

Antinomies of Self-Care

Sarah Sharma / Lynx Sainte-Marie / Lauren Fournier

Selfie-Care and the Uncommons

Sarah Sharma

Self-care is a strategy of survival, “an act of political warfare” for bodies neglected and worn down by the intersecting nodes of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy.¹ Self-care is distinct from the *selfie-care* found in glossy, neoliberal, postfeminist magazines, where women are instructed to recharge in order to re-enter currents of patriarchy/capitalism/white supremacy. The self *taking care of itself* has become a photo op, one that too often parades the individual as the most important unit in political struggle. This coopting of the radical necessity of self-care speaks to neoliberal feminism’s ignorance of how gender is mutually raced and classed. Neoliberal feminism is a privileged bystander often complicit with the regime of violence that leaves so many uncared for.

The self-care/selfie-care political spectrum is easy to plot. #Selfiecare is a photo of a pair of feet floating in a pool of sudsy water being worked on by the repetitive motions of the manicurist at the nail factory. On the other end of the spectrum you might find people engaged in communal forms of reproductive labour so others can eat, sleep, and rest. Care in the commons is not so digitally noteworthy—this is a type of care that the medium cannot capture and quickly brandish via a hashtag. Selfie-care comes by way of online self-diagnos-

tic quizzes, clickbait lists, and BuzzFeed tips. Selfie-care lists things one must do: Dance, Eat, Breathe, Hydrate, Touch a Tree, Send a Nice Email.

I suspect those things take on extra special significance in contemporary culture because they can’t be taken care of by a technological device or through the labour of another. Selfie-care makes the commons not only a regime of productivity and efficiency, but also one of over-determined scarcity. The left is not immune from selfie-care. The list, like the selfie, reorients self-care away from an act of refusal toward a momentary retreat, supposedly excusable in this moment of Trump. Self-care becomes a lifestyle choice for a productive, healthful life, whether you are an activist or a capitalist. Sadly, there is no #selfcare list that says: get high, call in sick, watch Netflix all day, punch a bigot or a nazi, and then enjoy a loaf of bread. Ultimately, #whocares if it’s a kale smoothie or loaf of bread—that’s a matter of #selfiecare.

The radical potential of self-care is impeded by the need to document it, publicize it, enclose it in a list. Unlike selfie-care, self-care isn’t about the private domain of the self, but about the maintenance of the conditions of possibility for people to be cared for in common.

The Endless Possibilities of Our Limitations²

Lynx Sainte-Marie

I’ve spent the last several years presenting, performing, facilitating, lecturing, and consulting in spaces all over this colonized land commonly known as Canada. Recently, my focus has been healing justice and disability justice, challenging individuals and organizations to move away from *self care* as an absolute rule—where the onus of care is on the individual—towards a *community care* practice and politic. Healing justice takes much of its teachings from disability justice, borne of sick and disabled, queer, trans, gender non-conforming, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) communities who prioritize the bodies, leadership, and genius of the most marginalized.³ Both of these intersectionality-centred frameworks—disability justice and healing justice—ask questions like: How can we move towards liberation together? Are we not only giving, but also asking our communities for what we need, and holding them accountable? Communities that heal together resist better together. And sustainability is key. The imperialist white supremacist capitalist cishetereopatriarchy knows it runs more efficiently when we’re separated, outnumbered, and alone.

What oppressive systems teach us about

1 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1988).

2 This is a revised excerpt of the article “Can The Work Heal Us,” published in the Disability Justice issue of *The Peak Magazine* 56, no. 4 (2017).

3 I owe so much of my current knowledge of disability justice and healing justice to the wisdom and genius of Black, Indigenous, women, femmes, and non-binary people of colour I’ve encountered URL and IRL, including but not limited to Spectra Speaks, Esther Armah, adrienne maree brown, Yashna Maya Padamsee, Mia Mingus, Ciel Sainte-Marie, melannie monoceros, Jassie Justice, and Danielle Stevens. May our brilliance always light the way through the darkness.

4 Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory,” *Mask*, January 2016, <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.

