Rashni Stanford and Mel Brown

CULTIVATING WELLNESS IN BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS

Establishing Philadelphia's Deep Space Mind 215 Cooperative

Disability Studies

Collection Editor
DAMIAN MELLIFONT

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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Abstract

Cultivating Wellness In Black Neighborhoods: Establishing Philadelphia's Deep Space Mind 215 Cooperative is a collection of experiences and emerging practices and frameworks in neighborhood mental health and Black care work as developed by members of Deep Space Mind 215 Co-operative, alongside neighbors who work in partnership with DSM215 in the city of Philadelphia. Deep Space Mind 215 was formed in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, during the political unrest following the wake of racialized, ableist police violence both locally and nationally, when many fissures, hypocrisies, and meltdowns in all sectors of the care, social service, and healthcare industries were laid bare. It is against this backdrop that *Cultivating Wellness in Black Neighborhoods* documents and contextualizes the collective's work. This book collects personal accounts of mental health recovery journeys, institutionalization, and survivorship; emerging grassroots practice and praxis development informed by DSM215's first community projects, afrofuturism, and disability justice; archival material from local partnerships; and interviews with neighbors who have collaborated with DSM215 to build collaborative spaces for wellness, community care, and self-determination. The collection reminds readers, students, care workers and mental health professionals, and survivors of institutional systems that those living with mental health challenges have the capacity to bring humanizing care to local neighborhoods, and that local wisdom in the form of peership, survivorship, and Black and Indigenous ancestral traditions are indispensable assets in the work to increase wellness and joy in Black communities.

Keywords

Lived experience, invisible illness, community mental health, mental health harm reduction, misogynoir, complex trauma, state-sanctioned violence, mad afrofuturisms, Black healing experiences, ancestral healing, disability justice

Contents

Content warning

In this book, we discuss our lived experiences of navigating psychosis and the Western psychiatric industrial complex which includes the following difficult or triggering content dealing with themes of

- family violence, death;
- suicide, sucidality;
- personal accounts of self-harm, substance abuse, psychosis;
- ableism and white supremacy culture, misogynoir;
- psychiatric industrial complex, detainment, institutionalization;
- child sexual abuse, sexual violence;
- criminal and juvenile legal systems, detention, incarceration.

We made our best attempt to warn readers before subsequent chapters that address the aforementioned themes. Please do what is necessary to have emotional safety and care while continuing. If you or anyone you know is struggling with suicidality, please call 988, or for more resources, specifically LGBTQIA+, visit https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/.

Learning objectives

1. Defining key terms and integrating real-life accounts related to the Western medical industrial complex.
2. Understanding the long-term effects of complex trauma in Black communities beyond the dichotomy of micro- versus macro- frameworks.
3. Understanding the significant impact of community wellness as a means of mental health harm reduction.
4. Understanding of real-life examples of community-led resilience and self-determination.
5. Capacity to provide examples of how madness leads to new approaches and methodologies for community healing.

Foreword

Rasheedah Philips

We all have that one secret we haven't told our parents—the one thing that, if they knew, would shatter their world. Maybe they've discovered it and chosen to ignore it, or perhaps they've been waiting for you to reveal it. It's also possible that they remain blissfully unaware, forever innocent. But is your secret a black hole or a white hole? Is it a simple yes, no, or maybe? Is it like the shake of a magic 8-ball or the shuffle of a fortune teller's deck, revealing glimpses of fate as a game of chance?

Fate, it seems, is always just beyond our grasp. It is like a hand drawing itself, an eye that cannot see itself unless it looks in the mirror—and even then, it's not a true reflection but a reversal, an inside-out view of the self along the z-axis. This disorienting perspective allows us to get lost or even switch selves with another world. Perhaps this is how I ended up here—maybe I tumbled out of a mirror, as I had always stared into the second-floor bathroom mirror as a child. The small, silver-framed mirror would captivate me for minutes on end until I no longer recognized myself, until I stood on the brink of sanity, feeling almost, almost gone. But did I truly go somewhere? Maybe. I felt strange all the time, but when did that strangeness begin? I recall feeling relatively normal until I was around six when I was first touched by someone I knew. We were watching TV after my Grandmom and his dad had fallen asleep. He was a few years older than me, and the

TV was just gray squiggly lines on Channel 7 until, at around 2 a.m., the commercials for 900 hotlines began.

