Dear Workshop Participants,

First things first: heartfelt thanks for reading my paper!

What follows is a draft of the first half of my dissertation's second chapter. This dissertation, provisionally titled "We Don't Breathe Alone: Relationality and Form in Anglo-America, 1970s to Today," explores breathing as a foremost concept for relationality and encounter in an experimental literature that deals with ecological and political crises. The first chapter argues that a consciousness of breathing in experimental life writing by Dodie Bellamy, CA Conrad, and Bob Flanagan mobilizes the tension between receptivity and agency at the heart of New Age in the service of a therapeutic mode of self-encounter that I term "aesthetic self-medication." The third chapter, which currently only exists as a scraggy conference paper, turns to queer, African-American speculative fiction by Samuel Delany and Renee Gladman to provide a model of breathing as that which marks the limits of what we can know about the people with whom we share the air. The fourth chapter, which at this point is barely visible on the horizon, tracks the strange emergence of a subject of intention and action in the discourses of the last breath featured in long-form, empirical documentaries by Frederick Wiseman and Allan King.

The half-chapter below links the prevalence of respiratory tropes in feminist writing to the inextricability of attunement and aggression in feminist groupwork. Specifically, I suggest that breathing models relations and collectivities without doing away with the alienation or falling out without which political groups would hardly qualify as feminist. Following this excerpt, I plan to extrapolate from Toni Cade Bambara's allusions to both nuclear toxicity and the family form to scale up and scale down my account of feminist breathing. My object, here, will be Linda Hogan's Chickasaw, ecofeminist poetry, which imagines an isomorphism between the first breath of Hogan's daughter and planetary breathing. This chapter's coda will depart from the matters of spatiality at play in Bambara and Hogan's iterations of feminist breathing to focus on the temporality of compulsion that orchestrates a brutal feminist coalition in Maggie Nelson's *Jane*.

I'm open to any and all feedback, so I'm going to refrain from submitting preliminary questions. Still, I should mention that if I sound like I'm mixing literal and metaphorical references to breathing, it's because I'm doing just that! In the introduction of the dissertation, I plan to address and historicize how breathing magnifies the co-constitutive nature of organic and aesthetic form.

Once again: many thanks! I look forward to seeing you at the workshop.

Jean-Thomas

Jean-Thomas Tremblay

Chapter Two
Political Breathing: Somatics of Feminist Coalition

Feminists working since the 1970s have mobilized the material reality and figure of breathing in their meditations on enlivening and harmful aspects of feminist advocacy through time and across standpoints and identities. Feminists need a breath of fresh air. They've been waiting to exhale.[1] "Man-made obstacles" have kept them from breathing freely.[2] They've been dealing with more than their fair share of mouth breathers. Respiratory tropes saturate feminist writing; the archive I study in this chapter makes this clear. But how do membership in and exclusion from feminist relations and collectivities come to be felt and expressed as breathing matters? Conversely, what does breathing teach us about the terms and conditions under which feminists assemble in solidarity—or not? I argue, in this chapter, that respiratory tropes enable feminist writers to consciously or nonconsciously model relations and collectivities that aren't premised on an ideological consensus. Put differently, breathing together, breathing in sync, and related forms of breathing model attunement without doing away with the possibility of aggression, antagonism, disagreement, and conflict—a possibility without which feminism would hardly qualify as, well, feminism.

Beyond feminism lies airlessness, Shulamith Firestone teaches us in her largely autobiographical short story collection, *Airless Spaces*.[3] The title of Firestone's book, the only one she published after *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, refers to the sites, including the mental hospitals, where she ended up as she found herself unable to sustain the

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[1] This phrasing is a nod to Terry McMillan's ambivalently feminist bestseller, *Waiting to Exhale* (New York: Viking, 1992), which was turned into a film in 1995.
[2] Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 17.
[3] Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 1998).

fiery, radical activism for which she had been known in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[4] Holding *Airless Spaces*, Sianne Ngai writes, feels "like holding a representation of the lost history (and equally lost present and future) of a feminist activist and intellectual."[5] Throughout *Airless Spaces*, Firestone appears to be, in Kathi Weeks' words, "no longer an agent, or by this point even a subject, of feminist history."[6] "So crushed by the burdens of the present," she cannot bear the label of feminist, let alone imagine feminist futurity.[7] The airlessness of life beyond feminism isn't, for Firestone, strictly a metaphor. In the story, "I Remember Valerie," for instance, Firestone foregrounds respiratory dysfunctions like "larynx trouble" and "bronchial pneumonia" to describe Valerie Solanas, another figure relegated to the margins of feminism after the publication of a groundbreaking text—the *SCUM Manifesto*, in her case.[8] Firestone and Solanas had a hard time breathing within the confines of organized feminism, but the airlessness they experienced outside of these confines proved even more debilitating.

