgamation, an outgrowth of moments, interactions, connections and disconnections that became harder and harder to ignore. In the following section, I will convey how I learned that my identity was unacceptable, and where this sense of isolation started.

I still remember clearly my grandmother sitting me down and writing on a blank piece of printer paper a list of places my ancestors came from:

Armenia

Portugal

India

China

Africa (Due to the nature and history of colonialism and slavery, we do not know exactly which countries)

Britain

Guyana

Seven places on my dad's side. I was proud of those seven places. I felt special to be the culmination of so many people migrating from such diverse places to meet each other. And when other eight-year-olds would ask me where I was from, I would list all seven countries for my dad's side, alongside Italy for my mom's. That list defined my identity in my childhood years.

But my physical traits demanded that my background always be questioned and revealing that list became exhausting. The questions never ceased. *What are you? Where are you from? What is your background?* I never had to guess whether people were asking what city I lived in or what species I am – I always knew they wanted that list. But every time I revealed it, it felt less and less right. What do I know about Armenia? What connection do I have to Britain or Portugal? These places did not fit within the life I was living. Whereas other countries and places on that list could not be forgotten. I would never not be Chinese - my last name constantly making that ancestry known. The slope of my jaw, the roundness of my nose, the tan in my complexion, the fullness of my lips, the frizz and curl in my hair would always remind me that my ancestors were people of colour. They were mixed, they were Black and Brown, they were immigrants. Saying I was British, Armenian, or Portuguese therefore made no sense – I never saw them in my reflection.

In my adolescence, I realized that there was a simpler way to identify myself. I began to resent having to identify myself but there was no way around it - so I adapted. I was Guyanese and Italian. It required less time and energy to say. But Guyana also encapsulated all the complexities of that list I was used to – those seven places – while revealing the culture closest to my experience growing up. Growing up with Soca and pepper pot and the beauties and complexities of Caribbean culture – that was reflected in this new identity claim. Having a Chinese last name but looking like a racial conundrum – that was reflected in this identity. Having ancestors from all around the world – that *was* reflected in this identity. That is the true reality of Guyana – we are all mixed and we all look different. So, when people challenged my identity by saying "you don't look (x)," I tried to remind myself that I did. There is not one way to look Guyanese.

That did not make it easier to hear when people would be astonished that I was Guyanese. I have had other Caribbean folk scream, gasp, accuse me of lying even though I now see it so plainly that I am who I am. These small moments carried profound impact, causing me to constantly question whether there was any identity that I could validly hold. There was a long part of my life where I thought that I was white-passing because I was whiter

than almost everyone I knew – all my friends and coworkers being people of colour. It took a long time to realize that being constantly stopped and interrogated about my identity is not something that happens to white people. Being in white contexts later in my life also revealed to me that being whiter than other people of colour didn't make me less Brown when surrounded by whites. There truly was no natural place to belong without being questioned.

And the questioning is the exact tool that caused this sense of otherness.

"What are you? Where are you from? What is your background? What is your ethnicity? ¿Hablas español?

Sofia is an Arabic name. Are you Middle Eastern? You don't look like your mom.

Sofia is a Pakistani name. Are you Pakistani? You look Indian. You do look Arabic. Sofia is a Middle Eastern name. Oh really? You don't look it. Oh, I've never heard of Guyana before, where is that? Oh, you're from Ghana? I bet your mom is the Italian one. You do look like your mom.

Sofia is a Spanish name. I knew you were mixed! But isn't your last name Chinese? I'm Guyanese too! I thought you were Asian. Because you're white. You don't look Caribbean. What a beautiful mix! I heard you're Guyanese. I couldn't believe you're Guyanese. You look like your dad.

Sofia is an Italian name. Are you fully Italian? Are you Muslim? Are you Latina? Are you sure you're not Pakistani? Are you sure you're not Moroccan? You look like my sister. You don't look like your dad.

Sofia is a Portuguese name. You're Goan? You're Cuban? You sound white. Are you adopted?"

When I was in my undergrad, I did a project where I collected every comment on my race for just over a month resulting in the above list. These comments have always had a heavy presence in my life. I can still recall many moments beginning in childhood where these comments were made. At the time of this research project, I worked a retail job and was

constantly confronted by these questions and remarks. I felt like a spectacle. Other people could just live and do their job, but I could not do anything without having to reveal my identity first. My racial identity always took the foreground.

Knowing that I had no ground to stand on when it came to my identity caused a strong compulsion to prove myself throughout my life. To prove that I was who I said I was – who I thought I was. I needed to learn my culture to survive. I needed to know cultural references, food, music so that when my identity was questioned, I could prove it. The only issue was that culture was not easily available to me. After my grandfather passed away, my grandmother stopped cooking. I never got the chance to learn all the recipes she used to make. I lived with my Italian mother most of the time, so I know how to be Italian even if no one ever thinks I look Italian. When I spent time with my dad, he never really taught me culture. Sometimes he would play us reggae or cook channa. But most of the time Guyanese culture was something I had to pursue on my own. Not uncommonly, my Guyanese family is also rife with interpersonal conflicts and falling outs. I do not know most of my family on that side, and no one really stepped up to make sure I forged those connections when I was young. I have cousins who all look beautifully different, but I do not know them. They gather for different holidays like Lunar New Year, Christmas, or Easter but I have only been a handful of times. Family – such a typical spark for belonging – felt inaccessible.

Since I took it upon myself to learn about Guyanese culture, I was never entirely sure that what I was learning was accurate or relevant to the people I come from. But there were small pillars that I clung to. Pepperpot – the national dish of Guyana – black and sweet with cassareep, gravy glistening with a thin layer of oil sweetened every Christmas dinner. It represents the beautiful conglomeration of cultural creolization that flourished under such oppressive circumstances. I know my grandfather used to listen to the Merrymen. I remember all the Byron Lee songs that the band covered at the last Last Lap Lime my family took me too. I can still remember the taste of my grandma's cook-up rice. I sometimes suck my teeth. I know how to pronounce plantain. I know how to chip and wave my flag to Soca music. It feels trivial and even superficial, but these small things provided some affirmation that I am who I am. It

never felt like enough to others but these were the things that I clung too to avoid my identity unravelling completely.

Those seven places haunted me though – I felt like I needed to live up to the worldly ancestry that made up my sense of self. I wanted to know Chinese food, language and culture. I wanted to know Indian language and dance, African music and dishes. What religions and spiritual beliefs did my ancestors keep? I learned to dance Bollywood with my friends, who were mostly South Asian, in high school. I felt proud to be celebrating this part of my ancestry by dancing like how I imagine my ancestors may have danced. I felt like it proved I belonged. But it never worked like that. I stuck out like a jagged piece of driftwood on a smooth sandy shore, dancing on stage with my beautiful South Asian friends, the only mixed one –an anomaly. I remember revelling in the glow of our last performance before being stopped by one of my teachers, a loud Portuguese woman, who said "Wow it's so great you're trying to learn about other people's cultures." It felt like she came to let me know that my attempt at belonging had failed once again. Even after attaching a Guyanese flag to my skirt, proudly swaying it with each movement of my hips, and choosing a Guyanese song to add to our routine, my identity had not been proven.

While I have had many experiences where other Caribbean people became flabbergasted to know I was Guyanese –there were also moments of acceptance that started me on a path to self-discovery and love. Asking a Trini man where his accent was from because it reminded me of people I knew and him meeting me with a smile. Answering my Guyanese coworkers' questions about my identity and being met with "I knew it!" Going to the Caribbean for the first time and sharing a love for music with the locals. Getting homemade rum cake as a gift from my Guyanese manager. Small instances of community that left me wanting more, but showed me that there was hope. This hope is what prepared me to do this research.

This retelling of my life and identity is important because it illustrates exactly how and why belonging mattered to me. Being told that I could not be who I said I was caused a

destabilization of my sense of self, that reverberated through all my social interactions. Social interaction being the foundation of belonging, my ability to belong or feel I belong was arrested. I therefore retreated from social interactions only staying where I felt safe or where my identity felt relatively neutral. These experiences closed me off to finding belonging, even though it was what I was searching for. These experiences also caused me to treat identity almost as a currency to gain status, rather than something personal that can initiate a sense of connection with like others.

The Mechanisms of Othering: Tools to Dismantle Belonging

In the life events described above, one thing that becomes clear is that my identity was not something I determined alone. It was not something I was born with but something I gained over time, with each social encounter. Fanon writes:

> "Before the corporeal schema I had sketched out a historic-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by 'residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,' but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories." [113]

As suggested here, the identity of racialized people is not determined by their own will, actions, and movements through the world but by the conceptions of those in power, or here, the white man. The way my identity was constructed depended upon the myriads of ways that others saw me and placed me into categories that they were familiar with. Therefore, growing up my identity was unstable. It felt like tectonic plates under my feet, shifting constantly, quaking, breaking, shaking the ground beneath me. When I found my balance, I would lose it just as quickly. Everyone had something to say. I was too brown and too white. I looked too little like my parents. My teeth were too big. My lips were too big. My hair was too frizzy. I was too tall.

---

[113] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 111.

People didn't know where to place me –so I floated in some liminal space between community, between identities, untethered. A growing sense of difference made me feel as though I had fallen into some crack where I could watch people have community and culture but could never reach it myself.

As Sarah Ahmed writes, "…being in place, or having a place, involves the intimacy of coinhabiting spaces with other things."[114] By accumulating social interactions that at almost every turn described me as something "other," I learned that there was no space in which I could gain that intimacy of cohabitation. I had no community and therefore no sense of belonging. Even when I found people who I thought were like me, there was always some obstacle between us. "Oh, you don't look Guyanese. Are you lying? You can't just be Italian. What are you?"

These blockages to community illustrate how our world is inherently structured through race, although how race presents itself in our lives varies on which side of power you are on. Ahmed describes whiteness not as a tangible entity but as a concept that assigns value and agency to certain bodies over others.[115] This agency manifests in certain habits or tendencies that, repeated over time, begin to structure how the world works. Spaces and institutions therefore take the shape of whiteness through repeated decisions to allow white bodies to move freely within them while blocking, mitigating, or otherwise inhibiting the movement and even existence of non-white people.[116] Repeated action becomes habit and habit becomes automatic over time, so that these actions disappear from white consciousness. This means that white people do not perceive their own race or power –it never becomes an object of attention because it never hinders their movements or actions. By contrast, being a person of colour in a society structured around whiteness is disorienting, in that the body cannot move freely, without being stopped or questioned:

---

[114] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 111.
[115]Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 129.
[116] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 132-135.