5 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1988); Sarah Ahmed, “Selfcare as Warfare,” *feministkilljoys*, 25 August 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare>.

the kind of support we should value is poisonous and insidious. It means that people are reluctant to see the everyday, practical things they do as care work. As if, like building muscle, when you’re not wincing from the tearing of tissue, you’re probably not doing it right. Disabled activists who organize online feel the brunt of these ableist narratives every day, even though our arthritic fingers hurt with every hashtag. BIPOC care workers and cultural workers, particularly those of us with multiple intersections of oppression, are paid less than our white/white-passing/lighter-skinned peers, and are often asked to work for free, or not asked at all. Many of us struggle to take care of ourselves, while those of us with more privilege and resources are taught that the people we should be supporting are *out there somewhere*. So, we volunteer at crisis lines four hours a week, while the emotional labour we engage in with loved ones is scarce. We work with disabled youth, yet the struggles of our chronically ill friends go unnoticed. Couple this with all the self-care we should be doing, but aren’t, because the world needs saving, and it’s no wonder so many of us deal with burn-out and compassion fatigue.

But the ways we can and do take care

of ourselves and of each other, with whatever we have at our disposal, are valuable. Now, when I think about the care I want to cultivate with others, I think of the range of things we are able to do for ourselves with the support of our folks. I think about celebrating our self-determination and striving for interdependency. I think about the time they moved carefully beside me down the street, without questions and accusations, watching me as I cautiously took my first neighbourhood walk in a year. And the crowdfunder that he, she and they created on my behalf for the medical device I use for my pain. Or when we promised to check in with one another and spoke about boundary-setting as intentional pathways to each other’s hearts. I think about the capacity I have as a sick and disabled person, and how the Medical Industrial Complex describes my capacity as “limited.” But, when we centre disability, our limitations become endless care strategies and possibilities. We’re powerful on our own, no doubt, but all of us working together—as multi-issue people with complex bodies, histories, relationships to this land, and stories, holding our most marginalized while still getting the care that we need—this is the kind of care that, I believe, will set us free.

Sustaining Our Selves, Collectively

Lauren Fournier

Self-care is ambivalent. On the one hand, *care of the self* has been reclaimed by intersectional feminists as a politicized act of autonomy by which those whose lives have been rendered precarious uphold the value of their lives: in hostile circumstances, survival becomes resistance. Johanna Hedva articulates an ethos of agency for those living with chronic illness,⁴ while Audre Lorde and Sara Ahmed champion “self-care as warfare,” emphasizing how taking care of the self, particularly when that self is marginalized, is necessary for sustaining resistance to social, political, and economic structures that work against us.⁵

On the other hand, to *take care of the self* is a neoliberal imperative that has been criticized for removing responsibility from the state, displacing the onus to the individual. Think, for example, of debates about publicly funded health care and privatization, where right-wing politicians frame questions of “access” to health care in terms of “customers” and the right to purchase, rather than in terms of citizen rights.

Alert to how capitalism swallows resistance movements with such ease, or at least tries to, we must approach “self-care” critically, especially in light of the current context of neoliberal capitalism, with its privileging of the individual *self* above all else.

In my curatorial project *Self Care for Skeptics* (2015), artists, writers, and activists troubled self-care through intersectional feminist, queer, and BIPOC frameworks. Some contributors acknowledged the desirability of self-care practices—it’s important to look good and feel good, for example—even as they critiqued the patriarchal, neoliberal, capitalist, and ableist ideologies that scaffold the notion of self-care. Others moved away from self-care and embraced new conceptions of collectivity, opting for an ethics of *collaborative care* that places renewed emphasis on community.

In *The Sustenance Rite* exhibition, which is part of *Take Care*, artists engage the space of *health* and *care*—both individual and collective—from positionalities grounded in experiences of oppression and stigmatization, mental health issues, physical illness, and mourning and grief. The artists’ projects unhinge dominant conceptions of health and illness, making room for more expansive conceptions of what it means to be well. Reflecting on the rites and rights of mental and physical health care in the contemporary moment, *The Sustenance Rite* makes space for rituals that sustain us.