Bernice Johnson Reagon and Cherríe Moraga, two feminists of color especially active around the time Firestone and Solanas opted out of organized advocacy and experienced airlessness, have described feminist coalition building as showing up for difficult breathing. For Reagon, the challenge awaiting feminist and Civil Rights activists in the last two decades of the

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[4] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). Much of Firestone's activism took place under the banner of the New York Radical Women, of which she was a founding member. See Shulamith Firestone, "The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View," in *Notes from the First Year*, 1968, box 8, Bob Flanagan Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

[5] Sianne Ngai, "Shulamith Firestone's *Airless Spaces*," *Arcade*, August 31, 2012, http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/shulamith-firestone%E2%80%99s-airless-spaces.

[6] Kathi Weeks, "The Vanishing *Dialectic*: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (2015): 745.

[7] Ibid., 746.

[8] Firestone, *Airless Spaces*, 131-132; Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, [1967] 2013); Jennifer Latson, "This Is Why a Radical Playwright Shot Andy Warhol," *Time*, June 3, 2015, http://time.com/3901488/andy-warhol-valerie-solanas/.

twentieth century had to do with learning how to share limited air.[9] "Coalition work," she explains," is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be down in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do."[10] California's Yosemite National Forest, where Reagon delivered her address on the occasion of the 1981 West Coast Women's Music Festival, literalizes the danger and discomfort from which coalitions arise. The site's high altitude makes breathing hard, at least for some people:

> There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can't get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they're going to do when they can't think properly. I'm serious about that. There are probably some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain—and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you're staggering around, and that's what this workshop is about this morning.[11]

Reagon doesn't speculate as to whether white women or women of color have a harder time breathing in Yosemite. She simply suggests that embodied experience impacts the degree of strain involved in turning up for coalition building.

Cherríe Moraga, by contrast, posits that race overdetermines experiences of difficult breathing in feminism:

> I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, "race," the word, "color." The pauses keeping the voice breathless, the bodies taut, erect—unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.[12]

In Moraga's account, the bodies of all individuals who show up for feminist organizing—that of white women and that of women of color—are presumably "taut, erect," but for different

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[9] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 356.
[10] Ibid., 359.
[11] Ibid., 356.
[12] Cherríe Moraga, "Preface," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, second edition, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xv.

reasons. The white women's shrinking concurs with the felt awkwardness of formulating feminism as a common struggle that encompasses the realities of women of color. On the other hand, Moraga's own body feels tense and used because, as hinted by the title of the 1981 anthology she edited with Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, women of color disproportionally carry the weight of building coalitions. For Moraga, as for Reagon, difficult breathing indicates that activists have left their comfort zones, willingly or not. But neither of these writers reduces breathing to an emblem of feminist injury. Cathartic breathing—breathing deeply, laughing, moaning, crying—would serve as evidence of successful attunement.

Feminists writing in French display particular enthusiasm when it comes to breathing's cathartic potential. Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, for instance, write in their dictionary for female lovers that lesbians feel the shared joy of "bouffées d'amour"—deep breaths or bursts of love—in their throats and brachial plexuses.[13] Since the 1980s, breath and the air have provided the impetus for Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy. Repressing breath and the air, as Heideggerian phenomenology does, according to Irigaray, entails repressing the ethical interval of sexual difference—a "fluid density [that] leaves space for every growth," and a "matter that, not yet divided in itself, permits sharing."[14] Breath, for Wittig, Zeig, and Irigaray, delineates a terrain for exploring feminist valences of what we could call, based on Jean-Luc Nancy, "being

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[13] Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, *Brouillon pour un dictionaire des amantes* (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1976), 43.

[14] Luce Irigaray, *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 9-16; Luce Irigaray, *Être deux* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1997), 11; Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

In her study of breathing, Irigaray's otherwise quasi-mystical prose abandons all secular pretense. She writes in "The Age of Breath," trans. Katja van de Rakt, Staci Boeckman, and Luce Irigaray, in *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004), that the breath, the "the first autonomous gesture of a human living," stimulates a "passage from nature to grace" (165, 167). In the introduction to *Le Souffle des Femmes*, ed. Luce Irigaray (Paris: Action Catholique Générale Féminine, 1996), Irigaray presents breath as the site of an encounter between Western (i.e. Catholic) and Eastern (i.e. Buddhist and Hindu) spiritualities (9, 20).

singular plural:" a mode of being wherein individual essence is contingent on coexistence.[15]