> "For Fanon, racism 'stops' black bodies inhabiting space by extending through objects and others; familiarity of 'the white world,' as a world we know implicitly, 'disorients' black bodies such that they cease to know where to find things - reduced as they are to things among things." (111, Ahmed)

Othering, therefore, is a series of stoppages.[117] Being racialized and placed into categories determines what one can or cannot do, given the histories that we inherit as being part of the societies we live in.[118] Being white in a society that has been built to benefit white people affords one the freedom to do or get away with more than racialized others, without being questioned, stopped, blocked. Othering is a tool used by white people to "extend the reach of the body" or expand the scope of what they can do, say, or feel.[119] Othering maintains white identity by creating groups of people that white people can be superior to and exploit.[120] With whiteness as the default, I experienced the disorientation that Ahmed mentioned above as the constant commentary and interrogation of my identity. In this way, identity followed me everywhere. The shaping of the world around whiteness, is what allowed my identity to take the foreground in every interaction. There was no place I could go where my race could fade into the background of my being. Being constantly stopped and questioned, silenced and sexualized, impressed upon me the reality of my otherness – forcing me to know that I could *not* belong and therefore could not feel the safety of community and social connection.

Othering, Stoppages, and Interrogation

I learned I was *other* was through the questioning and interrogation I experienced in my daily life. My features cause questions. I am a conundrum. People thrive on being able to place others. We need to know where we stand amongst others –an evolutionary practice we have

[117] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 110.
[118] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 111-112.
[119] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 131.
[120] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 128.

developed to keep ourselves safe. But there is also a sense of control in placing. Ahmed describes the desire to occupy in which those that are in a position of dominance over the other can use and manipulate the identity of the other to build their identity and their conceptions of the world. Being able to place someone as other, allows one to objectify and use them as an extension of oneself, increasing one's "reach" or the territory over which they can claim as their own.[121] But I am not easily placeable. So, the questions come: "Where are you from? What is your background? What is your ethnicity?"

Interrogation serves as a tool for others to, in a sense, domesticate me by making my identity tangible, familiar, and ready to be encompassed into their worldview. Once I am placed, how others will interact with me can be established based on their preconceptions and stereotypes about the identity I claim. It is not only white people who do this, everyone does. But the systems that have been built to benefit white people pit people of colour against each other, so that our relations become structured by how our racial backgrounds organize us hierarchically.[122] Being able to *other* others allows us all to feel empowered in our connections to our own groups. We use othering as a way to build collective. By creating a white race, white people were able to coagulate into a distinct group that can move towards unified goals which involved the relegation of others as tools for their nation building. Since our societies are structured with this history in mind, we all approach collective building in similar ways. We become cohesive groups based on the predicate that there are those that do not belong.

Othering, Objectification, and Visibility: Being a Body in Question

There is also an aspect of visibility that comes with being placed as other. It is the nature of power and control in a white-dominated world, that whites can use the power afforded them by their own constructions of race to move through space without being seen as out place.

---

[121] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 114-115.
[122] Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 20-21.

Rather they can feel their power by being seen amongst people of colour.[123] There is a hyper-visibility that comes with being racialized in white space, on the other hand, that reminds one that one is other.

Looking has different connotations when one is assigned subjecthood versus objecthood.[124] Othering serves to objectify, so that our gaze, our ability to look is controlled or punished. Our sense of reality, our ability to comprehend reality is diminished so that our realities are written by the dominant race. This control of visibility also allows the sinister aspects of whiteness to be invisible, hidden under a facade in which whiteness is equivalent to goodness. Since whiteness has been made to be the universal standard of humanity, through the dehumanization of others, it has become neutral, blending into the background of our social interactions. The white identity is invisible, rendering difference hyper-visible. Not fitting into the mold of the universal person – a white man or white woman – causes you to become both invisible and hyper-visible. Invisible in the sense that you cannot be considered a subject with power and agency, yet hyper-visible in the sense that you cannot enter and traverse through white space without being stopped and questioned.

It was not just about who I was or where I was from but how I looked. My body was a site of confusion and so these constant questions were not only impacting my sense of identity internally, but my relationship with my body and to the external world. The fact that my body refused to be easily categorized by race, meant that my body was always up for discussion and I believe that this is dangerous, especially for a young girl.

Othering is dehumanization through objectification. The other is to be occupied or used for one's own benefit. One of the ways that othering therefore showed up in my life was through sexualization. Constantly being told I could be a model by middle-aged men as a preteen girl,

---

[123] hooks, *Belonging*, 92-93.
[124] hooks, *Belonging*, 64-66.

due to my height, tan complexion, full lips, and thin composition, the adults in my life made my objecthood known by their remarks. It went beyond "cuteness." I was beautiful. I was exotic. This sexualization is most evident in one of the memories I have struggled with the most.

I was about 9 or 10, on a trip with my dad and brother "up north," which is what we called a camping ground in Killaloe, 4-5 hours north of where we lived. My dad was part of some spiritual school and he would take us with him when he went to visit. The leader of this group owned a large plot of land that included forest, fields, and a house he built by the river. The adults were gathered in the meeting room of the leader's house. He was giving some sermon on topics I did not understand - wisdom, death, grief, etc. The children were made to serve the adults in this group – something about teaching us to be respectful and responsible, although it mostly made me an anxious people-pleaser – so I was serving tea along with some other girls. After the meeting was over, people were chatting and saying their goodbyes before departing home. A slender man, with long blonde hair and a cane, probably in his 30s, approached me with my dad because he needed to talk to me. We sat together by a window at the back of the house, secluded from other members of the group. He revealed that he had been staring at my growing chest as I was serving tea – obviously in a sexual manner – and he wanted to apologize. In this situation, I was utterly alone, and confused. My dad accepted his apology and the man gifted me some decorated garment he was supposed to give to his partner. As I was leaving, an older white man stopped me and said that I should be grateful, as men out in the world would never apologize for what happened.

Looking back on this memory, I have often wondered where the outrage was at a young child being sexualized in such a way. But I do not think it mattered very much to the adults around me because I was a child of colour and there is a dehumanizing element that renders sympathy unnecessary. Because I was not a child – to them I was a tea server, I was a spiritual experiment, I was a spectre floating around the forest landscape. My dad was the only man of colour in a group of white spiritualists who made a habit of appropriating cultures. I stood out in

more ways than one but not in a way that necessitated outrage, or support on my behalf. I was an object – a tool for them to use in their experiments with spirituality and appropriation.

The Dinner Party: Comfort and White Space

I was invited to Christmas dinner by my ex-partner's mother. I knew I would be the only person of colour at the table but I thought I would be safe, supported. I learned far too late that that could never be true.

I knew that one of the guests was someone I could never trust, respect or get along with. He had made racist remarks in my presence before. Tonight, would be no different.

Small talk was awkward but benign. I was getting that feeling that sometimes comes when I talk to someone so different from me that I can tell they think I'm speaking some other, made-up language. It's in the way they nod along with a dull, apathetic look in their eyes. I just had to survive a couple of hours.

We sat for dinner. My ex, his mother and brother, her boyfriend, and the family friends - husband, wife, and son. The son and the brother get on their typical young male banter. But as dinner unfolds with the passing around of soulless food and wine, the husband gets comfortable enough to start sharing his more sinister thoughts and opinions. I don't even know how exactly it came up. Perhaps my ex brought up our favourite grocery store – an Asian supermarket less than 10 minutes away and filled with treasured snacks and affordable produce. The husband responds, doubtful of the hygiene of such a place and continues on to enlist some stereotypes of "the Chinese" that I will not retell. I grew hot with anger. I thought of my great grandfather – the progenitor of the Sue-Wah-Sings – and his grocery store in Guyana. His store was a cornerstone of the community in his time. I think of the trauma in the British bastardizing his Chinese name for an anglicized one and the hard work it must have taken for him to move across the world in order to create a life for what would be a very large family. And for all that love, care, work, food to be reduced to some dirty stereotype – it brought tears to my eyes. Besides the fact that my ex's mother had explicitly told us not to talk

politics – something that only served to disadvantage me and not the white supremacist at the table – I had gotten used to growing small in the presence of danger and bigotry. I silenced myself and hid my tears by staring down at the uneaten food on my plate. My ex-partner knew I would be bothered but nothing was said.

After a few more ignorant remarks, I could no longer stand it. I stood up abruptly and scurried to the bathroom where I would cry on the floor until the night was over. My ex-partner was apologetic but docile - unwilling to threaten his status in the family for me. His mother came by and seemed concerned but her eyes betrayed some sense of ridicule. She said she would address the issue with the wife another day but she never did. So that sorrow was all mine. They went on with their lives, their dehumanizing beliefs, their Christmas gifts and get-togethers without ever having their ancestors insulted in their faces without the power to respond.

Because this was a white family's house and a white family's party, the very space was shaped around whiteness. The habitual nature of white space, as outlined by Ahmed, becomes apparent in a space such as this.[125] The dinner party is a habit in and of itself, and the decisions that went into it have been repeated time and again. Every family dinner, certain permissions are made and denied and the rules around these permissions and denials are cemented by the habit itself. Men like the husband here have been permitted, time and again, to say such racist and bigoted things as he had said. His whiteness and presence in a white space allows him to speak freely, even if others disagree. But to rebuke these remarks would be unacceptable because this has *not* been made habitual. There has not been a history of having an *other* at the table. There has not been a history of standing up for the other. So, at this dinner table, I was inhibited, as a person who does not have access to the freedoms given by living in a white body. I was the other.

[125] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 110-119.

Moments such as then, I realize how I truly could never belong in a space like that – a space crafted by a white woman and a white man for a white family and their white guests. Even though some people perceive me as white, these moments remind me that I exist as a spectre floating in between things.

Healing the Wounds of Isolation

The following section conveys the findings and realizations I have gleaned from applying a Caribbean healing philosophy in my everyday life. Upon reflecting on my experiences in this research, I have contrived three main areas within which I will expound: ancestral worship and connection, ritual and ceremony, and community care.

Finding my Ancestors

Ancestral worship is a fundamental aspect of Caribbean healing traditions. Death was ever present in the lives of the enslaved and indentured.[126] The capacity to sense the dead was therefore a mindful act, honoring those who were discarded by European colonizers or remembering those who were back home across the Atlantic. Communicating with the dead or gone was also a form of self-empowerment, allowing those under such oppressive conditions to see through their reality into other mystical worlds that evoke the homes they longed for.

In this section I look at how learning about my human ancestors and connecting with non-human kin has helped me achieve a sense of belonging that healed me from the traumas of isolation.

[126] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 33-38.