From a young age, I struggled with depression, long before I had the language for it or understood that I had been a victim of sexual violence. My first "real" suicide attempt occurred nearly a decade later. My boyfriend at the time, who was with me when I locked myself in the bathroom and took a handful of pills, took care of the baby and called the ambulance, and I ended up in a hospital bed, drinking a cup full of charcoal. That day opened several paths for me, like the mirror world I had stumbled into a decade earlier. There were worlds and possibilities beyond the immediate reality of my existence, and I made the choice to get better, to live, to follow the unexpected path.

Part of the reason why cycles of poverty and trauma perpetuate and repeat is because the stories behind the statistics are rendered invisible, go unacknowledged, or are manipulated to suit particular agendas. When our stories and our truths go untold and unshared, the cycles of trauma are bound to repeat, with no space or time given to evaluate one's journey and shift course. Understanding how trauma and post-traumatic stress can connect or disconnect us from our pasts, and the ways in which human behavior, in the aggregate, can influence an entire community or city, or how historical events, such as slavery or war, transform our communities in such a way that it displaces us completely from those events and their sources. We not only see ourselves reflected in these stories; we see our mothers and our fathers, our sisters and our brothers, our neighbors and our friends. That means that the work of healing extends beyond the

individual to begin to reverse the vicious and destructive cycles that our communities have fallen into due to institutions which systematically deny the right to life, liberty, justice, shelter, service, and good health.

Black madness, and the accompanying states of Black mental wholeness and expression, are essential to both Afrofuturism and the broader project of Black survival. Afrofuturism harnesses the radical imagination to envision futures where Black people are liberated from systemic oppression. Black madness, as a response to and product of these systemic pressures, acts as a catalyst for creative expression and innovation, pushing us to reimagine reality and explore possibilities that extend beyond the limitations of the present. Scholars like Therí A. Pickens have examined how Black neurodiversities challenge conventional temporal frameworks, offering a perspective that disrupts linear time and opens up spaces for radical hope and the wild imagination of new realities (Pickens, 2019). This is not merely a theoretical exercise but a lived experience that transforms how we understand and engage with time.

In my personal journey, depression and anxiety have often manifested as a dread of the linear future—a fear that events would unfold in their worst possible form. This fear stems from a traditional view of time as a straightforward progression from cause to effect, where the future is a mere extension of the present. Yet, as I delved into time, community, and quantum physics over the years, I came to recognize the limitations of this linear perspective. Black madness, with its unique temporalities and spatialities, offers an alternative. It disrupts the linear flow of time and

transforms predetermined outcomes into a realm of potential possibilities.

This transformative potential aligns with Black Quantum Futurism, a theory and practice that envisions time not as a rigid continuum but as a dynamic, fluid entity shaped by the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. In the spirit of quantum mechanics, where particles exist in multiple states and outcomes are probabilistic rather than deterministic, Black madness offers a quantum-like understanding of time. It reveals that the future is not a predetermined path but a landscape of infinite possibilities, shaped by our collective imagination and radical hope.

The insights of Black madness scholars such as Sami Schalk further illuminate this perspective. Schalk explores how Black neurodiversities and disability provide a lens to see beyond the constraints of linear time, creating spaces for new, liberating temporal experiences (Schalk, 2018). These experiences are not confined by the oppressive structures that seek to limit Black existence but offer a vision for transformative change.

Embracing Black madness allows us to tap into a deep well of radical hope and imagination, enabling us to envision and strive for new realities that transcend the limitations of the present while embracing a vision of the future that is expansive and inclusive of diverse Black experiences. Black madness, therefore, is not merely a condition to be managed but a source of profound temporal agency and creative potential. This perspective not only challenges the status quo but also offers a visionary framework for creating just and equitable realities for Black communities.