Whereas Wittig, Zeig, and Irigaray's pleasurable, erotic breaths presume coexistence, other feminists, notably in the Anglo-American context that this dissertation investigates, emphasize the labor of engendering such a condition. The same anthologies that contain Reagon's address and Moraga's preface also feature tools for countering breathing asymmetries in the form of chants and poems to be sung or recited communally.[16] These scores, like the meditations created by Alexis Pauline Gumbs for the 2014 gathering of her Black Feminist Breathing Chorus, aim, among other things, to configure collectivities through the orchestration of breathing.[17] Elsewhere, Gumbs, oscillating between the one-on-one intimacy that interests Wittig, Zeig, and Irigaray and a group-based model of black feminist collectivity, associates breathing with intergenerational contact. In *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Subjectivity*, a hybrid of poetry and literary criticism, Gumbs engages with the prose of feminist and critical race theorist, Hortense Spillers.[18] Gumbs turns to Spillers to "find fresh air and breathe again," and to access a "sky so open" it "can't refuse the shape of our lungs."[19]

Elisabeth Subrin, too, devises an artistic strategy for reaching out to, and breathing with, a feminist figure from a previous generation. Her 1997 art film, *Shulie*, recreates, with Kim Soss

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[15] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), 48-50.

[16] See Donna Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xxi-xii; Akasha (Gloria) Hull, "Poem," in *Home Girls*, lix-lx; Toi Derricotte, "Hester's Song," in *Home Girls*, 8-9.

Verse is common in feminist anthologies. The Robin Morgan-edited *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1970), a key text for second-wave feminism, comprises such chants and poems as Susan Sutheim's "For Witches" and Marilyn Lowen Fletcher's "A Chant for My Sisters" (495, 497). Issue 17 of *Feminist Review* (1984), edited by Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar, is titled "Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives" and contains as many poems as it does essays and reviews.

[17] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "About," Black Feminist Breathing Chorus, date unknown, http://blackfeministbreathing.tumblr.com/about.

[18] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[19] Ibid., xv, 13.

in the title role, a 1967 documentary centering on Firestone's life as a student in painting at School of the Art Institute of Chicago.[20] Apart from an added opening montage of the mid-1990s postindustrial landscape of Chicago's Near West Side, Subrin's *Shulie* meticulously reproduces each frame of the original documentary. Or so we are told: at Firestone's request, the 1967 version was never distributed. Shulie's political idiom in Subrin's film is, as Elizabeth Freeman points out, resolutely anticommunal. Shulie "[feels] not very contemporary," alienated from a generation, the Now generation, which is "hip" and "[lives] in the now."[21] Yet, the reshoot, specifically Soss' practice of talking, moving, and breathing with Firestone, carves out a space for Firestone's early sense of political alienation to cohabit with Subrin and Soss' own confusion as to what feminist groupwork can and should look like decades after the Second Wave.[22]

Although anthologized feminist chants, Gumbs' meditations and poems, and Subrin's art film span multiple genres and media, they all mobilize breathing to generate what Ngai, citing Freud, calls "group feeling."[23] In Ngai's exploration of envy across feminist and antifeminist archives, group feeling designates our sense of becoming "compound subjects."[24] Compound subjects emerge from a grey zone between identification and self-transformation: we develop a sense of collectivity by entertaining fantasies of identification with other people *and* by undergoing self-transformation as we produce and register shared affect.[25] Ngai insists that group feeling doesn't equate harmony. To craft compound subjects and generate group feeling, we test each other's limits and, at times, act in ways that are sensed as invasive or violating.

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[20] *Shulie*, directed by Elisabeth Subrin (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1997), video.
[21] Ibid.; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 77.
[22] Ibid., 72.
[23] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 143.
[24] Ibid., 144-145.
[25] Ibid., 167-168.

Aggression is woven into the fabric of feminism. Feminists have claimed negative emotions like rage and irritation as political instruments—a trend obvious in Katie Sarachild's acerbic term of endearment for consciousness raising: "bitch session cell groups."[26] What's more, internal conflicts—spawned by daughters who hate their mothers, by Second Wavers dissatisfied with Gen Xers' prioritization of identitarian differences over a unified agenda, and by radicals and liberals disagreeing with the normative principles guiding the other clan—populate the history of feminism in the Anglo-American context.[27] The significance of dissensus in feminism, Ewa Plonowska Ziarek argues, transcends particular scenes of aggression and antagonism. For Ziarek, feminism can only contest the persistence of white male solipsism in so far as its investment in sexuality and embodiment takes the shape of a refusal to flatten sexual and racial difference.[28]

The fact that respiratory tropes in feminism coexist with a simultaneous attachment to

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[26] Robin Morgan, "Introduction: The Women's Revolution," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, xxiii. On feminist rage, see *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, dir. Mary Dore (Music Box Films, 2014).