A Lineage of Crafters

01.26.26

Maybe this restlessness,
Those vicious waves
Pounding against the shore that is my
Sternum,
Has roots far deeper than these sands.
Deep into clay and stone.
Driving into the most impossible
Realm
Of obscurity and pressure.
Entangling around layers of sediment.
Some powerful force
That imbues my spirit
With an insatiable need.
My hands tingle and my mind flutters
Like butterflies or autumn leaves in the wind.
The need to create
Filled with so much ambiguity and
Uncertainty.
In which all I know is that I must.
Why?
Because there were women that
Couldn't.
Because there were women who did but
Were never seen.
Were never named.
But I have been named
And they heard my name.
They said my name.
Called my name.
Sang my name.
And maybe all those voices are the waves against my sternum,
And maybe it is not just
My hands
Which create

Such beautiful potentialities.

I have always been a crafter. Even since I was little, making things that are beautiful has been my primary passion. I used to make friendship bracelets, paint decorative rocks or bottles, cross stitch, tuft rugs, fashion ornaments out of Perler beads. Someone taught me to hand spin yarn so I did that for a while. I also used to carve things out of wood with my brother's or father's pocket knives. All of these little crafts have come in and out of my life, but the need to create has always been there.

Crochet has been a constant medium and site for my creative expression. My grandmother taught me. I remember the joy I felt, being handed her yarn and hook. I would always sit in awe, watching her creating something of seemingly nothing. I do not remember how old I was when I learned how to knit and crochet from my grandmother, but those skills I acquired have followed me through my life. I knitted my grandmother a scarf out of green and red acrylic yarn when I was in elementary school. It was a simple rectangle, knitted only in garter stitch, and I am sure it was far from straight. But she was proud. I started a blanket for my mother when I was in high school. It could cover a queen size bed but it was made with three-inch granny squares. It took me several years to complete, so long that by the time I assembled it all I realized I could make so many better things. I still have not woven in the ends.

Now crochet is both an artform and a method for relaxation. I typically cannot relax without doing something with my hands, so crochet is sometimes a tool I use to finally relax. Although it can be helpful in this way, it brings a creative energy out of me that sometimes makes me keep making and making without stopping. This especially happens when I use crochet as an artform and not just a hobby. Making artwork drives me to crochet more and more without rest. I have hurt my hands and wrists doing this. But the medium itself is something I will never let go of. It connects me to my grandma, who is still an avid crocheter. It allows me to

make things that are beautiful but also *functional*. Things I can give to people that will make them happy and keep them warm. Things that can fill my room with colour.

There is something special in the motion of crochet. It is repetitive – each stitch simply a variation of crochet's most basic form. These small knots that can be built up to create beautiful patterns and images. The motion – yarn over, inserting the hook, pulling up a loop, pulling through – is not easily forgotten. After periods where I dropped crochet for a while, especially as a kid, I would need a reminder of exactly how to do each stitch, but my hands would always remember. I would simply need to remember the steps, and my hands would get going. It did not seem like a special skill, until I tried to teach others to crochet and their hands could not understand it. I would say "yarn over, pull through" and the yarn would fall off the hook or the loops would get twisted. My hands were made for crochet – they grew up with crochet. So even when my mind forgets the pattern, my hands remember the motion. Reflecting on this innate capability for crochet, makes me think of my grandma, and how perhaps she has crocheted herself into my hands. That as long as they remember how to crochet, they remember her.

My grandma, Jacqueline Sue-Wah-Sing, is an incredibly talented fibre artist. She knits and crochets every day. She makes baby cardigans and hats, stuffed animals, mittens, scarves, baby blankets, bedspreads, tablecloths. She makes gifts with crochet. She donates her work. She crochets for newborn babies. Now she spends most of her time knitting with yarn people have given her, making beautiful things out of leftovers, and donating them to her church or selling them at fundraisers. She makes pieces for commission. She helps her friends with their projects. She has such an eye for crochet and knitting, she can read a piece like a book. And she can easily diagnose mistakes others make in their work, with just a glance. One time, I was trying to knit a baby vest, and she took one look and asked why I was twisting my stitches. I had no idea I was doing it. But, her artistry and these little pieces of her are her efforts to put into the world a legacy worth remembering. And even though she has made countless pieces, she seems to

remember each one. She will call to ask if we still have that one blanket she made us years ago. Or if I still wear the cardigan she made me. These are pieces of the path she leaves behind her. A path she wants us to trace.

My nonna, Savina Zandona, was also a crafter. She was more of a seamstress than a fibre artist. She made most of her own clothes and would design dresses for my mother and her friends when my mother was young. She made a beautiful black satin dress with intricate trim for my mother's prom. She kept it in my mother's childhood wardrobe, so when I was a kid I found it and would play dress up with it. When I was older, I commissioned her to make me a flowing black skirt that I still have. It is perfectly pleated and tailored to my waist and it flourishes when I spin. I struggled to find a dress that fit well for my prom, so I bought one that worked well enough and she tailored it for me. I remember looking in the bathroom mirror while she designed how the shoulder straps would fall, enlisting my mother to help hold things in place. Between my mother and her, I learned the basics of sewing – an endlessly useful skill. Now that she is gone, I carry her memory in using her tools – a felt heart she sewed by hand to hold her needles, her leftover wooden spools.

In the process of this research, I learned that my great-grandmother, Violet Seth (mother of Jacqueline), was not only a craftswoman as well, but a successful seamstress and gown designer. I knew she had traveled from Guyana to London a few times when my grandmother was young but I only found out recently that she travelled to make gowns for wealthier women in London as well as New York. What was even more special in this discovery was the revelation that my family has a small archive of photographs of her work. Original dark-room-developed photographs on browning paper with frayed edges, portray happy women on their wedding days in beautiful dresses with ruffled and laced details.

Making these connections, seeing how my need to create was inherited from such talented women, helped me see exactly how I belong in the family I come from. I am part of a

lineage of crafters that I am sure extends farther back in history than I will ever know. Knowing this helped me feel seen by my ancestors and helped me know that perhaps they guided me on the path through this research.

Natural Elements and Grounding

I was taught from a young age that all things *matter*. Everything is alive and has spirit. I did not always understand what that meant. But I tried to believe in Western ideas about nature and the lack of concern for all that lives and breathes and matters made it clear. I can sense the life in everything and the more I have embraced this, the more I can communicate with and listen to the things around me. I realized this the most with plants. But this feeling has happened with other natural elements as well. If I find myself in a state of melancholy, sometimes a gale of wind will blow through me and it feels like a consoling embrace. Or it will snow and it feels like my ancestors are dancing down from the sky. Or the sound of waves melts the fear and loneliness in my soul. Or the sun feeds me strength and courage.

In researching the background for this work, bell hooks words stand out as a major motivation for me to dig deeper into the connections I already had with nature. hooks makes direct connections between land and culture: "Cultural histories speak the language of the land."[127] She argues that making connections to our true cultures, as cultures deeply connected to land, will help us to "decolonize our minds."[128] Being able to find community in all living things is therefore a form of resistance against the Western worldview that upholds colonialism and capitalism. Colonizers want us to be detached from the natural world, because having nature on our side gives us too much power to be dominated.[129] The ability to see beyond empirical reality was also a major component of Caribbean healing traditions and Western

[127] hooks, *Belonging*, 31.
[128] hooks, *Belonging*, 30.
[129] hooks, *Belonging*, 33-35.

standards were formed to delegitimize and demonize these practices.[130] hooks also writes, "When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so."[131] My personal belief in this idea, that we belong first and foremost to the earth because we are *of* the earth, helped me along in this journey to finding belonging. All life matters because all of it is connected. If I can connect with and listen to the spirit of the wind, water, stars, or fire, if I can listen to the plant life and speak with them, I can never be *alone*. I will always have community around me because I belong to the earth.

Celestial Connections

Journal Entry: 10.31.25

I never knew there were blue stars and orange stars. Not until I started looking. I used to think they were all white.

I remember seeing the full night sky. A sky littered with stars, glimmering so bright it illuminated the ground, coating everything in blue. I remember the vastness of the milky band that stretched across the sky, filled with an impossible number of stars and planets. I remember the pit of fear in my stomach as the adults around me denied my request for a flashlight in favour of moonlight. I wish I knew back then how rare it would be to find a place so dark that you can see all of the stars and the moon can kiss the ground around you. The last time I saw this sky - the full night sky - I was a child. I've searched for the same sky, but can never quite find it. I only started looking again recently, even knowing that so much of the sky is hidden. There was some part of me that went dormant - the part of me that was unabashed in my love for life and for all the beings that surround me. I think it was buried under deadlines, bank accounts, meetings, and science textbooks. Something reminded me of that buried part of my soul and I dug it out. I started looking for the connections I lost. I looked for home in the stars again.

---

[130] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 115-117.
[131] hooks, *Belonging*, 32.

I started to track the constellations only last year. Each night I check on them and they are still there but moved ever so slightly. As I looked and kept looking, I noticed the patterns that I'd only heard of in passing. I see Orion and Gemini and Jupiter as the weather gets colder. I see Venus, Lyra, Cygnus, and the dippers in Summer. Tracking the stars provides me with a sense of place and time.

I feel myself reflected back in the stars and in the moon. It feels as though they hear me. I think of them as my ancestors.

Being able to connect with the night sky, by learning the constellations and the names of the stars, was a major source of belonging and connection over the course of this project. I was able to forge a connection with the sky that felt personal, uninfluenced by childhood experiences or the presence of others. Often night can be a lonely time – everyone is asleep and you are left alone with your own thoughts. But looking up at the sky and seeing my ancestors in the stars helped me feel seen and loved.

Lunar Connections

Journal Entry: 10.6.25

It's a special full moon tonight.

I went outside, saw the moon and started to bawl and I haven't been able to stop. I feel lonely and it feels like I'm dying or I have died. And I have - who I thought I was going to be is gone and I'm starting anew. I forgot that that process isn't all joy - healing is also pain and grief. Good pain and good grief but it still hurts like dying.

Apparently, this moon signifies change, letting go of the old for the new. It fits.

I'm feeling the loss.

My heart hurts.

The moon is so painfully beautiful. It painted my garden in shades of blue.

Maybe I'm grieving love. Or my love of love.

The blue of the moon

And the red of my blood

Stain my hands purple.

I write this in moonlight.

The presence of the moon was also a source of belonging over the course of this project. The moon is not always visible from my house, so the moments that it comes into view are particularly special. Being able to see its changes over the span of a few days before it disappears from view provided a sense of grounding in time, similar to how it feels to track the stars. The moon came to be a symbol of change for me, especially as I watched the changing phases of the moon. The blue light of the moon and the quietness of night made moongazing a particularly poignant activity for reflection and connection. I greet the moon whenever I see it, and sometimes I would tell it my problems or thoughts as though it was my great grandmother in the sky.