#

The extreme fringes of life, characterized by instability and the fragility of sanity, serve as spaces of not only immense pressure but also incredible innovation. Historically, Black people have had to innovate to survive, creating new cultural, social, and technological practices in response to systemic oppression. These innovations often arise from the necessity of navigating and resisting these oppressive structures. The experiences of Black madness act as a bridge to other realities, offering insights and knowledge that enhance and transform our current reality. The concept of moving between different states of being and knowing resonates with Afrofuturist modes of time travel, alternate dimensions, and speculative futures.

The survival of Black communities hinges on resilience and adaptability. Exploring Black madness and mental wholeness reveals how Black people have resisted and adapted to oppressive systems, creating resilient communities that endure and evolve. Understanding Black madness as a form of temporal and creative agency allows us to challenge the pathologization of Black experiences and reframe them as sources of power and innovation. This shift empowers us to define our own narratives and envision new futures.

Being on the extreme fringes of life positions Black people at the edge of space and time, where conventional boundaries blur and new possibilities emerge. This liminal space is fertile ground for Black creative and futurist thought, which seeks to transcend current limitations and imagine collective futures where Black people are thriving. Within these fringes, innovation occurs,

breaking through to other realities and bringing back transformative ways of being, existing, and knowing. Within these fringes, we are affirmed that Black madness is not an aberration but a profound expression of resistance and resilience. It embodies the capacity to imagine and create new worlds, where Black people are free from systemic oppression haunting our futures and able to thrive in our full humanity. Embracing Black madness as a source of temporal and creative power is essential for envisioning and building these new futures.

The path to change and healing is not an easy one, for it requires collaboration and a dismantling of deep-rooted cycles of trauma. It is a journey that encompasses all levels of existence—from the particle level to the whole self to the communal to the global to the universal. We cannot make this journey alone. Telling our stories and speaking our truths allow us to practically explore the ways in which our collective and personal pasts continue to affect us and share sustainable solutions to breaking cycles of trauma. This book contains the truth, words, hopes, dreams, lessons, experiences, wisdom, and stories of those who are best positioned to speak on it and identify the solutions.

Introduction

This book outlines the early years of Deep Space Mind 215 Co-operative and its projects in the city of Philadelphia concerning the humanization and inclusion of those with lived experience of mental health challenges, neurodiversities, and confinement in institutions in local leadership around community care and health innovation. DSM215 has utilized a variety of community interventions to connect with and continue ongoing dialogue and shared action with neighbors, including afrofuturism, art-based interventions, restorative circle practice, psychoeducation, and peer support.

We will lead you through our lived experiences as long-time mental health and social service workers, community organizers, and survivors of institutionalization and psychiatric experiences. This will serve as the foundation from which DSM215 co-founders Rashni Stanford and Mel Brown bring you our frameworks toward Black disability justice, Mad pride, and centering peership and lived experience while building care alternatives to carceral systems in Black communities.

Next, we will discuss DSM215's recent historical context and emerging frameworks and solutions around Black mental health, community care, and a radical reimagining of what community mental health looks like for those who have seen how

institutional systems tear Black communities apart, rather than restore safety and humanity.

Then we will hear from our neighbor's voices and the experiences that have colored our collaborative work, as well as how DSM215's way of working has begun impacting our local network.

Lastly, we share with you our Syllabus and Archive, including exercises from our workshops, archival materials from our partnerships, and resources for collective care.

We have included discussion questions with each chapter, meant to challenge the reader to look for ways to apply tenets of centering lived experience, local history, and destigmatizing madness and radical imagination in service of real life, effective and humanizing care for those suffering from mental health challenges.

#

Thank you to our community: DSM215 Autumn 2024

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We at DSM215 acknowledge and recognize all of the Philadelphians, all the young people, elders, children, all of the animals, spirits, and ancestors—all the madness, creativity, and imagination. Thank you for the struggle, the mess, and the not-so-salient successes. And thank you for the belly laughs, shared joy, and shared grief.

