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# Untitled: Self-care Through Communal Acts

*Renée Whittaker*

## **Abstract**

What is self-care, and how does it work? Is it something that all people have access to? This paper, which is an introduction to my PhD project, aims to challenge the canons of self-care while arguing that they are embedded in capitalistic individualism. I look specifically at communal child-rearing and other load-bearing practices such as child-shifting, and closely examine the benefits of communal caring practices in direct response to current beliefs of what self-care should look like. Through this approach, I investigate Black women's communal anticapitalistic resistance and its positive effects in challenging neoliberal ideologies.

**Keywords:** Communal Care, Self-care, Neoliberal, Black Women's Resistance

Is it simply by chance that my presentation, and in turn this paper, has been titled *Untitled*? As I reviewed my entry for the presentation that led to this paper, I was surprised to see that the title was listed as "Untitled." This was an oversight due to the large number of items that continue to remain pending on my to-do list. This "to-do" list only seems to grow as time progresses. As I begin to think through the realities of our everyday, this is not an abnormal incident. I was driven to leave my presentation as untitled in order to illustrate the real daily stresses that we all experience. This is a normal event for most people. However, as my to-do list grows, my anxiety multiplies. The pressures of the world seem to push me into fits of uncertainty and mental chaos. These moments of chaos seem to present no tangible solution or possible exit plan. What do I do when the papers are piling up and the bills force me to count every penny, while I attempt to evaluate what needs to be cut? This is further complicated by the boss who adds more tasks, with the expectation that they will be completed prior to their deadline. This then has a ripple effect which forces me to take work home on a more regular basis. In response to these pressures, popular culture advises us that all you need is a good massage, a bath bomb, or a spa day to rub or wash away the worries of the day.<sup>1</sup> How is this effective when after the bath bomb, massage, or spa day, the same woes are awaiting me? Even worse, once the massage or spa bill arrives, I am forced to face the very real consequences of my actions; the money that I have spent to relieve my stress becomes a new point of stress.

My decision to return to school in order to achieve a higher level of education reflects the privilege that allows me to do so. Simply put, I have been able to go to school and work at a job where I have been able to create my own hours. When necessary, I have been able to ask family

and close friends for assistance. Yet, this decision has had real consequences, such as financial burdens and emotional stressors. Notably, there are people who have to face similar obstacles due to a series of social structures that act as unmovable barriers, such as unlivable wages, lack of paid sick leave, or extraordinarily high daycare costs. By no means does this paper attempt to belittle those real concerns of personal rejuvenation practices; rather, I attempt to make a call to focus on the inaccessibility of current canons of self-care, while highlighting the innate assumptions that exist regarding who is able to participate in these prescribed modes of rejuvenation.

This paper aims to begin to challenge current mechanisms of self-care that are centered around consumption and individualism, which is innately materially exclusionary. I lean on the work of Charmaine Crawford, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Saidiya Hartman as entry points to understand the significance and political power that exists in utilizing alternative methods of practicing self-care. By furthering the current popular scope of self-care, I hope that readers will be able to move towards acknowledging communal care practices that have been deemed ineffective or irrelevant in Western society. These particular practices of communal care include communal child-rearing, child-shifting, girls' nights, and for my family in particular, cousin dates. I argue that these practices reap benefits that are seldom acknowledged, much less appreciated, within the scope of Western understandings of self-care.<sup>2</sup>

When consulting popular Western scholarship on self-care, there tends to be a focus on the ways that emotional distress interferes with one's productivity and their ability to materially contribute to society. Indeed, self-care has gained its momentum in the attempt to increase workers' abilities in order to contribute to their modes of production.<sup>3</sup> As a means of increasing individuals' productivity, there is a push for each person to practice socially approved modes of self-care. This typically includes the production of acts that center the individual. These mechanisms of self-care tend to encapsulate not only neoliberal concepts regarding the individualized self, but also ideologies of improvement that emphasize both commodity collection and the acquisition of symbols which communicate wealth and prestige. Scholars such as Richard and Shea and Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison exemplify this point through their concentration on working professionals and the importance of care-givers in practicing various modes of reflective care. As the authors reveal, stress generally has adverse effects on an individual, which can impede individuals' level of care and, in return, their productivity.<sup>4</sup> Within this reproduction of a particular and limited concept of self-care, there exist normative assumptions surrounding who qualifies to engage in this praxis of self-care and who must be left out. Seen through omissions within popular literature, people of colour, and particularly Black women, have been rendered outside of the scope of warranting self-care; historically, viewed as less-than-human, existing in a space that can be categorized as socially dead.<sup>5</sup> This concept of social death comes from the school of thought known as Afro-pessimism, which states that

Black people exist in a state of inhumanity that is the consequence of the social, economic, and psychological conditions which facilitated the existence of the trans -Atlantic slave trade.<sup>6</sup>