I see this practice of communicating with the moon, my own interpretation of ancestral worship as found in the Caribbean. Imagining community, dreaming connections, between myself and the elements of the universe in which I reside empowered me. It helped me see how small I am I the grand scheme of the universe, but also how supported I am by all that is around me.

Plants as Agents of Connection

I started keeping plants when I worked at a hardware store as a teenager. One of the only joys of working in a place where I was constantly made to feel stupid for being a woman and othered for being racially unknowable was walking by the plant section and marvelling at the different shapes and shades of green. Plants I had never seen before were sitting there

waiting to be sold. Succulents and cacti were the first to pique my interest. Succulents had such perfect symmetry and came in such vibrant shades - neon lime, sage, grays, lilacs, and pinks. There were thick striped stalks that looked like grasses from a cartoon. Small spherical leaves that looked like green peas or leaves shaped like dolphins. Cacti came in all different shapes and colours, some tall and blueish, some with small tufts of brown or white spines, some with large domineering spines, some round and short. There were also plants with patterns and colours I had never seen. Leafy plants with pink or red polka dots, succulents with zebra stripes, or cacti with tie-dye-esque combinations of bright yellows, reds, and fuchsias. They were beautiful and intriguing, their quiet intricacies drawing me in.

I started a small collection. It felt good to have something to care for. I wanted to water them and tend to them every day, even if they didn't need it, because it was so exciting. I didn't know what I was doing back then, so when they were losing leaves or wilting or browning, I didn't always know how to fix it or why these things were happening.

Over the years, since this first introduction, I learned so much about plants. I learned the dropping yellow leaves meant the plant was thirsty, black meant the roots were flooded. I learned about the different pests that could harm my plants like mealies or spider mites. I learned about fungi that could kill plants. But most importantly and above all else, I learned that plants are beings - they are kin, they are family. This realization developed over years of training my senses to receive the messages they were sending me.

Plants speak and respond to how you treat them. They give the love and care that you give them back to you. Over the summer where this research really began to take shape, my plants and I became even more connected, almost as if they were becoming part of my very self. Alongside this research, I was on a very deep journey towards self-love, belonging, and healing. Having my first serious relationship end violently, with racism at the heart of the issue, I was experiencing pain and loss in profound ways. I felt hollow, all my emotions and energy having been poured out, and it was then time to build myself back up. I would sit outside, in the backyard surrounded by the garden I poured my heart into, and absorb the sunlight. I let the

wind hit my skin and it felt like embraces from my ancestors. There were small and intricate moments that showed me these beings were there with me on my journey. The perennial rhododendron my mother planted in the garden years ago, which never seemed to thrive, suddenly bloomed for the first time in as long as I could remember. Not long after my Nonna's death, my friend Sade pointed out that it could be her who made it bloom, and I suddenly felt that connection from the glowing pink and white of those petals. I began to realize the profound joy of watching plants blossom and grow.

You can tell when a new leaf or flower is coming usually as a small spike or bulge. Unsuspecting at first, and often easily missed. But every once in a while, I will be walking past a plant and I will catch a glimpse of colour or a strange texture or protrusion, and discover these small beginnings that have come to brighten my day. Blooms are of special importance because that is how the plant says its happy, and how it shows its appreciation. And the timing is often significant, as though they know when I need encouragement to keep trying. There have been many moments where the weight of betrayals and hardships bares down on me and causes me to break – but in my wreckage and through tear-clouded vision I would look up to be greeted by a new philodendron leaf pushing its way into the world, or a glowing pink spear of an anthurium flower about to unfurl and I could sense their love in the form of abundance. In moments of turmoil, the arrival of a new leaf or flower felt like the hand of my ancestors pulling me out of the gloom. Philodendron leaves almost dance into the world. The new leaf incubates within the previous stem before it slithers out like an inch worm, popping free as a spike that spirals out to be a fully grown leaf. Bougainvillea blooms grow somewhat like leaves; they start small and dark reddish-green and slowly increase in size and vibrancy.

Having plants does not come without failures. Just like relationships amongst humans, you cannot always be there for each other – you cannot always be perfectly present. So sometimes other parts of my life prevent me from being the caregiver I need to be and I forget to

water, I forget to check in. And they tell me! They droop, they drop leaves, they grow long and frail, they yellow. It becomes a conversation where they try to tell me what they need and I have to learn how to listen.

I see this relation as, at its core, the very basis for belonging. This relation, for me, represents reciprocity, mutual aid, communication, community, and connection, all of which are the tools that we have to move past the obstacles to belonging that are pervasive in a world structure with colonialism and capitalism. This type of relationship also heavily informs how this research became creation – the goal being to create this type of relationship with an audience.

The plants I collect and share my space and life with are important parts of my journey toward connection and belonging, especially as someone living in the diaspora. I have never been to Guyana, but I know that land is calling me. I miss it deeply even though I have never set foot on that soil. And part of the reason I know that is through plants. Tropical plants are magical, the colours, patterns and shapes, their adaptations and the way they grow. Some climb trees naturally and their leaves grow bigger as they climb (philodendrons).[132] Some leaves move up and down with the sun (marantas and calatheas)

Figure 2. *Cacti off the side of a cliff in Bequia.* (Photography by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2023).

[132] Maddie Bailey and Alice Bailey, *The Hidden Histories of Houseplants*, (Hardie Grant Publishing, 2021).

or literally close when you touch them (mimosa pudica). Some do not even root in soil, they just perch on other plants like bird nests (epiphytic orchids or bromeliads). Some hold water for other living beings to drink from (tank bromeliads). Some grow fruit I have never even seen in real life. Some have healing properties. And remarkably, they grow *together* naturally. Ficus and palm trees grow tall and sturdy. Philodendrons or passion flowers climb up those trunks. Epiphytes perch higher up on branch intersections. Ferns and alocasias and other bushy plants grow close to the ground, protected from harsh sun by the taller growers. I find myself enthralled by the magical relationality among plants.

Figure 3. *Mango and Bougainvillea in Bequia*. (Photography by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2023).

While healing from the events of the summer, I also spent a lot of time in a botanical conservatory at Centennial Park. Being able to visit places like this helped me realize just how grand and magnificent the plants I collect and learn about are meant to be – and would be in their natural environment. Leaves grow bigger, stems become trunks, reaching the ceiling of the greenhouse. There, I get to see that unity, that community of being, at least in some small contrived way. I look up to them, their presence almost like ancient gods. And if I take a moment to look deep into the garden, it feels as if I have transported to Guyana, to the rainforests that surround Kaiteur

falls, and it feels like home. Where I am meant to belong.

I have only been to the Caribbean once, unfortunately with the very people I needed to heal from. It was a trip to Bequia, an island in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The land spoke to me in ways that feel beyond words. The roar of the ocean waves sounded like voices echoing over from Guyana, calling me. The wind, sun, moon were all profound parts of that experience for me. But the plants were very special. Seeing them grow, take up space, expand and propagate where *they* belong. I saw giant cacti growing off the cliffside (See Figure 2). What we call air plants here, usually removed from all context, were growing against trees, within view of the ocean. Sansevieria grew like grass along the roadside. Bougainvillea grew like clouds of bright pink around buildings and fences. Coconuts, mangoes, papayas growing *everywhere* (See Figure 3). Being able to recognize and notice the beauty in these things felt like a special private language between me and the land. Being surrounded by people who I knew could not appreciate the land and people the way I could, this small and quiet connection meant a lot to me and helped me feel safe amidst uncertainty. That felt like belonging.

Ritual and Ceremony

Dance and Releasing Trauma from the Body

Dancing is a notable methodology for healing found in various Caribbean healing traditions. Dance has a history in Afro-diasporic traditions of being a tool for healing the mind, body, and spirit as it has the potential to release symptoms of trauma and tension from the body.[133] Dance unites peoples across the diaspora created from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While African dances and ceremonies were often banned by slave owners, a creolized culture of dance and healing traditions formed in the Caribbean and North America.[134] The creolization of traditional African dances and aesthetics with the cultural practices of the colonizer present a

[133] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 19-20.
[134] Wilson, "Dancing Back to the Motherland," 80-81.

clear example of resistance and adaption to strife in the African diaspora. While dance has historically been used for healing in the diaspora, in contemporary contexts dance has also been found to create a sense of personal healing as well as facilitating community cohesion.[135]

I have always been a dancer, but the way that I connect with dance now is different than how it used to be. I used to dance to find belonging. Dancers can become family. They have to spend time together to perfect their craft and this time allows them to bond and become community. A dance routine cannot succeed without every member being able to perform it. I tried ballet and jazz dance when I was a kid, but I didn't last long doing those. I gravitated towards hip-hop and eventually Bollywood. I didn't have a specific reason to explain why certain dance types worked better for me than others, but I can see now that I likely didn't fit very well into the white/Western dance styles I originally had tried. At the hip-hop studio I went to, I saw people find family and I wanted it so bad – to feel connected and important. But I also felt out of place there. When I tried Bollywood the same thing happened even though I liked to dance it. I didn't have the cultural references and physical appearance to truly belong in any dance space I found, but I didn't understand at the time that dancing to prove myself as part of a community was not the best way to connect to my body.

I stopped dancing after high school, but I don't think the body forgets that potential it has. Since dance is intertwined with music, my love for music also reminded my body of its dancing past. I started dancing by myself, at night when everyone else was asleep. I'd find songs that inspired a sort of creative frenzy within me. Something about the drums or bass would spark a joy in me that couldn't be contained within my body. I *had* to dance. I used to try to dance well even though no one was watching. I would pretend I was on a stage. But as I started to adapt this habit into a method for healing, my focus shifted from dancing *well* to dancing *freely*. I play music that speaks to my soul in some way or another, Soca and calypso, reggae, Saharan rock, Latin. Sometimes I focus on my hips, moving them slowly and in different directions. Sometimes I focus on my shoulders, letting them float and sway above the rest of

[135] Wilson, "Dancing Back to the Motherland," 88.

my body. Sometimes I simply skip or twirl along with the beat. Whatever I do, the movement helps me focus on simply being alive – being a body – and nothing else. These moments help me to abandon my worries and focus on the energy within me, expressing that energy. And sometimes even expressing traumas and frustrations – I can tell by sudden onslaughts of emotions and tears that sometimes come when I focus on how my body feels.