[27] Sarah Schulman, in *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), draws on feminist and queer theories and histories to distinguish between conflict, the necessary motor of politics, and abuse (15-21, 274).

Generation and race have historically been nexuses of contention in feminism. According to Astrid Henry, in *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Second-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), the fear of becoming one's mother that Adrienne Rich, taking after Lynn Sukenick, names "matrophobia" created the conditions for the political sisterhood of the Second Wave (10, 43). Nancy Miller, in "Jason Dreams, Victoria Works Out," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, eds. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), denounces the "trashing" of Second Wavers by Gen Xers (170). For her part, Susan Gubar, in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" in *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998), formulates the problem to which Miller refers in a disciplinary idiom. For Gubar, feminists of color and poststructuralists are to blame for the dismissal of the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (886). In a response to Gubar titled "What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion," in *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999), Robyn Wiegman, a Gen Xer, accuses the former of reiterating a marked identity formation of injured whiteness dominant in late-twentieth-century U.S. culture (377). Interested in the form of these debates, Ngai, in *Ugly Feelings*, draws our attention to the vocabulary of injury and the imaginary of murder deployed by both Gubar and Wiegman (133-137).

[28] Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1, 2, 52, 183.

group formation and suspiciousness of harmony and consensus is no coincidence. Breathing constitutes a site where somatic implications of the negotiation between attunement and aggression conducive to feminist relations and collectivities are especially salient. By chanting and meditating together, for instance, feminists walk a fine line between, on the one hand, being and acting as one, and on the other hand, compromising personal spaces. *Shulie* challenges corporeal boundaries in a different way. At the same time as the film represents a moving homage, Soss' practice of breathing with Firestone is almost confrontational. Soss channels Firestone's magnetic demeanor and self-presentation better than Firestone herself, after decades spent in airless spaces, could. Even Wittig and Zeig's breaths of love expose subjects to a version of aggression: the emotional release that accompanies catharsis can be disorganizing, even shattering. So, while showing up for difficult breathing might afford a payoff—that is, the generation of breathing room, of room for feminists to catch their breath and breathe together, away from airless spaces—this payoff doesn't automatically offset aggression. In breathing together, feminists make themselves vulnerable to each together. And again: the air, in particular that which fills the pockets cultivated amid general airlessness, is exhaustible.

The cases I assemble to highlight the mechanics of feminist breathing span a range of feminisms in the Anglo-American context: Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters*, is associated with black feminism; Linda Hogan's poetry, with Indigenous (Chickasaw) ecofeminism; and Maggie Nelson's poetic memoir, *Jane: A Murder*, with the contemporary critique of misogyny and sexual violence.[29] By mobilizing breathing in such somatics as ceremonies, healings, and forensic investigations, these authors aim to restore not some

[29] Linda Hogan, *Dark. Sweet. New & Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980); Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2005).

fantasy of subjective or bodily integrity, individual or collective, but instead conditions for an embodied, interracial and/or intergenerational feminist politics that doesn't preclude injury, annoyance, and exasperation. Rather than tracing a path toward some oxymoronic feminist harmony, then, I foreground breathing's potency as a concept for the inextricability of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics—that is, of dynamics of coming together and falling apart—in feminist group feeling. In this sense, if Firestone, in *Airless Spaces*, retains a feminist respiratory lexicon to describe her exodus from feminist organizing, it's because this lexicon *already* offers concepts for alienation, falling out, and other centrifugal dynamics. I designate the processes and practices I survey as "somatics" to refer to matters of embodiment, broadly conceived, without assuming the existence of *the* paradigmatic body, as well as to evoke therapeutic and spiritual traditions for which forms of bodily choreography that are typically collective register and enact natural-social transformations. Proceeding from Bambara's depiction of a healing, which zooms in on the relation between the individual and her community, but suggests ramifications from the familial to the planetary, I work, via Hogan's writing and finally via Nelson's, toward an account of feminist breathing that resonates across scales.

"Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"

Toni Cade Bambara's (1939-1995) *The Salt Eaters* anatomizes, in both senses of the term, the project of returning to radical activism from a condition of debility tied to the declension of 1960s social movements.[30] In the preface to her 1970 anthology, *The Black*

[30] Scholars have recognized Bambara's dexterity in capturing the ethos of the late 1970s and early 1980s, specifically with regards to matters of race. Susan Willis, in *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), notes that *The Salt Eaters* compellingly explores the legacy of 1960s activism. Gloria T. Hull goes further in "What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt*

Woman, Bambara famously proposes that "what characterizes the [1960s] movement … is a turning away from the larger society [i.e. counterculture] and a turning toward each other."[31] In an interview published thirteen years later, Claudia Tate questions Bambara on the status of the "revolutionary fervor of the [1960s]."[32] Bambara is quick to diagnose a general decline in political ardor in the 1970s and early 1980s.[33] But instead of blaming this decline on the "refocusing on the self" that followed the 1960s, she maintains that the self has in fact been in need of care, for it is, "after all, the main instrument for self, group, and social transformation."[34] Radicals—Bambara identifies as a "Pan-Africanist-socialist-feminist"—needed to refocus on themselves in order to awaken to a profound transformation in "the psychic-power configuration of the globe."[35]

Ideally, as we learn in *The Salt Eaters*, the 1970s would have dealt with the damages of the thunderous 1960s; they would have "[drained] the poison, [repaired] damaged tissues, [retrained] the heartworks, [and realigned] the spine."[36] But they didn't: the "heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow."[37] Throughout the novel, the threat of a nuclear disaster and the

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Eaters," in *Home Girls*. She argues that *The Salt Eaters* "accomplishes even better for the 1980s what *Native Son* did for the 1940s, *Invisible Man* for the 1950s, or *Song of Solomon* for the 1970s: it fixes our present and challenges the way to the future" (124).

[30] Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," galley proof, 1979, box 7, Toni Cade Bambara Collection, Part I, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta.

[31] Toni Cade Bambara, "Preface," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Middlesex: A Mentor Book), 7.

[32] Toni Cade Bambara and Claudia Tate, "Interview," in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (London: Continuum, 1983), 13.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid. Influential critical texts that, unlike *The Salt Eaters*, frame the turn to the self of the 1970s as narcissism include two polemics: from the standpoint of the New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, *The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening*," *New York*, August 23, 1976, http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/; and from the (impossible) standpoint of the Left after the New Left, Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19-27.

[35] Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway."

[36] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 258.

[37] Ibid.

reality of chemical spills (the novel was published the year after the Three Mile Island partial nuclear meltdown, in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania) dramatize this atrophy and the difficulty of countering material and economic forces that operate at a scale much greater than human agency. Bambara's own turn to the self in *The Salt Eaters*—a gambit proximate to what Michel Foucault, referring to a medical perception of bodies and the world, calls the "care of the self"—thus consists of dealing with debilitated bodies in hopes of regenerating politics.[38]

The Salt Eaters opens with Minnie Ransom's question to Velma Henry: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"[39] Minnie is Claybourne, Georgia's "fabled healer." Velma is a feminist and Civil Rights activist who, made weary by, among other things, an ever-deferred revolution, has attempted suicide and is now seeking treatment. Minnie's question recurs, slightly tweaked, throughout the novel—an account of a relatively brief healing ritual punctuated by spun-out, impressionistic flashbacks and interludes showcasing the viewpoints of Claybourne's inhabitants and visitors.[40] "'Can you afford to be whole?'" Minnie, for instance, asks Velma.[41] "'As I said,'" Minnie clarifies, "'folks come in here moaning and carrying on and *say* they want to be healed. But like the wisdom warns, 'Doan letcha mouf gitcha in what ya

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[38] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 3: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 123.
[39] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 3.
[40] I owe my sense of ritual, as the concept pertains to *The Salt Eaters*, to Beverly J. Robinson's work on Afrodiasporic theater practices. In "The Sense of Self in Ritualizing New Performance Spaces for Survival,' in *Black Theater: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paula Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), she defines ritual as

> a recurring pattern of action that represents the desire to begin life anew, and the need to find some way of expressing that desire. If a sense of self based on identity and heritage could endure the Atlantic crossing from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean shores, then the memories of home of every African bound for slave labor over the age of ten would be the rituals. These rituals, sacred and secular, would include knowing the names of your gods, your ancestors, and yourself, and knowing your community and clan affiliation. You would also know your native language and the social prerequisites that prevailed in your home community; and you would understand your place in a culture where oral tradition prevailed over written ones. (332)

[41] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 106.

backbone caint stand.'"[42] Insistent, she further warns, "'Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."[43] Minnie goes back to the interrogative mode toward the end of the novel: "Choose your cure, sweetheart. Decide what you want to do with wholeness. … What will you do when you are well?"[44]

