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Feminist/Womanist Commentary on Work and Self-Care

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## *Practices of Self-Care*

# Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation: A Black Feminist/Womanist Commentary on Work and Self-Care

AT THE ONSET OF THE PANDEMIC, like many people around the globe, I was anxious and fearful. The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, was dangerous and mysterious. There were, and still are, many misconceptions and unknowns about the transmission, effects, and treatment of this virus, resulting in pervasive uncertainty and confusion. As an African American woman, I am a member of two groups frequently mistreated and underserved in healthcare — women and African Americans. Consistent with other health disparities, people of color — and particularly African Americans — are more likely to contract and die from the virus.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, then, I was terrified not only of getting sick but also of how I might be mistreated or underserved by those in charge of my care. I felt that if I were to contract this virus, I would surely die. This may seem like an unreasonable fear, but the risk of contracting COVID-19 combined with recent health diagnoses heightened my sense of precarity.

Shortly before the pandemic, I had undergone several diagnostic medical tests. I learned that I was on the verge of diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. A sleep study revealed that I was experiencing severe sleep apnea. Specifically, my breathing stopped 32 times

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1. Sherita Hill Golden, "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color," Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities>.

an hour. My family medical history gave me, and my primary care physician, further cause for concern. Over the last year and a half, I had lost a sister to heart failure and an aunt to a stroke. My late grandmother had diabetes, and my mother lives with it (and heart disease) now. Moreover, I'm sure that these physical health issues were linked to and exacerbated by my declining mental health. For years, I have suffered from anxiety, clinical depression, and likely post-traumatic stress disorder — conditions I brought with me into the COVID-19 pandemic. Though I have had sporadic treatment for these conditions, for many reasons, I have not had the sustained care necessary to effectively manage my mental health. If I am to live a life rich with vitality, or vibrant health, I know that I must embrace practices that will enable me to be holistically well.<sup>2</sup> At the onset of the pandemic, I was not addressing any of the mental or physical conditions that were causing me to be unwell in my “whole organism.”<sup>3</sup> Although Western Anglocentric culture promotes binary conceptions of Black/White and body/mind, I know that there is an inextricable synergy between my mind and body.

My healthcare providers had suggested that my conditions could “improve with exercise and a proper diet.” My exercise regimen at the time consisted of short, occasional walks with my dogs, during which I had to take frequent “bench breaks.” My “morbidly obese” body ached as passersby offered comments that were some version of “I’m not sure if you’re walking the dog or if the dog is walking you.” My diet mostly included whatever I could pick up from the nearest fast food restaurant. I indulged in sweets as respite from my stress-filled life. It was apparent that my work as a teacher-educator and scholar-activist did not allow for “exercise and a proper diet.” The “pandemic semester” was physically, intellectually, and emotionally demanding. Each semester since starting in my current position, I had been assigned a class “in the field,” meaning that I was a faculty supervisor to interns and residents gaining classroom teaching experience in area schools. For the first several years, mentoring these five to seven students was an especially fulfilling aspect of my work. In the last year, however, my supervisor punitively assigned me a schedule that doubled these numbers and eventually tripled them, so I

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2. Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 53.

3. Ibid.

had twenty students at twelve schools in three counties who needed to be visited weekly or biweekly. This field work was in addition to the evening seminars that lasted for five hours twice a week, ending at 10 pm on Mondays and 8 pm on Wednesdays. Each week, I was driving approximately 500 miles to schools and remote university campuses — frequently in traffic in one of the busiest metropolitan areas in the United States (Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas). In addition to teaching, I maintained an active social justice-oriented research and scholarship agenda and performed on- and off-campus service. My days started early and ended late. (I feel my heart racing and my stomach aching as I recount this grueling schedule.)

Although the pandemic inflicted universal fear and grief, I welcomed the slower pace that it demanded. As an introvert who needs time alone to recharge and center myself, I was grateful to be, well, *still*. I was no longer leaving home early in the mornings to avoid rush-hour traffic. I was no longer driving home in fear for two hours after getting out of class at 10 pm. I appreciated having more time with my spouse and my dogs. I listened to podcasts. I began practicing yoga. I slept in. I watched movies. I read books — fiction. I read stories again! I connected with friends, virtually of course. I played with Koko and Kanela (my dogs). Then I began moving my body, motivated by the goal of walking #50milesinMay, which has allowed me to spend time outdoors enjoying nature and soaking up sun rays. This modest goal has led to a sustained commitment to physical activity. With more time and less work-related stress, I also made dietary changes. I was now preparing balanced meals with my spouse, and we were actually sitting at the table to eat them. For me, the pandemic came to be a time for rest. This new way of life made processing the traumatic, seemingly incessant anti-Black racist violence that coincided with the pandemic less harmful for me than it otherwise would have been. I was, for the first time in a really long time, taking care of myself despite all the chaos and suffering around me.