In prioritizing healing, I have incorporated dance into my daily life by making small moments to abandon the demands of day. While my body had naturally been oriented toward dance, in doing this research into Caribbean healing traditions, I began to approach dance directly as a tool for healing, rather than simply an interesting habit. I found that approaching dance with more intentionality increased the positive impacts it had on me. I felt happier when I let my body be free and follow where the joy is coming from.

In practicing this small ritual while doing research on the Caribbean, I realized that some of the natural instincts of my body or the music that touches my soul connects me directly to my ancestors – those who lived in the Caribbean and those who came from Africa and Asia. Caribbean dance and music have direct influences from African and Asian music, carrying the souls of our ancestors through specific beats and movements. Being able to dance and feel music reverberate through my being, knowing that these movements and sounds were movements and sounds they also enjoyed, has allowed me to deepen a sense of belonging for myself. The fact that these potentialities for belonging and connection were already within me helps me ascertain just how embedded I am in the web of my ancestors. Despite being told throughout my life that I am not enough to claim my own identity, being able to dance to the music of my ancestors helps me prove to myself that I very much am.

Prioritizing a liberating practice of movement, has deeper implications than simply inciting joy and connection. That release of trauma comes from taking a moment to be human despite dehumanization. hooks writes, “Working in conditions where the body was regarded

solely as a tool (as in slavery), a profound estrangement occurred between mind and body… It did not matter if the body was well, only that it appeared well."[136] Capitalism and colonialism have rendered the bodies of people of colour as tools for nation building and the production of profit, so that we only come to know our bodies through labour. So, to *dance* is to know our bodies through joy. This can be seen as a form of revolution or rebellion. Dance as rebellion has been enacted historically, as noted previously, when enslaved Africans in the Caribbean began using dance and masquerade to mock European oppressors and imagining liberated futures. Dance, therefore, allows us to shed the tension and pain of exploitation and othering in our day-to-day lives, while also being a revolutionary tool to connect us back to our bodies.

Dreaming and Imagination

02.02.26

What is reality but some sort of cage? Or a line in the sand that stops you in your tracks. Some arbitrary barrier where we suddenly stop.

What if we looked beyond our reality? What if we could smell beyond what we're given or told to buy? Listen to the rhythms of life that have been drowned out by the sounds of jackhammers or traffic or commercials?

What if we could find family in the places we're never told to look?

Our ancestors knew there was a world beyond the one forced on them. They sought ways to commune with the spirit of the world. To expand their senses beyond the traumatic

[136] hooks, *Belonging,* 34.

reality of their physical world in search for hope and safety in the natural world that breathes beneath it all.

Dreams are also entwined in healing traditions from the diaspora. Using the Caribbean as an example for the diaspora, the Caribbean philosophy of health prioritizes freedom and emancipation from oppression as its first goal.[137] The spiritual focus of healthcare in this area encompassed the decentering of whiteness by shifting attention to the spiritual or ancestral realm. The Western conception of the divide between mind and body has historically been used to maintain a racist hierarchy, positing that white minds are superior, in order to justify the transformation of Black bodies into tools for labour.[138] A focus on the spiritual and the investment of energy into healing the spiritual first, evinces a logic of healthcare that uplifts the mental state of people of colour, leaving behind the Western mind-body dichotomy for something that reflects the complexities of our experiences. Dreams have been used to analyze the state of one's spirit and reveal elements of the spirit that can be manipulated in rituals.[139] Dreams can also reveal who has the capacity to be a healer.[140] Visions and dreams are therefore expressions of the spiritual realm that help us maintain hope for a liberated future through imagination and self-reliance.

I see my capacity to create community through imagination as a direct relation to these spiritual traditions of dreaming. Imagining my ancestors into existence – by learning about them, touching the objects they made, or speaking to the moon and stars – is a practice in dreaming a better future into existence. Enacting belonging as a practice of hope and imagination – looking to make connection manifest through these alternative ways of seeing the

---

[137] Sutherland, "The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions," 19-21.
[138] hooks, *Belonging*, 30-31.
[139] Jeremy Jacob Peretz, "'Put the Brassiere on the Cross': Performing 'Spanish' Fem(Me)Ininities and Sexualities through Komfa in Guyana," *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 97, no. 3/4 (2023): 265. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27249972.
[140] Payne-Jackson, "Caribbean Traditional Medicine," 44-45.

world – is how I have interpreted and incorporated this aspect of dreaming as a Caribbean healing tradition into my life.

Community and Care

Herbalism

Herbalism – the practice of using plants as medicine – is an ancient tradition that almost every culture has in its history.[141] Herbal remedies are constants, they never really change, which is special in that it allows us to reenact the very same practices our ancestors have done for generations. Herbalism is also simpler than it may seem. Everyone does it – using ginger for stomach aches or chamomile tea to promote sleep. Herbalism is integrated into our lives, and connects us to each other, to our ancestors, and to the natural world.

I find the fact that our ancestors found ways to heal each other in a strange land with strange new plants very poignant. It shows a capacity to adapt in order to help each other survive, even under oppressive circumstances. I attempted to instill some aspects of herbalism in my life as part of this research, learning about various herbs and how they can be beneficial to myself and others. I see this practice as a method of creating self-sustenance, avoiding reliance on systems of healthcare built by the very people who oppress us. Herbalism is a practice in connecting to land as we have to learn the plant life around us. It is also a practice in connecting to our human communities, as we tend to help each other through our ailments, asking if a friend had any ginger after having a stomach ache, or giving a family member tea when they have a cold. In these ways, I see herbalism as very much an important component in this Caribbean healing philosophy and in a practice for belonging.

---

[141] Ruth A. Blanding, *Herbal Medicine for Modern Life: Traditional Folk Remedies for Everyday Health and Well-Being* (Zeitgeist, 2024), 17-19.

Care and Mutual Responsibility

Shared responsibility and accountability to one another is an aspect of Caribbean healing traditions and of belonging that I found important in my time conducting this research. Not only did having the help and care of others help me feel that I belong *somewhere* but being able to help others was what allowed me to feel I mattered. I felt embedded in a cyclical relationship of reciprocation and care when I was able to help and be helped. This does not only apply to relationships between humans – that reciprocal relationship I have with plants and the natural world is part of this idea as well.

Looking at sharing as a tool for liberation and healing, reminded me of the ways my grandmothers used to show care. I wrote the following poem while I was remembering my nonna:

Her hands,
Delicate and fragile,
Arthritis swollen knuckles
Carefully
Peeling, cleaning, slicing
Fruit
Placed
In small bowls
Suddenly appearing
On
The side table
Without words that
Often failed her
I knew the fruit was
Mine
When all she could
Say was
"Eat, eat, eat."

Remembering these moments, where women close to me showed me they cared through small gestures, helped me realize that belonging is engendered through collectivity. Being able to *survive* together, by making sure we all get fed and we are all taken care of, is belonging.

In the phase of this work where I began making artwork alongside my personal reflections on healing, I felt community start to form around me. I started to share the challenges I was facing with others, and found that they would share their challenges with me. This reciprocity was invigorating. I felt connected to others in a way I had not experienced before. I would spend time making ceramics with my friends, Sade and Jules, at the ceramics studio where we often felt unwanted. We would talk about the issues that were weighing us down, finding relief in sharing our burdens. We would bounce ideas off one another, inspire one another, and help one another along in the process of our making. We bonded over commonalities – being mixed, being queer, being neurodivergent. All of these things made us closer. And in fostering this connection between us, we were able to carve a space to belong in an otherwise unwelcoming place. This connection and reciprocity is community and in finding community, I felt belonging.

We Are All We Need: The Installation

In this section I will explain the choices that were made in designing the creative culmination of this research. I will also speak on the effects of the space and the observations I made about the space.

Overview

The creative output of this research took the form of an installation titled *We Are All We Need* at the Ada Slaight Hallway Gallery in the OCAD University main building, presented from February 26th to March 1st, 2026. The installation took the form of a domestic space. The furnishings and curation of the space did not evoke any particular room (a kitchen versus a living room, for example) but was arranged to bring forth a sense of homeliness and place. Filling up a long and narrow space, the arrangement of furnishings allowed for somewhat of a

Figure 4. *First wall, We Are All We Need.* (Photograph by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2026).

path from beginning to end. At the beginning, on the leftmost wall, there was a didactic explaining the research behind the exhibition, bookended by two wooden chairs with handmade pillows (See Figure 4). On this first wall was also a framed sign that let visitors know the space was interactive. Then along the middle wall were hung tapestries depicting scenes of rituals, Caribbean mythologies, natural elements, and dancers; cabinets and small tables carrying ceramic bowls and jars filled with herbs or fruit, potted plants, books, poems and note pads; and framed photos accompanied by typewritten poems and didacts. Near the rightmost wall, was a seating area with a small couch and armchair, side table, knitting basket, and rug (See Figure 6). Crochet pieces made by myself and my two grandmothers adorned table tops and the arm chair.

The Space

Figure 5. *Gallery view from the couch, We Are All We Need.* (Photograph by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2026).

The space, being a hallway, provided a challenge to my main goal which was to create a place where visitors could feel a sense of belonging. The transitory nature of a hallway seemed to be the antithesis of what I needed the space to be – a space where people could stay, sit, relax,

and feel safe. So, consideration into the curation of the space was important to ensure that this installation could still be successful. The installation was made to evoke a domestic space, including furnishings and various handmade home goods (See Figure 5 and 6). Some furniture belonged to my Nonna, including her kitchen cabinet and sewing table. Other furnishings - some chairs and tables - belong to my father. A couch and arm chair were purchased to share amongst my friends. Each piece felt integral to creating a space that was familiar and safe, while also evoking the community that I am coming from in making this work.

Figure 6. *Couch and arm chair in We Are All We Need featuring crocheted work by Savina Zandona (Brown Shawl) and Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing (White table cloth).* (Photograph by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2026).

In arranging the space, I tried to design the environment in a way that can promote inner peace, safety, and healing. Since the space and objects evoked places we are all familiar with, viewers were able to interact with the space as they would their own home. By making obvious that the work was open to being touched, I also allowed viewers to experience a sense of agency and choice – they were able to open jars if they wanted to, or pull up a chair, or grab a book. I arranged chairs to be facing in different directions so viewers had the *option* to be more or less visible or vulnerable. In allowing for options, viewers could feel agency in choosing how they want to position themselves in the space. I did find that different people found different places more or less comfortable. Some were happy to sit with their backs to the hallway; others preferred the comfier and more social area where the couch and recliner chair were, where they could also see more of the space and hallway.