A healer's cautiousness when it comes to being well and being whole might appear counterintuitive. It's not. *The Salt Eaters* is written from the point of view of a community, meaning that, for Bambara, Velma's healing works as a pretext for the "town [to tell] as much of its story as can be told."[45] As such, being whole entails taking in the affect of the community—the support and solidarity it provides, but also the resentment and unfinished businesses it harbors. In this sense, the healing echoes CA Conrad's ecodeviance, a therapeutic practice, discussed in the previous chapter, which involves absorbing an environment's beauty *and* brutality. Now, being well and being whole also constitute modes of being that qualify Velma for reentering the arena of feminist and Civil Rights politics. Wellness and wholeness therefore herald the risk of getting hurt once again. Healing, whether it's measured through Velma's absorption of Claybourne's enlivening and debilitating forces or through the capacity to engage once again in activism, is a double-edged sword. Throughout *The Salt Eaters*, variations of breathing's rhythm and intensity magnify Bambara's tough-love outlook on healing.

In the opening pages of *The Salt Eaters*, Velma's breathing is disorganized. She isn't "sure whether it [is] time to breathe in or breathe out."[46] She "[inhales] in gasps, and [exhales]

[42] Ibid., 9, italics in the original.
[43] Ibid., 10.
[44] Ibid., 220. See also 45.
[45] Bambara and Tate, "Interview," 32.
[46] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 5.

shudderingly."[47] As the healing begins, Velma finds herself "breathing in and out in almost regular rhythm," but remains distracted, "wondering if it [is] worth submitting herself to this ordeal."[48] Her distracted musings eventually give in to a kind of hypnosis. Taken over by the rhythmicity of her own breathing, she experiences a sensory overload that seeps into each of the novel's subsequent pages:

> Rumor was these sessions never lasted more than ten or fifteen minutes anyway. It wouldn't kill her to go along with the thing. Wouldn't kill her. She almost laughed. She might have died. *I might have died*. It was an incredible thought now. She sat there holding on to *that* thought, waiting for Minnie Ransom to quit playing to the gallery and get on with it. Sat there, every cell flooded with the light of that idea, with the rhythm of her own breathing, with the sensation of having not died at all at any time, not on the attic stairs, not at the kitchen drawer, not in the ambulance, not on the operating table, not in that other place where the mud mothers were painting the walls of the cave and calling to her, not in the sheets she trashed out in strangling her legs, her rib cage, fighting off the woman with snakes in her hair, the crowds that moved in and out of each other around the bed trying to tell her about the difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent.[49]

Strikingly, as Velma settles into a more or less regular breathing rhythm, the novel's free-indirect speech becomes breathless. The lengthy sentence that concludes this excerpt hoards clauses without first identifying Velma as the subject performing the action of sitting.

The same sentence, in addition to listing the places where Velma could have, but didn't, die when she attempted suicide, culminates with a distinction between eating salt and turning into salt. The distinction does double duty as a gloss on the novel's title and an allegory for the healing. Bambara's image refers to Lot's wife, a figure, first mentioned in Genesis 19, who, instead of swiftly fleeing the city of Sodom as God is about to destroy it, looks back and is turned into salt. "Without a belief in the capacity for transformation," Bambara explains in her

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[47] Ibid., 6.
[48] Ibid., 7.
[49] Ibid., 7-8, italics in the original.

writing notes "one can become ossified."[50] Eating salt also alludes to the communal attribute of the novel and of the healing it portrays. Velma's godmother, Sophie Heywood (nicknamed M'Dear), posits, for instance, that "you never really know a person until you've eaten salt together."[51] Salt decontaminates wounds, though not without pain. It can be found in every pantry, but it doesn't come with a posology. And as Daddy Dolphy, Sophie's partner, explains, salt "helps neutralize the venom;" "to neutralize the serpent's another matter."[52] To be well and whole in a community that, for its part, is neither well nor whole is one thing. It's one thing, that is, to learn to breathe in a regular and organized manner amidst an environment plagued by sexism, racism, and nuclear toxicity. It's another thing, however, to transform a milieu, to make it more livable, more hospitable.[53] The healing, as a breathing-driven somatic, offers provisional and relative wellness and wholeness. Said wellness and wholeness remain dependent on the composition of Claybourne's air, its atmosphere.