We are grateful for the young people at YASP who shared their sorrow with us on the morning of a fallen comrade's funeral. And

those who celebrated birthdays and low days at our workshops and training. We are grateful for the jams, jellies, and tinctures our neighbors made and shared with us, and for the kindness and warmth bestowed upon us by our elders at Pentridge Children's Garden. We thank the groundhogs, cats, hummingbirds, catbirds, and cardinals. We thank the porgy of the Delaware Bay and the jellyfish of the Chesapeake. We thank the black squirrels of Detroit that dart around Mama Myrtle's mushrooms at Freedom Freedom Farm. We thank French for growing with us.

Thank you to the space for radical imagination provided by comrades at Black Quantum Futurist Collective, Community Futures Lab, Black Womxn's Time Camp, and Metropolarity. For Joshua Glenn of Youth Art & Self Empowerment project, Sul'Yah Williams, Jimmy Mao, Chynna Rogers, Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells, and the beloved gardeners of Pentridge Children's Garden.

Neighborhood partners:

- Creative Resilience Youth [CRY]
- Young Artist Program [YAP]
- Youth Art and Self-Empowerment Project [YASP]
- Philly Homes 4 Youth Coalition
- UrbEd
- PhillyCam
- Eddie's House
- The Philadelphia Rent Control Coalition
- Hook and Loop
- Restorative Cities Initiative
- The Dynamic Justice Collective
- Metropolitan Christian Council of Philadelphia

- House of Umoja
- Neighbors/communities of people (e.g., consumers and workers within local systems, those with lived experience of foster care, homelessness, mental health, etc.)

Green Space Partners:

- Gente de Tierra Collective
- Join Heinz Wildlife Center
- Urban Creators
- One Art Community Center

Press Partners:

- Lived Places Publishing
- Resolve Philly
- The Appeal

National:

- National Council of Elders
- Feedom Freedom Farm Detroit
- PolicyLink
- Afrofuture Youth

Institutional supporters:

- Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance
- Villanova Legal Clinic

1
Experiences

In this chapter DSM215 co-founders present lived experience of mental health challenges, including but not limited to intergenerational struggle with suicidality, interpersonal struggle, the effects of racial capitalism, chronic subjugation of Black people's time and labor. CW: Suicidality, intergenerational trauma, sexual violence, institutional violence, C-PTSD

#

A personal account of suicidality and time subjugation - Mel Brown

This is dedicated to loved ones who've transitioned to another space-time on their own terms. I love and cherish all that you had to give, suffered through, in transition to the other side of "things." This chapter is hard for me to write but I'm gonna make my best attempt to explain the thresholds of my body, time, psychosis, and my flirtations with the great abyss that is death, which we all must face alone.

For those who stare into the sun

My mother was in marital bliss, which would take me and my youngest older brother from a western coastal shoreside of the

Bay Area to a vast landlocked place called Saint Louis, Missouri. I was in the third grade and joined my peers late in the year, and I remember being excited about snow. Later that year, there was a total lunar eclipse. As a class we covered the basics, the transition of the moon, made our pinhole eye glasses, but for whatever reason I chose to stare into the sun. After being told many tall tales of the hazards of doing so, I insisted on experiencing it for myself. I was curious about many things at a young age, with the understanding that there was more to things, often searching for elsewhere, another place, or maybe somewhere beyond the tears of my mother, and her mother, and her mother (fades out).

I am named after my grandmother, who I never met. Her name was Elizabeth. I learned more about her in depth when I was pregnant at 19 with my first child. Heavy with birth, I asked my mother, "what was she like?," and "why was I named after her?" Comforting my questioning mind, laying beside me, my mother recited all the ways she witnessed her mother's beauty, poise, and how I so much resemble her. Elizabeth died unexpectedly, which was always referred to but never explicitly explained; her death was a mystery to me and my siblings. Heartbrokenly my grandmother took her life. I pictured my mother with soft skin, holding my eldest brother to her breast, at her mother's funeral asking myself, "Was she relieved that she didn't have to care for her mother's grief any longer?" Wondering if my grandmother also stared into the abyss? Forever changed, misunderstood?

