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Healing Justice Spaces: Virtual Intersections of Religion, Environmentalism, and Social Justice

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What is Healing Justice?

Healing justice is a term and movement created by queer and trans people of color which combats the burnout and ableism in social justice work. It was created in response to the lack of access to quality healing services and health care for oppressed peoples and centers the decolonial modalities of healing used by oppressed communities.

“If it’s not centering Black / Indigenous / people of colour (BIPOC) healers, it’s not healing justice. If it’s not affordable, it’s not healing justice.” – Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Writer and Healer



Illustration for DPN Artist Relief Fund event, posted on DPN’s Facebook on April 20th, 2020.

Healing justice holistically intervenes on intergenerational trauma and violence by providing individual and collective care in the forms of counseling, reiki, acupuncture, yoga, plant medicine, somatics, and many other practices. It pushes back against the co-opting and capitalizing of Black and Indigenous healing practices to exclude the communities they were originally created to serve.

The Program

DPN is a Los Angeles-based grassroots organization founded in 2012 by Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors that fights for the dignity and power for all incarcerated people and their families. Their health and wellness program provides healing justice through both rapid response work and ongoing Wellness Clinics free of charge from a cohort of healers. My work with them included:

- Outreaching for wellness events,
- editing video content for 2021 retreat,
- participant observing family meetings,
- building community connections



“REIMAGINE” Speech and illustration of Patrisse Cullors, posted on DPN’s Facebook on July 12th, 2021.

Digital Connections

Healing Justice operates in digital spaces such as meeting platforms like Zoom as a result of COVID-19 and on social media like Instagram and Facebook predating the pandemic. During the pandemic, all DPN health and wellness work moved online, including all outreach events and monthly zoom family meetings for individuals impacted by incarceration and state violence.

Positionality

“Numbing is the primary shame coping strategy that I and other white people have inherited from our ancestors. It is a coping strategy with a serious side effect—it destroys empathy, and prevents us from noticing and responding to injustice.” – Varissar Tarakali, Somatic Educator

My experience doing ethnographic research and intern work with DPN required me to listen to and sit with the discomfort of devastating experiences of trauma and violence. And while the healings I observed and resources DPN provided to community members were powerful, pain and grief were still palpable in every space without a clear solution or quick fix. I came to see my role in these spaces in the words that Professor Greta Austin shared with me, that “we are here to bear witness.” The power of these digital healing spaces extends beyond interpersonal healing of community members to a broader reckoning when individuals are given the space to share their stories and others outside their immediate community deeply listen and hold their pain and grief with them, recognizing that our shared humanity means that we are not separate from each other.

Question

How do themes of environmentalism, religion, and social justice connect in DPN’s Health and Wellness Program?

Thesis

Digital healing justice spaces are a means to an end for promoting healing in the lives of people impacted by systems of oppression. Created due to the inability to gather in person, work within these spaces facilitates connection to nature, spirituality, and activism in the non-digital lives of the individuals who participate. Work within these spaces allows individuals to claim their stories, develop sovereignty over the bodies, and empower their communities.



(Above) Illustration from transformharm.org article on centering healing justice in wellness, original article posted on August 19th, 2020. (Left) Poster from DPN virtual healing event, posted on DPN’s Facebook on July 22nd, 2020.

Method

From June through August 2021, I worked with DPN conducting ethnographic research and as their health and wellness program intern, specifically focusing on outreach for monthly family meetings. Participant observation was my chosen form of research and was based on the principle of listening deeply and bearing witness. The spaces I was allowed to be a part of, all on zoom, were created with the intention of giving space and solace to community members to share their trauma and be supported through various healing modalities. I witnessed the power of debriefing, listening, validating, and sitting with discomfort. This power emanates outward: giving space interpersonally leads to giving space to a community, for a movement, for radical social and political change.

“Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and transplanting the knowledge of other beings.” – Robin Wall Kimmerer, Indigenous Botanist and Writer

“My body is made of stars and dirt and the blood of my ancestors and the breaths of all the people who have been here before me and the green exhale of the trees. How can I possibly think my pain and my joy is mine alone?” – Dori Midnight, Healer

Acknowledgments

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Interconnected Pillars of Research:

Environmentalism

Nature is a central aspect of healing justice in which an individual grounds and connects to the healing properties of nature around them. This can take the form of plant medicine such as creating and consuming teas and tinctures with plants local to one’s area and with meaning to their culture and heritage. DPN healer Thanh Mai created a video on plant medicine for grief and stress which was posted on DPN’s Instagram and Facebook. Mai connects with viewers in this digital space to share indigenous plant knowledge and inspire community members to do what they can with what they have around them. Mai’s work is deeply empowering, giving the community tangible skills to develop sovereignty over their bodies and reclaim their connection to nature. DPN’s health and wellness program exemplifies Nepantla Environmentalism which invokes Indigenous cosmologies of nature as kin and ethics of living lightly on the earth.

“Nepantla is a decolonial formation in which attitudes and behaviors have positive ecological outcomes though without necessarily having the concern of a separate entity of the “environment.” – Amanda Baugh, Author of *Nepantla Environmentalism*



Wellness Wednesday video created by healer Thanh Mai titled “Plant Medicine for Grief and Stress” posted on DPN’s Instagram on July 7th, 2021.

Religion

Healing Justice includes a multitude of spiritual and religious practices from different cultures. One spiritual tradition in particular, Ifá, is a Yoruba faith and divination system practiced by Patrisse Cullors (founder of DPN) and Leah Penniman author of *Farming While Black*. Both Patrisse and Leah are ordained Ifá practitioners. Leah is a farmer and food sovereignty activist who connects food and healing justice to spiritual connection to the land and an embrace of Afro-Indigenous religious traditions and practices. In the virtual healing justice spaces of the DPN family meetings, facilitators began by grounding participants in spiritual connection to nature with roots in Afro-Indigenous practices and beliefs.



The centrality of non-dominant religious practices allows community members to reclaim spiritual traditions which are demonized, such as Ifá, in efforts to own their stories and make sense of their trauma and healing.

Ifá divination practice used at Leah Penniman’s Soul Fire Farm to ask permission of the land, image in article by Leah Penniman posted on February 16th, 2021.

Social Justice

The Health and Wellness program at DPN exists directly to combat the martyr mentality and burnout in activists as well as provide healing support for community members experiencing trauma. Michele Infante, Senior Campaign Lead at DPN and founder of the monthly family meetings discussed how when it comes to police violence and incarceration, the families have to be their own investigators because no one will help them figure out what happened to their loved ones. By getting involved in coalitions which support them through their grief, family members narrate their own story, may be able to shift pain and suffering, and have a platform for liberation work. A key aspect of helping them move through their trauma is to guide them to participation in work for social and political change.