Perhaps the most impactful work I've done during the pandemic, however, has been my engagement with *theory in the flesh*.<sup>4</sup> Said differently, the stillness of the pandemic allowed me the space and time to understand how my health has been impacted by the “imperialist,

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4. Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 19.

capitalist, white supremacist patriarchal state,” a term used to show the connections between these systems that uniquely oppress women of color.<sup>5</sup> Like hooks, “I came to theory . . . to grasp what was happening around and within me.”<sup>6</sup> Black Feminist Theory was, for me, “a location for healing” that helped me understand the ways Black women’s lived experiences, including my own, are profoundly impacted by a system steeped in racism, sexism, and capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Somehow, though, I had avoided using Black Feminist Theory to reveal why I was fat, sick, and likely dying. If theory is a mirror, it was time for me to face it, which started with examining Black women’s relationship to work.

Zora Neale Hurston described the Black woman as “de mule uh de world.”<sup>8</sup> Black women’s first roles in the United States were as workers whose labor was exploited for the advancement of White men, a point Angela Davis elucidated in her monograph *Women, Race, and Class*.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Deborah Gray White explained that during the Great Depression, Black women stood “on street corners waiting for a chance to get to work.”<sup>10</sup> I’ve witnessed this desire for a “chance to get to work” firsthand among the women in my family, who performed whatever labor they could find in rural Alabama, mostly domestic and factory work. For the last twenty years, my sixty-two-year-old aunt has commuted two hours to and from work at a poultry plant. Another aunt has had close to a dozen back surgeries and is permanently disabled after decades of working in factories. No strangers to hard work, Black women, like the ones in my family, perform paid and unpaid labor that is considered essential but is devalued in social status and pay. The hard work ideal is valorized in ways that are particularly dangerous for Black women, who are at the bottom of the occupational ladder and hold a lower overall

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5. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 2000), 22.

6. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.

7. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 59.

8. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1937), 20.

9. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

10. Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 143.

social status than other groups while having the highest workforce participation among women.<sup>11</sup> Hard work alone is not, and has never been, the path to economic freedom for women of color who experience persistent pay gaps that result in income and wealth disparities.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the Federal Reserve reported in 2019 that “Black and Hispanic families have considerably less wealth than White families.”<sup>13</sup>

Because of these documented imbalances, we must interrogate this notion of hard work in relation to women of color:

- Who benefits most from the hard work of Black women and other women of color?
- What material and spiritual sacrifices do Black women and other women of color make in the name of hard work?
- What barriers prevent upward mobility for Black women and other women of color despite their hard work?
- How should we demonstrate value for the work performed by Black women and other women of color, considering their history with capitalistic exploitation?

Black women are “mules” because of capitalism—the engine that drives sexism, racism, and classism. Its purpose is White male domination, and it is propelled by a philosophy espousing “hard work.” The driving force behind capitalism is productivity. The goal is profit—generate more revenue, beat the competition, come out on top at any cost. Capitalism succeeds based on its dehumanization of women and people of color as well as its destruction of the environment.<sup>14</sup> It forces us to neglect our

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11. hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 16; Jocelyn Frye. Valuing Black Women's Work: A Commitment to Black Women's Equal Pay Is Essential to the Nation's Economic Progress, August 7, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/news/2018/08/07/454508/valuing-black-womens-work>.

12. Ibid.

13. Neil Bhutta, Andrew C. Chang, Lisa J. Dettling, and Joanne W. Hsu, “Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances,” September 28, 2020, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-20200928.htm>.