The presence of textile art, ceramics, and plants signals to viewers that this can be a peaceful space. Providing comfortable seating in a quiet environment also promotes relaxation and safety in the space. The presence of greenery evokes the outdoors, allowing for viewers to experience a small connection with the natural world while within the university. I integrated this emphasis on the natural world into the artworks themselves, depicting flowers and plant life, water, and other natural elements.

A Note on Symbolism

The goal of the symbolism in this work was not to educate on specific Caribbean practices but to create a visual language that uplifts and embraces Caribbean history and tradition in order to tell stories about life in the present. I use the basic tenets of Caribbean healing to paint a portrait of a possible future where belonging is a given and care is used as a tool to heal from and combat the effects of colonialism and capitalism. I also used symbols related to the natural world to add to the overall effect of the space – placing familiar and pleasing imagery in the space to allow guests to feel comfortable, welcome, and relaxed. Images of these elements such as stars, fire, and water are also general enough that anyone can make connections to the work. In some way, we have all made connections with these elements. We have all looked up in awe at the night sky, or sat by a fire, watching the flicker of the flames. By making work that is not overly specific or abstracted, I hoped to allow more people to see themselves in the work, or to make connections between the work and their lives.

Figure 7. *Spirit Quilt.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

Quilting and Tapestry

My Approach to Quilting

The historical account of quilting above is important in understanding why I chose quilting as one of the media I would focus on in this work. The piece-meal nature of quilting was endearing to me and seemed to reflect the very nature of this practice of belonging I sought to enact. Creating belonging and fostering healing are both non-linear processes that are formed by piecing together moments for connection in our lives. I did not seek one final treatment for the traumas of isolation in my life – I sought a web of ideas and experiences. I thought that quilting could reflect how these moments and choices came together to create one whole.

Crazy quilts – the amalgamation of found pieces of fabric – became part of how I approached making this work, finding pieces of fabric, pieces of my family history, fragments of memories or ideas, and bringing them together to create a meaningful whole. The quilts themselves were constructed of a variety of materials, in keeping with this tradition of crazy quilting. I used pieces of old bed sheets (some of them I dyed with turmeric), pieces of thrifted fabrics, hand-me-down fabrics from my grandmothers and their friends, and various fabrics I bought that I felt represented different aspects of my ancestry. I used some African or Batik prints, some Italian linens, some Indian brocade. I also designed some of my own fabrics, printing on cotton with linoleum and wood blocks I carved. The pieced nature of quilting seemed to reflect the complex patchwork of my ancestry.

Figure 8. *Spirit Quilt (Old Hag Detail).* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

The Quilted Works

There were three main quilted tapestries in the final exhibition. The first one I made was *Spirit Quilt* (see figure 7). This quilt represents an earlier phase of this research in which I was exploring Guyanese mythologies specifically. In this piece, I made ceramic sculptures to represent two figures of Guyanese mythology. Higher in the picture is a red flame with the face of a woman that represents the Old Higue or Old Hag, also known as a soucouyant in other parts of the Caribbean (See Figure 8). She is a vampiric old woman who transforms into a fireball at night, flying into people's homes and drinking their blood, especially the blood of babies. I saw this myth as an example of how women have been demonized, especially old women, due to their power within communities. Their abilities to comfort others, maintain social cohesion, and also provide wisdom especially related to sustenance and healing has been demonized as it can be seen as a threat to capitalistic ideals that seek to disengage labourers from all means of self-reliance and empowerment.[142] I represent this fire-woman, soaring above another figure – Bakoo – who is a small demon that lives in a jar and brings fortune to those who feed him (See Figure 9). If one fails to feed him well, he will in turn bring misery into that

Figure 9. *Spirit Quilt (Bakoo Detail)*. (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

[142] Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 29-32.

person's life. This tale can be seen as fable warning against the harms that money can cause.[143] I position Bakoo beneath the Old Hag, to subvert the hierarchy between capitalist control and these old and wise women that are pillars of community.

I also created a quilted banner that hung towards the beginning of the installation, draping from high on the wall to the floor (See Figure 10). I made this quilt inspired by the women who use quilts to document moments in their lives or the things they would see during their day-to-day tasks. There are six squares in this quilt, each depicting some aspect of Caribbean healing that I had absorbed into my life or learned about as part of this research process. Some squares present natural elements that I relied on in this journey: stars, fire, plants, roots. The other two squares present scenes representing Caribbean ritual healing. One of them is a square depicting a figure, tugging on a rope that is tied around an interpretation of Bakoo. This scene is derived from a documented story that Pablo Gòmez writes about in *The Experiential Caribbean* in which two enslaved women managed to paralyze their "owner" by imagining themselves tying ropes around his limbs:

> "All available facts indicated that two of de Santiago's West African female slaves, Leonor Zape and Guiomar Bran, were the culprits of his marred state. De Santiago told Inquisitors that when he asked Leonor about why he had been 'sick and crippled' for four years, she told him that, together with Guiomar, 'she had tied [his legs].'"[144]

[143] Rogério Brittes W. Pires, Stuart Earle Strange, Marcelo Moura Mello, "The Bakru Speaks," New West Indian Guide, Volume 92, Issues 1–2, (2018), 1-34.

[144] Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean,* 98-99.

Figure 10. *Banner Quilt.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

This scene stuck out in my mind because it shows the power that we can have innately, when we allow ourselves to believe in our own power and experiences of the world. The agency that these women were able to seize for themselves, by believing they had the power to change their circumstance is empowering, and I wanted to bring that empowering feeling into the space. Finally, a square depicting a hand, circled by droplets of blood, references the use of blood in rituals in Caribbean history. While the practice itself may seem somewhat violent, I think the idea of releasing evil from the body, in order to change and heal is compelling and I see it as a metaphor for the pain involved in healing traumatic wounds.

The final quilted tapestry, called *Ritual Quilt*, depicts two beings, partially submerged in water, engaging in a ritual together (See Figure 11). I see this image of ritual as a metaphorical representation of two phases of my spiritual self in this research process. The first being is incomplete, the leaves that make up its skin not fully grown, while the second being is fully realized and covered in plant life. They both reflect moonlight on their faces (signified by the crescent moons) representing the role the moon played in the changes of my life. The fully realized form, reaches to its past self, brushing its skin with a soft broom and water. This gesture is inspired by *jharay*, the Indo-Caribbean practice of sweeping water and herbs over the skin to heal various ailments practiced in Guyana and Trinidad. The ritual is enacted here to heal spiritual wounds. Presenting these figures in a non-gendered and amorphous form, is meant to reflect the notion that this scene is happening in a spiritual realm, inspired by the emphasis on spiritual connection and healing in Caribbean traditions.

Figure 11. *Ritual Quilt*. (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

Ceramics

Ceramics played a large part in the making for this installation. I created pots for plants, teacups, and jars to populate the space and evoke the domestic. Almost all of the ceramics in this work were hand-built, meaning I did not use a pottery wheel but assembled them either as pinch-pots or with slabs and coils (flat and round pieces of clay). This made the making more labour-intensive but also more personal, each piece reflecting the impressions of my hands and the unique choices I made for each one.

The Rationale Behind My Ceramic Practice

There are a few factors that went into my choosing ceramics as a medium but also my design for each piece. First, I see it as one of the oldest forms of art-making and, since my focus was on traditional media, it seemed right to include ceramics in this installation. It is an ancient

and global artform, and I can imagine I have ancestors from all over the world who may have been potters. Since it is such a global artform, I also looked to pottery and design elements from around the world to inform my choices for each pot. I researched Caribbean pottery, but also West African, Chinese, and Indian pottery. I found that Caribbean pottery, made by both Indigenous and African populations tended to be hand-built historically (at least before the introduction and influence of European pottery wheels).[145] There were also some features of West African pottery that melded into Caribbean pottery production, especially seen in the production of Yabbas (small vessels found in Jamaica mostly), which included repetitive incisions and stamped designs. In studying West African sculptural artwork, I also found the use of repetitive patterns, especially parallel linear incisions. I looked to Chinese and Indian designs as well, inspired by the flowing depictions of clouds or the repetitive patterns found in henna designs. I incorporated these inspirations into ceramic plant pots and jars, forming my own stamps to create repeated patterns, or carving linear patterns into their surfaces. Caribbean pottery also tends to be unglazed, allowing the colour of the clay to shine through. Therefore, most of the pieces I created were burnished rather than glazed – a process where repeatedly rubbing the surface of the clay compresses its particles together and creates a solid and somewhat shiny surface. Caribbean pottery, and the pottery of the Caribbean artists I have met and known, tends to use non-white clay (reds and browns), so I chose a speckled brown clay for these pieces. For some pieces, I made designs using black underglaze, inspired by examples of Guyanese pottery, especially pottery practices of the Arawak and other Indigenous nations in the Caribbean.

[145] Meyers, Allan D. "West African Tradition in the Decoration of Colonial Jamaican Folk Pottery." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 3, no. 4 (1999): 204.

Figure 12. *Blood and Blossom Pot.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

Ceramics as a medium also has such a significant potential for making objects than can be used. I liked the idea of making art that was functional as it would add to the domestic feel of the space, but also invite interaction with the work. Making things that others could use was almost part of the practice of belonging I was trying to enact. Being able to make homes for my plants or bowls that could offer fruit to guests felt like an integral component of care in this process. Also creating objects that are functional but also *beautiful* felt important in creating a space that is pleasing and relaxing but also personal.

Finally, the process of creating these pieces was healing in itself. It allowed me to feel grounded, working entirely by feeling with my hands. The process of making these domestic objects started with practice. Pinch pots were something I used to hate. It felt like you could start a project with a certain intention and the clay could (and often did) completely disagree. I would pinch the bottom of the pot and everything would be fine. Then I would pinch around in

Figure 13. *Blood and Blossom Pot.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

circles, starting the walls, and things began to change. The walls became too long, too wide. I would struggle to force the clay into a more compact form. It wrinkled under the pressure. Then as I kept working the walls – pinching up and pinching together – the once-too-wet clay would start to crack around the lip of the pot as it dried. Once I would have a general shape, the pot would be too wet to smooth but too dry to form without further cracking its surface. I would have to let the pot sit for a while before continuing onwards. This process is unpredictable and nonlinear. It follows a known path – pinch from the bottom up and shape to your liking. But it is never so simple. There can always be an unexpected wrinkle, an unexpected crack. You can work too hard and the walls will be too thin. You can leave the clay too long and it hardens. You can work one side more than the other and leave one side far too thick. You can pinch a hole in the bottom. All these things cannot always be predicted, especially within the fervor of making.