Having grown up in the church, my obsession with heaven and hell at an early age forced me to excel in memorizing my bible verses, holding on tight to the warnings of being a bad person wishing "if only I could be good." Thinking the only way to be

good was through suffering like the character Job from the Old Testament because everyone who was righteous had a "cross" to bear, which was just a biblical way of saying that everyone had their own individualized suffering they had to do in this lifetime. This life was your own personal hell, and no, you can't skip ahead by your own hand or you go to eternal hell and that was forever. My mental health began to fail in a new way by the time I was in junior high. Overwhelmed and worried, when I should've been a carefree preteen, I remember the walls of my bedroom, the stiffness of my small body, being perceived as too much, with breasts that developed too fast. I wanted so badly to escape my body and the suicidal ideation came and never left.

I'm in college, organizing other women, protesting police violence in the Shaw neighborhood of Saint Louis in the early 2000s, fervently reading radical Black feminist prose when I reach Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who've Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. I was comforted once again with words describing myself, but this time Ntozake. She comforted me, reminding me that this so-called reality, or place, was never meant to hold the first version of queer, described as other than, or Black femme (Shange, 1997).

Time subjugation madness

My pathology relieves me of a certain type of fixed time or the kind of time that muscle memory relies on for its retention. Monotonous time, like how long it takes for you to walk to school every morning, or get to the bus stop from your stoop, it's the kind of time that's the same every time. But for me, there's a faintness that's between here (real time) and some other time. I slip

often between the two, where there's no distinction of beginning or end. My brain is busted, with no first memory, my memories forever to be in a flux that my body struggles to keep up with. In my time of being in that "other place," or institutionalized, the stillness of time is what I remember.

When memory is brittle and slippery, I sometimes go somewhere, or maybe in between, but we've heard that before. The periphery or the upside down, the sunken place. I am here but absent from now. The temporal space, somewhere in between, requires a stretching of place. How can I be here and there without overextending the limits of my body, or "spirit." We know that under systems of violent status quo, or white hegemony, being in two places at once is a disservice to productivity because those subjugated should remain tethered to (real-time) production.

I oscillate between time dysfunction and being time poor.

Poor people live in a linear dichotomy of time.

Poor people die slow deaths, waiting for the money to come, living check to check, living the repetitive 9 to 5 time.

Poor people die fast deaths when tricking time, insert lessons of quick money, and early deaths.

The only way out is through, in this case, a lie.

I've been making my best attempt to write this email for a few weeks. I understand why, I've come to the conclusion that when one's dreams are directly opposed to the reality of resources there's an undeniable stopgap. I ask myself often, how could I be so privileged to dream?

In my journal, I write,

> ….how could I imagine freedom while living in time captivity, of a geo-social-political landscape of terror?

Yet I am inspired to live and die with dignity, in these last days of late-stage capitalism. I recognize that this system ensures that I will die working, to live. When I think of radical time liberation, I think of the Igbo people in 1803 who marched into the sea chained together…. and how time stopped—on the shore of St. Simon's Island, they turned their backs to captivity, to a lifetime sentence of servitude[1].

I'm here, now, knowing our children will go to fight yet another war, just like our fathers, and their fathers. I am inconsolable, how could I hold tight to me what has never truly belonged to me? With no access to object permanence, or a future.

Furthermore, I write,

> No one is coming to save you. Not your father or brother, not the church man, or the earnest man, not the one who sings to you.

My interrogation of suicidality under generational ableist capitalism not only offers liberation in death but also serves as a warning for us to abolish the whelms of late-stage capitalism, while some of us are still "living."

#

Mad Black time cures for institutional trauma - Rashni Stanford

A Temporal Study of Institutional Trauma,

I remember the old Philly Family Court Building, with the marble columns, the 30-minute security check-in, and the grand

holding pen for families, workers, and hungover child advocates. We'd all take turns on the wall charger, sitting on the dirty squeaking floors. The children, dancing, crying, running back and forth, screaming—their voices used to bounce across all that stone, reverberating up into the high roof while we all waited for our cases to get called.