14. Delores S. Williams convincingly argued that there is a connection between the abuse and exploitation of nature and the abuse and exploitation of Black women's bodies, but that point is beyond the purview of this paper. See

personal and communal well-being for the sake of thriving industries and robust economies — this priority is evident in the rush to “re-open the economy” during the summer of 2020. The message of hard work is preached emphatically in impoverished communities, where members are told that drive and discipline are the traits necessary to break the proverbial “cycle of poverty.” This myth of meritocracy — hard work equals upward mobility — completely negates the impact of longstanding, inequitable systemic policies and practices that present impenetrable barriers to upward mobility for minoritized populations, regardless of how hard we work. My African ancestors who were enslaved in the Americas are profoundly illustrative of this point. Though they worked far harder than humans deserve, the white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal state caused them to be materially impoverished for generations. Consider, too, the plight of today’s Mexican farmworkers, who perform the essential work of providing the country’s food but remain impoverished. They frequently work the land but rarely own land. I am convinced that there is no “cycle of poverty,” only interlocking systems of oppression that create hardworking, yet impoverished, individuals and communities. It’s far past time for us to scrutinize the notion of hard work that is part of the United States ethos. Instead of simply encouraging working hard, we need to support individuals performing work that is affirming, work that is life-giving, work that is meaningful, and work that encourages self-care.

My self-care praxis is informed by the theorizing of Black feminist and womanist scholars. Its origin can be found in Alice Walker’s definition of a womanist: “She loves herself. *Regardless*.”<sup>15</sup> It is a notion also urged by Black feminist June Jordan: “I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect.”<sup>16</sup> Jameta Barlow warned that, for Black women, a lack of love for ourselves is “the real silent killer.”<sup>17</sup> Self-care, then, can be

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“Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 24–29.

15. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), xi (italics in original).
16. June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 269–70.
17. Jameta N. Barlow, “#WhenIFellInLoveWithMyself: Disrupting the Gaze and Loving Our Black Womanist Self as an Act of Political Warfare,” *Meridians*



thought of as an observable, purposeful demonstration of love for our bodies, minds, and spirits. I was introduced to Black feminist/womanist self-care in a graduate class taught by womanist religion scholar, Melanie Harris, who assigned me to write a “self-care plan” as a final paper. Although I didn’t fully grasp its rationale or purpose as a doctoral student and questioned its place in academic coursework, Harris was aware that “the psychological toll of being a Black woman . . . can never be underestimated. There is very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist.”<sup>18</sup> Harris was urging me to “take care of the self even when others fail to do so.”<sup>19</sup> The purpose of self-care is to rectify imbalances and heal wounds.<sup>20</sup> Engaging in self-care is particularly important for Black women: “Our role is to do for others: labor, prosper, entertain, revere, serve, and yes, even save. And for all of that—strength is mandated. Although rarely theorized, the liberatory practice of black feminist thought demands self-care if we are to protect and preserve that strength.”<sup>21</sup> Self-care is necessarily about refusing to be complicit in my own destruction in a society determined to destroy the bodies, minds, and spirits of Black women. When Black women commit to self-care, we reject implicit messages that we are unworthy, that we are expendable, and that we are superhuman beings who don’t need nurturing. We refute the notion that our bodies and minds are valuable only when profitable to others.

To be clear, Black feminist/womanist self-care should not be confused with *American individualism*, which prizes individual achievement and relentless competition—an ideal that conflicts with non-Western ontologies of being-in-community with others. Self-care is not synonymous with self-indulgence. To further clarify, for me, self-care does not mean indulging in luxuries such as manicures, facials, and

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15, no. 1 (2016): 211.

18. The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *All the Women Are White, All the Black Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), 18.
19. Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 44.
20. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 53.
21. Karla D. Scott, “Black Feminist Reflections on Activism: Repurposing Strength for Self-Care, Sustainability, and Survival,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5, no. 3 (2016): 131.

waxes; dining at fancy restaurants; taking expensive vacations; or shopping. In my estimation, these actions are more akin to pampering than self-care and can (but do not always) lead to extreme consumerism and materialism, which are antithetical to self-care. Kieran Yates described today's self-care trend as "a big business" in her article "How Self-Care Has Been Hijacked by Big Business."<sup>22</sup> It is estimated to be an almost ten-billion-dollar industry in the United States.<sup>23</sup> These supposed "self-care" entrapments are largely products of capitalism designed to promote debt, overspending, and exclusivity. Instead of contributing to our victimization through capitalism, Black women must see self-care as a way to resist capitalistic exploitation. Self-care must not be elitist. It is a right of all Black women, not just a privilege for the affluent.

Low- and no-cost activities such as rest are integral to self-care, yet I've felt guilty about resting—having no defined goals and no list of daily accomplishments. bell hooks explained that society has taught that Black women's purpose is to be "little worker bees who never stop," so we, too, have "trouble calling a halt."<sup>24</sup> I feared contributing to the "lazy" stereotype ascribed to Black people and to overweight people. I felt that even during a global pandemic, I should be working harder, doing more, creating ways to labor. In the academic world, work—not rest—is celebrated. Even my fitness tracker "rewards" me for working hard: "Congratulations, Altheria, you've exercised six straight days!" Never once has it applauded me for taking a day to rest.