Despite the treacherous nature of this process, I approach each challenge with the same care and love. If the clay wrinkles, I brush my thumb over the wrinkle until it closes. If the clay cracks, I smooth it with a wooden tool and water. If the walls are too thin, I add a veneer of clay to strengthen them. If the clay is too hard I sit it under a damp cloth and wait. If the pot is lopsided, I balance the work out and trim the excess clay. If I pinch a hole through the bottom, I patch it. This is the nature of the earth. You can pull a weed and another grows back. Earth is powerful in that way. And all things good can happen when you befriend that earthly power. This process is healing. It is not easy or simple or straightforward. Especially when we live in

places that work to dehumanize us and keep us apart from that power that earth shares with us. Healing can start off easy and a crack can show in that smooth surface you have fallen into. But the key to continuing the journey is to keep on caring. To keep on coaxing the pot into the shape you want it to be. And to approach the process with an open mind – open to challenges, those wrinkles and cracks, and open to the shape that was meant to be.

Figure 14. *Cardamom in sculpted scallop shell.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

The process of creating these designs is meditative and intuitive – I could not rush each piece but rather I had to work with the clay to determine its final form. Each line was drawn, carved, smoothed, so that every part of the design was touched and considered multiple times. The shaping process involved repetitive motions, checking on all parts of the work to ensure that all parts were addressed with the same care.

Curation and Significance of the Ceramic Pieces

Similar to the quilted works, the pots in my show depicted various aspects of Caribbean healing traditions and natural elements that I felt resonated with my own journey towards belonging, including stars, fire, wind, the sun and moon, ritual, shells, and dancers. As an example of this symbolism, I made two pots with the same imagery meant to complement each other when shown, depicting a metaphor interpretation of a blood-letting ritual (See Figures 12 and 13). A hand is depicted with drops of blood that float away, towards a lotus. Lotus petals continue the floating design, leading back towards the hand in a cyclical formation. I use the blood to symbolism change and the pain of change in the healing process, but also as a direct linkage to the idea of shared blood and ancestry. The lotus represents the positive outcomes of healing, but also represents Guyana itself as it is the national flower. The blood is therefore a link back to Guyana, while also representing the pain that comes before healing can be achieved.

Figure 15. *Dandelion root in pinched bowl.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

In the pots, I chose to display various herbs that can and have been used for healing, especially in the Caribbean but also from my life in general. Small pinched bowls and sculpted scallop shells held cardamom, cloves, cinnamon,


Figure 16. *Lavender Jar.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

Figure 17. *Ginger Jar.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

turmeric, black pepper, dandelion root, ashwagandha, sorrel, tamarind and more (See Figures 14 and 15). I also made jars to contain some larger or more aromatic herbal remedies such as ginger or lavender (See Figure 16 and 17). I made jars with the hope that they would contain the scent of the herbs, allowing visitors to experience the scent of these remedies as they opened each jar. The need to open the jars was also meant to encourage interaction in the space. Inspired by Yabbas and Caribbean pottery in general, I experimented with different shapes for the lids and handles, keeping most of the jar bodies unglazed as well.

Figure 18. *Figurine of a Guyanese Dancer.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

There were two ceramic figures in this installation modeled after Guyanese dancers. They were meant to reflect my ancestors, in keeping with traditional healing practices in which figurines or statues are made as conduits for spirits and the afterlife (See Figure 18). I incised dancers into some of the ceramic works to represent my ancestors as well. The figurines depict women wearing skirts coloured with the Guyanese flag. I sculpted them in positions that reminded me of moves I used to do as a Bollywood dancer. I replaced their faces with stars to represent the fact that I do not know my ancestors specifically, but I see them in the stars.

Crochet

"For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release." – Alice Walker [146]

Figure 19. *We Are All We Need crocheted banner.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

The crochet pieces presented in this installation were a combination of mine, my grandma's and my nonna's work. The focal point of the seating area in this installation is a filet crochet tapestry I made over the span of a month and a half (See Figure 19 and 20). This piece represents possibly my highest achievement in crochet – I used the smallest hook I have ever used to make a piece with thousands of stitches, using a design I created myself. The image is symmetrical, depicting six women dancing around the sun, surrounded by flowers. I made this

[146] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose,* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984), 137.

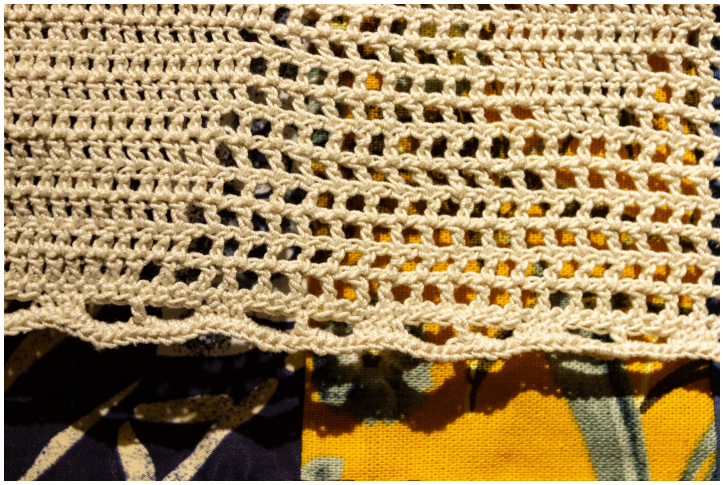

Figure 20. *We Are All We Need crocheted banner (stitch detail).* (Photograph by Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing, 2026).

piece as a reflection of my use of dance as a healing practice, and my research on dance as a historic Caribbean healing tradition. The poses of the women were inspired directly from Caribbean masquerade and carnival. I wanted to show Caribbean joy, without censoring or diluting it for any other audience. Whining and twerking can be seen as lude and profane, especially when one adopts a European-Catholic mindset around issues such as etiquette and propriety, but I see the liberation that is enacted in these movements, and I wanted to portray that through the poses of the women in this scene.

The material of this piece is also important. I used natural cotton crochet thread – a thin thread used for decorative crochet pieces. I wanted to use this thread specifically, to align myself as a creator with my grandmother and great-grandmother. Both of them – Violet and Jacqueline – have done beautiful decorative work with miniscule stitches in intricate patterns to decorate tables or chairs. Seeing their work, I felt a sense of awe, looking at these small stitches and how they come together to make something so beautiful. Knowing how to read crochet, those small stitches gave me a clue into how much time and effort they put into making these items to decorate their homes. In the research process, I found a crochet table runner made by my grandmother and gifted to my mother. This table runner covers the table directly beneath my crochet tapestry, putting my grandmother's artistry in direct conversation with mine (See Figure 21).

Figure 21. *Crochet table runner by Jacqueline Sue-Wah-Sing.* (Photograph by Yifan Wang, 2026).

My nonna's crochet was also represented in the form of a brown crochet shawl, propped over the back of the arm chair in this installation (See Figure 5). It was in conversation with a small white table cloth I made for the side table beside the arm chair. Bringing my grandmothers' work into this piece was important to me, because it allowed me to put them on the same stage that I was on, in an arts university. Bringing them into the work was an attempt to give them the recognition they deserve for being the artists that inspired me.

My Observations

Once this work was installed, I spent time in the space to observe how it felt and if it could in fact engender belonging. I was able to see how others interacted with the space in my time there, which helped bolster the conclusions I come to in this research.

In terms of my personal experience in the space, changing the quality of the gallery space to become more like a domestic place allowed me to feel as though this hallway in the middle of OCAD university had suddenly become my apartment. My plants were there, pictures of my family on the walls, my books on the shelf, my yarn in its basket. I personally felt comfortable in the space in a way I did not necessarily expect, given the open and transitory nature of a hallway gallery. But it became a space I could stay in. I played music while I was there – often reggae – which echoed through the hall and made the space feel even less like a gallery. The space also required a sense of care, which made it feel alive. I had a watering can in the installation, that I would walk around with, checking on my plants and watering them when they needed. I sometimes had to put things away or reorganize things that people had moved while I was not in the space. I had to check if there were enough oranges out and replenish them if they were gone. This daily maintenance transformed the gallery space into a *living* space. For a few days, this was my home. I felt simultaneously protective of it and open to visitors, as I would in my own home. Not having my own place to call home, this small taste of the autonomy involved in crafting my own space was very much part of this journey towards belonging. Being able to craft a space where I belonged felt like the perfect culmination of this research. I almost felt like a part of the installation as I walked around with my watering can and mister, tending to my plants and monitoring the needs of the space.

On the final day of the exhibition, I spent a few hours alone in the space. The school was quiet and not many people had walked by. The space felt mine. I sat on the couch, enjoying the view of the room from that corner for the first time. It felt restful. Peaceful. I had my dog on the seat beside me, while I listened to music and took in the space. I realized I could smell the sorrel I put out from where I sat, and it smelled like memories. The integration of the senses into the experience of the work made it feel real and alive – hearing the music I liked, smelling these familiar smells, feeling the soft cushions beneath me, entangling my fingers in yarn as I crocheted. My belonging in the space was facilitated by this sensory immersion.

In observing the activity within the space over the few days it was up, I was surprised to find how willing others were to engage fully in the work. This was not a work that people walked idly by. I found people walking through the space, sitting comfortably on the furniture. One person was curled up on the armchair, reading one of the books I left out and eating one of the oranges. Some came into the space and opened each jar to see which spices and herbs were contained. The sound of the ceramic added to the life of the space, each curious touch emphasized by the light tinkling of the glazed pieces. Some came and picked up the poems I had interspersed throughout the space, reading the words intently. Others wrote notes on the notepads I had left on the tables. This willingness to not only engage with the work, but even enter the space and stay, appeared to be a sign that the space was engendering belonging. The comfort with which people moved into the space, touched things, took things, read things, and *stayed* signalled to me that my goal was at least somewhat achieved in making it a space for people to belong.

The herbs played a role in creating belonging in the space. They felt like live participants in this work. I observed people looking through, smelling, touching the different vessels with these spices. People seemed to be reminded of home, by seeing spices their mothers and aunts would have used every day. Spices like cardamom and clove spoke to South Asian visitors, reminding them of their home cuisines. Dandelion root or ashwagandha spoke directly to alternative healing practices like Chinese medicine. I found that these herbs and spices brought people into the show, and allowed them to identify themselves in the space, without having to be specifically Guyanese or Caribbean at all. These herbs seemed to be in conversation with the guests who recognized them, similar in a sense to the private language I feel I have with plants as mentioned earlier.

The use of traditional media – textile and fibre art especially – also seemed to evoke memories of home. Some visitors told me they remembered mothers and grandmothers who

engaged in the same craft and who may have appreciated my use of the media in this work. Other crafters were also able to engage more closely with these pieces, looking at the details and reading the stitches just as my grandma does.