Ten years ago, the city built a new Family Court. It's all glass and looks like an airport, and families don't crowd in through its doors and wait in a giant room like cattle or chattel anymore. There are televisions now that stream PBSKids for the children to watch. The waiting hasn't changed. I have known this child for four years out of the seven that he has been on this earth.

In his fifth year, he made his first court appearance alongside me, and I watched him sink into the inexplicable waiting that comes with court time—a unique temporal experience I once thought myself to be accustomed to, and seasoned in as a product of the many machines that whirr on for this country's poorest, most inconvenient families, youth, and individuals.

This was not this child's first experience with waiting, whether for visitation, or for the city-wide daycare subsidy to come through, or for a COVID-lockdown to expire. It was not his first experience with the chaotic and unpredictable machinations of adult relationships, and the hard truths of foster care, racialized care, disability, class, generational trauma, a global pandemic. When he first came to me at three years old, he only had a few words, and I went frantic with setting up evaluations, medical appointments, childcare, and wrap-around services. And the machine reminded us both to wait. There can be no urgency

in the care of a Black child. Prevention and proactivity are privileges reserved for other children.

We had to wait for the paperwork to come in with all the insurance cards and eligibility verifications, and we waited with each other, like, "Well, I guess we gotta wait til we know each other now too." And while we waited for the machine, we got on with that impossible work of care and domesticity, impossible to do in such liminal temporalities as those that come with being case-managed and court-ordered. Sitting next to him in Family Court, watching his feet kick, and hearing his fruitless questions of *Are we done yet? Can we go home?*, I become aware of another five year old I know, who sits on the other side of me, invisible to most, but the child looks just like me and shares my name. By five years old, 2700 miles away in Los Angeles County, California, I had already sat through institutional time. Throughout preschool and kindergarten, I haunted the waiting rooms of lockdown juvenile behavioral health institutions where my older brother was held. I endured my brother's lengthy evaluations by eating the good hospital cookies, drinking the hot chocolate, and generally fawning at the frontline and administrative staff, who marveled at how I could occupy myself for the four hours needed to complete these assessments. But as I entered kindergarten, my brother managed to enter a free fall deeper into the maturing—and increasingly lucrative—juvenile detention system. In the 1990s, juvenile detention facilities in Southern California were bursting with children, especially Black and brown boys, and from 1990 to the early 2000s, juvenile facilities, boot camps, and other institutions meant to habilitate wayward adolescents having the highest populations in history, with Los

Padrinos juvenile detention center holding over 700 youth in 1990 when it was originally built to house 400 (Jovenes[cr1] Inc., 2023).

At five or six years old, I experienced my first juvenile criminal court hearing at the one-stop shop of juvenile detention proceedings, Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall, defunct as of 2019. I sat rigid next to my father while the attendees were read out loud. I remained still so that I could be invisible and continue being allowed to witness, be present, and attached to my father, who had no childcare that day, and so brought me to his only remaining minor son's criminal hearing.

I had fallen asleep to *Night Court* and *Judge Judy*. The court room wasn't unfamiliar, but I remember being shuffled into a wood-paneled room, not unlike church or some sort of auditorium, dissociating through the drone of grownup pomp and circumstance. The carpets I remember are still covered with dust, but I may be misremembering.

There's a memory of our shoes squeaking on the shiny floors—I may be mixing this up with the marble of the old Philly Family Court, or maybe the disinfected terrazzo in the art deco lobbies of one of the psychiatric hospitals that held and fed my mother for weeks and months at a time, while my father and me waited at home. Or maybe the polished concrete of the community clinic where my dad and I stood in line for hours waiting with dozens of other Californians for low-cost antibiotics, or a free round of childhood immunizations.

Now I am 35 again, and a week after the family court hearing, I'm back on the auction block shuffling into the overflow room