The healing reaches its pinnacle in a passage that mirrors the last block quotation. This new passage, too, is set in motion by Velma's heightened attention to breathing—here, to the sensation of Velma's warm breath. And it, too, conveys a sensory overload:

> Day of Restoration, Velma muttered, feeling the warm breath of Minnie Ransom on her, lending her something to work the bellows of her lungs with. To keep on dancing like the sassy singer said. Dancing on toward the busy streets alive with winti, coyote and cunnie rabbit and turtle and caribou as if heading to the Ark in the new tidal wave,

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[50] Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway."
[51] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 147.
[52] Ibid., 258.
[53] On this matter, Ann Folwell Stanford writes, in "Mechanisms of Disease: African-American Women Writers, Social Pathologies, and the Limits of Medicine, in *NWSA Journal* 6, no. 1 (1994), that

> *The Salt Eaters* rests on the assumption that the world is sick and that in order to survive, human beings must be about the business of healing it through social, political, cultural, and spiritual channels. There is an ecology at stake, however. On the one hand, when individuals ignore their own health—be that spiritual, physical, or emotional—they cannot fully engage in working toward a more healthy world. On the other hand, the notion of a privatized, individual health divorced from community is an illusion. (32)

> racing in the direction of resurrection as you should be and she had a choice running running in the streets naming things—cunnie rabbit called impala called little deer called trickster called brother called change—naming things amidst the rush and dash of tires, feet, damp dresses swishing by, the Spirits of Blessing way outrunning disaster, outrunning jinns, shetnoi, soubaka, succubi, innocuii, incubi, nefarii, the demons midwifed, suckled and father by the one in ten Mama warned about who come to earth for the express purpose of making trouble for the other nine. Demons running the streets defying Earth Mother and Heavenly Father and defiling the universe in a stampede rush, rending, tearing creature ideas jumping through billboards and screw-thy-neighbor paperbacks, the modern grimoires of the passing age.[54]

This passage moves promiscuously across creolized and nonreferential languages. The beliefs, Afrodiasporic or otherwise, that undergird the healing make appearances.[55] "Jinns," for instance, is a term for intelligent spirits in Arabian and Muslim mythologies. "Innocuii" and "nefarii," stylized versions of "innocuous" and "nefarious," aren't connected to any particular set of practices and beliefs, but they evoke the healing's status as a double-edged sword. This being said, the excerpt is a far cry from a straightforward summary of the healing. It's unclear what a straightforward summary of the healing would even look like. At every turn, *The Salt Eaters* eschews a linear and teleological narrative, in as much as the "Day of Restoration" to which Velma alludes cannot be grasped in eschatological terms. Restoration cannot be grasped either as a paradigm that promises bodily and spiritual integrity and that, in Mary Daly's words, "[conceals] the real nature of the breakdown it pretends to mend."[56] Restoration, in the context at hand, approximates group feeling: a sense of relationality and collectivity that is as fragile, as susceptible to being transformed as the community that serves as its incubator. Considering that Velma, in her early musings on salt, recognizes the precariousness of healing as well as its

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[54] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 263-264.
[55] See Stanford, "Mechanisms of Disease," 33. Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nkwankwo, in *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Rememberances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), explain that Afro-Atlantic communities engage in rituals that rely on the "abstract expressiveness" of dancing bodies and on "nonverbal, communicative procedure"—features that are all clearly on display in the breathing-centric ritual at the heart of *The Salt Eaters* (80-81).
[56] Daly, *Pure Lust*, 130, 136.

relational character, we might say that Restoration, for her, requires processing and metabolizing what she already knows.

As Derek Alwes aptly points out, Bambara codes isolation as deadly.[57] The fantasy that prevails in her early suicide attempt scene has to do with being "sealed—sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in," and with being "unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out."[58] I want to put pressure, however, on Alwes' assertion that the healing put forward as an antidote to isolation entails scrapping "personal … liberty" and appropriating a ready-made collective identity.[59] Not only is Velma transformed by the healing, but so is her community. This latter transformation is evident, for example, in a scene that shows the impossibility of *passively* witnessing the healing. Nadeen, a patient of the Southwest Community Infirmary, sees her breathing altered by the healing in question. She "[breathes] shallowly;" and she is "oblivious to the sharp intake of breath, the gasps, the stirrings around her as others [begin] to take notice."[60] This experience, Nadeen deduces, confirms that she's witnessing "the real thing," as opposed to something like "revival healing," which "[is] just not it."[61] The contagiousness of breathing confirms that the healing isn't only about Velma, that it has a potent effect on her surroundings.

Breathing, in *The Salt Eaters*, opens onto a web of relations than entangles Claybourne's inhabitants and visitors. Minnie says that she is "available to any and every adventure of the breath." [62] An adventure of the breath: this phrase functions as an ideal descriptor for a novel with such a fragmented and elusive plot, and yet such rich accounts of interpersonal dynamics.

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[57] Derek Alwes, "The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," *African American Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 454-355.
[58] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 19.
[59] Alwes, "The Burden of Liberty," 454-455.
[60] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 111.
[61] Ibid., 111-112.
[62] Ibid., 56.