In *Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves*, Angela Davis illuminates the fact that enslaved women engaged in practices which mimicked those done by White women within the nuclear family, such as cooking and cleaning for their loved ones within the household. Likewise, these Black women were able to resist some of the dehumanizing beliefs that maintained Black women as the subordinate class.<sup>7</sup> Through understanding the different mechanisms that Black people are able to create and maintain in order to endure the pressures of neo-liberal capitalist society, one is able to question the institution of the family unit and problematize a definition that simplistically includes only a father, mother, and children. This is important because simply looking at the nuclear family as a basic unit means that one alienates themselves from valued resources and can be subject to unrealistic demands of doing it all with very little help.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar vein, Christina Ho's work on Caribbean families in the Western United States illustrates how some communities broaden the understanding of family in order to collectively work towards the betterment of the community. Within her work "The Internationalization of Kinship and the Feminization of Caribbean Migration: The Case of Afro Trinidadian Immigrants in Los Angeles," she challenges notions of the modern understanding of family.<sup>9</sup> By identifying particular family units as households, Ho is able to challenge normative assumptions of the role of the extended family and encourage alternative housing practices that prioritize a communal rather than individual unit, which included the mother, father and children. These counter-practices include pooling together material and immaterial resources such as money and companionship. Through engaging these communal practices of caring, Ho expands on the notion of family membership to reach beyond the scope of just the mother, father, and children and instead include extended family member such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and close friends. In turn, this addition of membership into one's household unit increases one's access to much-needed material simply by having these needed resources in constant close proximity.<sup>10</sup>

Another communal care practice that Ho introduces is child-shifting, or what Mary Chamberlain defines as "the temporary or permanent fostering of the child by kinfolk, usually a grandmother, aunt or a close family friend."<sup>11</sup> This communal practice resists neoliberal notions of individualism that typically encapsulate hegemonic notions that center the nuclear family. Instead, through mechanisms such as child-shifting, Caribbean families are able to subvert systems that are built to ensure their oppression.<sup>12</sup> Thus, by reflecting on this collective care practice, we can see the importance of community that is seldom acknowledged within conversations of self-care, as self-preservation outweighs the need of the community at all times. Embedded in this notion is the fear of communism and the socialist state, as communal care is centered around the community coming together to pool necessary resources together and is thus

an ontological perspective that challenges the fundamental aspect of the neoliberal state, which is individualism.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is important to mention that this concept of caring for oneself through collective means is far from a new endeavour, nor is it isolated within Caribbean culture; rather, collective models of self-care have also been utilized within the confines of slavery and Indigenous communities within the Lower and Greater Antilles.<sup>14</sup> Looking back to what seemed to have always been, it is important to acknowledge that this research is not a discovery, but is rather a re-imagining of alternative self-care practices and possibilities that have roots within histories that have been primarily obscured in order to remind Black women that self-care can exist outside of costly activities.

Scholars like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, and The Combahee River Collective, have highlighted how Black women have been able to engage in collective resistance that does not always involve the care of children, and therefore have included Black who are both single and without children. At times, these forms of collective resistance have also been sites of personal rejuvenation which challenge the current neoliberal ideology of continual capital consumption and individualism as seen in the Combahee River Collective.<sup>15</sup> Saidiya Hartman furthers this thought by acknowledging that Black women have repeatedly engaged in practices that enable them to have moments of reprieve and restoration, which is seldom acknowledged by dominant discourses.<sup>16</sup> These collective movements also speak to Black women who may not have children, but whom are still in need of safe spaces away from the violences of everyday life. Certainly, there is still much investigative work that needs to be conducted on the ways that communities engage in self-care in manners that do not conform to the current individualistic expectations which consume our everyday life.<sup>17</sup>

As I conclude this paper, I am able to take the time to reflect on times when I have been particularly stressed. During these times, the most effective methods of self-care for myself have been ones that include those whom I cherish the most. Calling my parents, cousins, nieces, nephews, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and friends has allowed me to get my fill of stories, jokes, and—most importantly—reassurance that everything is going to be alright. My community has consistently reminded me I am never alone, and that they all always have my back, as I have theirs. My woes may sometimes feel too big for me, but with my community, they begin to feel a little bit smaller. The presence of my household, as illustrated by Christina Ho, continually provides me with the gift of self-care.

## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas M. Skovhot and Michelle Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for the Helping Professions* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Skovhot and Trotter-Mathison, *Resilient Practitioner*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, J. Sexton, and Hortense J. Spillers, “Afro-pessimism: An Introduction,” (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1972): 81–100.

<sup>8</sup> I intentionally mention the entirety of the family unit here, rather than just women or mothers. To focus on the women in this instance is to reinforce the very thing that I am challenging.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Ho, “The Internationalization of Kinship and the Feminization of Caribbean Migration: The Case of Afro-Trinidadian Immigrants in Los Angeles,” *Human Organization* 52, no. 1 (1993): 32–40.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory*.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Chamberlain, “Rethinking Caribbean Families: Extending the Links,” *Community, Work & Family*, no. 6 (2003): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ho, “Internationalization of Kinship.”

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, “Neo-liberalism as Creative Destruction,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 88, no. 2 (2006): 145–58.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Taylor, “Kinship and Social Structure of The Island Carib,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1946): 180–212.

<sup>15</sup> Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Albany, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 80–9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.