While this research was not a participatory study, these observation within the exhibition space reveal that a future study on how the infusion of Caribbean healing traditions into a space could create feelings of familiarity, comfort, and belonging for people of colour would be an interesting and potentially fruitful endeavor.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I looked back to various moments in my life where I felt a lack of belonging, in order to illustrate both the impacts of isolation on my psyche as well as the ways that I used to cope with said isolation. I used to amend my identity to seek reassurance from those around me, or attempt to prove my identity by hanging on to cultural signifiers. I overviewed how various social interactions structured my identity and signalled that I was *other*, resulting in feelings of being out place in every context or community. I connected these othering social interactions with broader societal issues, including the historical shaping of space to reflect whiteness as the standard of humanity.

The second phase of my reflections in this project involved the application of a Caribbean healing philosophy in my personal life in order to create a practice for belonging. The facets of this philosophy that I instilled in my life included ancestral worship and connection, connecting to the natural world, dance as a method for embodying joy, dreams and imagination, herbalism, and collective care. I found that each of these different facets created positive feelings of belonging and connection for myself, even in the absence of human-to-human social interactions.

The final outcome of this research was an installation entitled *We Are All We Need* in which I curated a space for belonging, populated with ceramic, crocheted, and quilted pieces that I made to reflect the Caribbean healing philosophy I used in this work. While in the finished space, I observed that the domestic nature of the space made it comfortable for myself and others to stay and rest. I also observed that the different elements of the work, including the placement of herbs and plants, the sound of music, the inclusion of books, and more seemed to not only draw visitors in to interact with the work, but evoked a sense of memory or home by

providing reminders for guests as to different aspects of their upbringing or evoking the places and people they came from.

There are a few notable limitations to the findings of this work, and their application in a real-world context. Firstly, I describe a practice of belonging as a revolutionary tool. While it is true that instilling some aspects of this practice, such as community care and encouraging self-subsistence through the use of herbalism and connections to the natural world, these practices cannot *change* the world we live in. They are instead responses to the traumas that can be caused by living under capitalism and colonialism. I do believe there is power in turning away from dominant forces and towards each other, but this does not eradicate those oppressive systems. Secondly, the fact that this was an autoethnographic study means that I cannot ascertain with certainty that the practices I have outlined here would be beneficial to all people of colour broadly. Future expansions on this topic would benefit from observational research on a variety of participants. Being able to study the application of the presented ideas on a larger sample of participants would also be likely to reveal any nuances missed by focusing on only myself as a participant in this study.

Overall, I found a few major themes that elicit belonging and can have potential positive effects for other people of colour who experience this absence of belonging throughout their lives. Firstly, a connection to the natural world via the maintenance of a garden or the use of herbal remedies allows us to be reminded of our innate belonging to the earth. Second, embodied practices such as dance, or immersion in places of rest, can allow us to reconnect with our own humanity, by emphasizing feelings of joy in our bodies, rather than ignoring our bodies in order to survive the world. Third, learning about one's family and ancestors is a way to learn about yourself, and to see how you are connected to others in ways one might forget in day-to-day life. Finally, caring for and about others, including non-human others, is a way for us to foster a sense of belonging. If we feed our relationships, those relationships will feed us. These

overall findings point to a practice of belonging that I believe can be a powerful tool in healing and empowering those of us who are impacted in various ways by the oppressive reality of colonialism and capitalism.

This project is important because I am using my personal journey to provide insight into the ways in which colonialism can structure our lives, our relations with our ancestors, and our traditions and cultures. The final goal of this project was to create an alternative space, where people of colour can bypass colonial barriers towards a feeling of a belonging. I aimed to create a space where cultural and traditional knowledge can be not only shared but prioritized over Western conceptions of healing and rationalism. Part of addressing this goal involved the recognition that certain spaces inherit racial hierarchies.[147] Especially in institutions such as universities, there is an underlying blueprint for the type of person the space is made for. Oftentimes people of colour become overtly aware of their out-of-place-ness in these institutional spaces, creating a sense of discomfort and impeding freedom of movement.[148] I wished to create a space with the goal of interrupting the limitations imposed by white-coded spaces, allowing other people of colour to feel a sense of ease and comfort, knowing the space was made for them and not to their exclusion. In forging connections back to culture, home, memory, and ancestry, I sought to create a sense of belonging and grounding for myself and others (tapping into a culture of place according to bell hooks), which may create a path toward healing colonial wounds.[149]

---

[147] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139.
[148] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 83.
[149] hooks, *Belonging*, 15-23.

Bibliography

Adams, Tony E, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. *Autoethnography*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Allen, Kelly-Ann, Margaret L. Kern, Christopher S. Rozek, Dennis M. McInerney, and George M. Slavich. 2021. "Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research." *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73 (1): 87–102. doi:10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

Alston, David. "The Guyana Maroons, 1796–1834: Persistent and Resilient until the End of Slavery." *Slavery & Abolition* 44, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 292–316. doi:10.1080/0144039X.2023.2165065.

Bailey, Alice and Maddie Bailey. *The Hidden Histories of Houseplants*. Hardie Grant Publishing, 2021.

Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie woman : The odyssey of indenture*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Black, Jeremy. *A Brief History of the Caribbean: Indispensable for Travellers*. Little Brown Book Group, 2021.

Blanding, Ruth A. *Herbal Medicine for Modern Life: Traditional Folk Rememdies for Everyday Health and Well-Being*. Zeitgeist, 2024.

Brackman, Barbara. *Facts & fabrications: unraveling the history of quilts & slavery*. C&T Publishing Inc, 2010.

Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Doubleday Canada, 2002.

Bruss KV, Seth P, Zhao G. “Loneliness, Lack of Social and Emotional Support, and Mental Health Issues,” United States, 2022. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep,* 2024;73:539–545.

Clement, Yuri. “Herbal Medicine Practices in the Caribbean.” In *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., edited by Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley. Routledge, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844502-6.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt9qh3cv.

De Barros, Juanita. ‘Setting things right’: Medicine and magic in British

Guiana, 1803–38 , Slavery & Abolition, 25:1 (2004), 28-50. DOI: 10.1080/0144039042000220919.

Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and ANGELA HARRIS. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition*. NYU Press, 2012. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg9h2.

du Toit, B.M. “Ethnomedical (Folk) Healing in the Caribbean.” In: Olmos, M.F., Paravisini-Gebert, L. (eds) *Healing Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. (2001). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-07647-2_2

Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.” In *Black Skin, White Masks,* translated by Charles Lam Markmann, 82-107. London: Pluto Press, 2008.

Federici, Silvia. *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*. Oakland: PM Press, 2018.

Fitzrandolph, Mavis. *Traditional Quilting-Its Story And Its Practice*. Read Books Ltd, 2013.

García-Moya, Irene and Antony Morgan, “The utility of salutogenesis for guiding health promotion: the case for young people's well-being,” *Health Promotion International*,

Volume 32, Issue 4, August 2017, Pages 723–733, https://doi-org.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/heapro/daw008

Ginwright, Shawn. "Hope, healing, and care." *Liberal Education* 97, no. 2 (2011): 34-39.

Gómez, Pablo F. *The Experiential Caribbean : Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic*. University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Henry, Frances, and Dwaine Plaza. *Carnival Is Woman : Feminism and Performance in Caribbean Mas*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020. pp 3-20.

hooks, bell. *Belonging : A Culture of Place*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008. Accessed April 5, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Kumar, Ashutosh. *Coolies of the Empire : Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Mackean T, Shakespeare M, Fisher M. Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Theories of Wellbeing and Their Suitability for Wellbeing Policy. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2022 Sep 16;19(18):11693. doi: 10.3390/ijerph191811693. PMID: 36141961; PMCID: PMC9517457.

Mazzi, Angela. “Toward a Unified Language (and Application) of Salutogenic Design: An Opinion Paper.” *HERD* 14, no. 2 (2021): 337–49. doi:10.1177/1937586720967347.

McMillan, Michael. “The West Indian Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon.” *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 13, no. 1 (2009): 135–156.

McNeal, Keith E, Kumar Mahabir, and Paul Younger. “Hindu Healing Traditions in the Southern Caribbean: History and Praxis.” In *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., edited by Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley. Routledge, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844502-18.

Meghji, Ali. "Towards a Theoretical Synergy: Critical Race Theory and Decolonial Thought in Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain." *Current Sociology* 70, no.5 (2020): 647–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120969764.

Meyers, Allan D. "West African Tradition in the Decoration of Colonial Jamaican Folk Pottery." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 3, no. 4 (1999): 201–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20852936.

Morgen, Sandra, William H Chafe, Beverly Jones, Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, Karen Sacks, Carol B Stack, and Elsa Barkley Brown. "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 921–929. doi:10.1086/494553.

Morrison, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. United States: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Payne-Jackson, Arvilla. "Caribbean Traditional Medicine: Legacy from the Past, Hope for the Future." In *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., edited by Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley. Routledge, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844502-5.

Peretz, J. J. "Komfa Work: Ritualizing Racecraft and Nation in Guyana's Spiritualist Faiths." PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020. ProQuest ID: Peretz_ucla_0031D_19185. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5dv6zmn. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qv9s45r

Peters, Terri, and Stephen Verderber. "Territories of Engagement in the Design of Ecohumanist Healthcare Environments." *HERD* (Los Angeles, CA) 10, no. 2 (2017): 104–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1937586716668635.

Roberts, Justin. “Working between the Lines: Labour and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations, 1796-97.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2006): 551–86. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3877375.

Sue-A-Quan, Trev. *Cane Reapers : Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana* (2nd ed.). Vancouver: Cane Press, 2003.

Sutherland, Patsy, Roy Moodley, and Barry Chevannes. “Introduction.” In *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., edited by Barry Chevannes, Roy Moodley, and Patsy Sutherland. Routledge, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844502-1.

Sutherland, Patsy. “The History, Philosophy, and Transformation of Caribbean Healing Traditions.” In *Caribbean Healing Traditions*, 1st ed., edited by Patsy Sutherland, Barry Chevannes, and Roy Moodley. Routledge, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844502-3.

Sutherland, Patsy. “Cultural Constructions of Trauma and the Therapeutic Interventions of Caribbean Healing Traditions.” PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2017.

Wilson, Lisa. “Dancing Back to the Motherland.” *Dance Chronicle* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 76–95. doi:10.1080/01472526.2024.2443709.

Witzling, Mara. “Quilt Language: Towards a Poetics of Quilting.” *Women’s History Review* 18, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 619–37. doi:10.1080/09612020903138351.