#### THE WEIGHT OF IT ALL

I can now better understand how I came to be sick and why healthcare professionals cannot make me well. Gloria Anzaldúa postulated that racism "sucks the life-blood out from our bodies, our souls."<sup>25</sup> Racism—

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22. Kieran Yates, "How Self-Care Has Been Hijacked by Big Business," *Sleek*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/cult-self-care>.

23. Funto Omojola, "This Is How Much Americans Spend on Self-Care Every Year," *Market Watch*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-is-how-much-americans-spend-on-self-care-every-year-2018-08-06>.

24. bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 41.

25. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Haciendo cara, una entrada," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 129.

along with white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy—demands and destroys Black and Brown women's bodies. It is not surprising, then, that cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of women and that almost half (49 percent) of African American women have heart diseases.<sup>26</sup> The rate of diabetes in Black women is 12.7 percent, compared to 7.5 percent for White women.<sup>27</sup> Although these diseases are often linked to lifestyle choices, there is a correlation between poor health and systemic oppression in a society that does not encourage women of color to care for ourselves and that inflicts violence through intersectional discrimination.<sup>28</sup> Our bodies carry racist and sexist violence, sustained anger, and unrecognized trauma.<sup>29</sup> Self-care is necessary to heal our bodies and spirits from this violence. It is in this way that self-care becomes an act of political rebellion. This sentiment is expressed in Lorde's oft-cited quoted, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."<sup>30</sup> In a similar manner, hooks described self-care as an act of "liberatory political practice."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to trauma inflicted by intersectional discrimination, working in a toxic environment contributed to my poor health. I was paying for career success with my life. The global pandemic has caused me to rethink my values, especially in terms of professional work, social activism, and self-care as a Black woman academic. I am now determined to resist the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal exploitation that happens when "we lack a firm grounding in self and identity."<sup>32</sup> Writing this narrative has been integral in helping me establish firm grounding and in envisioning my future work. I want to be known as

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26. American Heart Association, "Facts about Heart Disease in Women," 2020, <https://www.goredforwomen.org/en/about-heart-disease-in-women/facts>; American Heart Association, "Heart Disease in African American Women," 2020, <https://www.goredforwomen.org/en/about-heart-disease-in-women/facts/heart-disease-in-african-american-women>.

27. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, "Diabetes and African Americans," 2019, <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=18>.

28. Barlow, "#WhenIFellInLoveWithMyself," 208.

29. Anzaldúa, "Haciendo cara, una entrada," 128.

30. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988; Mineola, NY: Ixia Press, 2017), 130.

31. hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 7.

32. Ibid., 7.

a scholar-activist whose work is characterized by discipline, excellence, and significance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused global devastation and tragedy. Nevertheless, it has confronted Americans with uncomfortable truths about our values. We are grappling to determine whose lives are worth saving and whose can be sacrificed, whose work is *really* essential and whose is nonessential. But we should also have conversations about the dangers of living in a capitalistic society in which hard work is a deeply embedded but problematic ideal. Now that COVID-19 has helped to expose some of the dangers of capitalism, it is an ideal time for a reframing of work expectations for women of color.

The following anecdote seems an apropos way to punctuate my commentary on hard work and self-care. A few years ago, my then-department chair resigned from her administrative position to return to faculty status. The incoming department chair gave a speech as she presented her predecessor with a gift on behalf of the department's faculty. In this speech, she emphasized the former chair's hard work—her selfless commitment and the countless hours she had given the department. I remember thinking, "I don't want hard work, alone, to define my career." When we are post-pandemic, I want to do "work that matters"—"work that makes life sweet"—"hard, soulful work."<sup>33</sup> I believe that hard work impresses, but *heart* work impacts. I choose to engage in the latter, for the betterment of all who suffer at the hands of global white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. In order to sustain this work, I must strive to integrate my pandemic self-care practices, and a bevy of others, into my post-pandemic work. Meaningful work and self-care are not antithetical principles: balancing both is one of the most powerful ways that women of color can challenge capitalistic exploitation.

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33. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound," in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 22; hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 37; Scott, "Black Feminist Reflections on Activism," 131.