According to Bambara, the novel *formalizes* the community we encounter as we track Velma's, and other characters', breathing.[63] Gail Wilentz illustrates this phenomenon with a spatial metaphor: "Two hours of a traditional healing at a community hospital extend out into concentric circles of the lifeblood of an African-American community."[64] Bambara, who, before the 1980s, was mainly known as the editor of the anthology, *The Black Woman*, and as the author of short story collections like *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, adopted the novel form of *The Salt Eaters* "out of a problem solving impulse—what would it take to bridge the gap, to merge those … frames of reference, to fuse … camps."[65] While "the short story is a piece of work," Bambara surmises, "the novel is a way of life."[66] The novel isn't as contained as the short story; it grows outward, in multiple directions at once.

The feminist specificity of the healing lies both in Bambara's project of bridging the gap between camps and in the nature of these camps.[67] As Bambara indicates in her writing notes, Minnie and a racially heterogeneous "traveling troupe of seven women known as Sister of the

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[63] Margot Anne Kelley, in "'Damballah Is the First Law of the Thermodynamics': Modes of Access to Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," in *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (1993), notices that "most of the characters privilege relationships and relational ways of knowing," and that Velma "is created for us relationally—through the images offered by other characters and through her own reveries, clairvoyant dreams, and presentiments" (485).

[64] Gail Wilentz, *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 55.

[65] Bambara and Tate, "Interview," 16; Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorilla, My Love* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1977).

[66] Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway."

[67] Elliott Butler-Evans, in *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), posits that scholarly research on *The Salt Eaters* has prioritized the novel's cultural and historical references to African-American culture over its feminist content (171). I agree. Still, relevant feminist readings of *The Salt Eaters* include Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Toni Cade Bambara. Free To Be Anywhere in the Universe," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 229-231; Carmen Rose Marshall, *Black Professional Women in Recent American Fiction* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), esp. 107; Venetria K. Patton, "Othermothers as Elders and Culture Bearers in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Salt Eaters*," in *The Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 31-50.

Yam, Sister of the Plantain, Sister of the Rice, Sister of the Corn," and so on "help [her] argue the bridging of several camps: artists and activists, materialists and spiritualists, old and young, and of course the communities of color."[68] Like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Bambara, who supplied the anthology's foreword, uses female interactions—here, as part of intergenerational structure of care and a sisterhood—as blueprints for political groups. She also imagines coalition building or bridging gaps as a somatic enterprise—a labor performed by individuals who agree to bear, and in doing so must find ways to distribute, the weight and pressure of building relations.[69] *The Salt Eaters* is a "way of life" not only in a biographical sense, but also in a vital sense: it renders women's efforts to survive and strive in a community that, despite the presence of influential matriarchs, remains male-dominated. Velma, indeed, comes to depend on feminist care and support due to the casual and not-so-casual sexism she experiences in her romantic relationship with Obie and as a patient of Dr. Julius Meadows.[70]

Susan Willis criticizes *The Salt Eaters* on the basis that, "for all its yearning and insight, the novel fails to culminate in revolution, fails even to suggest how social change might be produced."[71] The point of *The Salt Eaters*, I want to suggest, is neither to induce revolution nor to impress on its readers a particular vision of political change. Instead, as Ann Folwell

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[68] Ibid. Bambara doesn't strictly imagine transhistorical bridges in the idiom of *intergenerational* coalitions. In "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," written during the genesis of *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara puts "In the Last Quarter" forward as a working title for the novel. She explains, "[This title] is to remind myself of the period I'm 'reading,' to remind myself to script flashforwards as well as flashbacks, to remind myself that powerful events of the 1980s and 1990s (nuclear explosions, comet splashdowns, asteroid collisions) resonate in the present." Bambara, then, imagines that the past and the future are pulling the present in their respective direction, hence curtailing or expanding the realm of possibilities that typifies this present.

[69] On feminist group form, see Cynthia Burack, *Healing Identities: Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Groups* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004), esp. 115.

[70] Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, 183-184, 188.

[71] Willis, *Specifying*, 129.

Stanford says of the healing (and the same could be said of the novel), it "[prepares] … for the difficult world-healing work ahead."[72] The healing that spans *The Salt Eaters* represents, rather than a political end in itself, a prep course for a return to activism. Breathing together and breathing in sync, as engines of the healing, operate as concepts for a feminist attunement that doesn't preclude various types of aggression. For one, the feminist relations and collectivities established in the novel don't hinge on an ideological consensus; they accommodate conflict. And in journeying back to herself by way of her community, a feedback loop guided by the back and forth of exhalation and inhalation, Velma becomes endowed with the responsibility of using her newfound strength for changing a milieu that remains debilitating.

[72] Stanford, "Mechanisms of Disease," 35.