

Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk

Reclaiming the Radical Politics of Self-Care: A Crip-of-Color Critique

Survival isn't some theory operating in a vacuum. It's a matter of my everyday living and making decisions.
—Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light"

Google searches for the term *self-care* in the United States began to climb in 2015, as the country approached its contentious 2016 election; searches for the term continued to reach new highs well into 2018 (Google, n.d.). As Aisha Harris (2017) wrote, "In 2016, self-care officially crossed over into the mainstream. It was the new chicken soup for the progressive soul." Between 2016 and 2018, articles on self-care appeared in a variety of major outlets online, such as the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, and the *New Yorker* (Donner et al. 2018; Nazish 2017; Baratta 2018; Kisner 2017). In 2016 singer Solange released a song titled "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)," and in 2018 the late rapper Mac Miller released a song and music video called "Self Care." On social media, the hashtag #selfcare increasingly appeared (and continues to appear) on posts (many of them sponsored by advertisers) for just about everything: yoga, meditation, massages, face masks, juice cleanses, resort getaways, and more. An overview of the use of the term *self-care* online, therefore,

suggests that it refers to any behavior that directly, and often exclusively, benefits an individual's physical or mental health. The rise of searches for and references to *self-care* during and after the 2016 election season suggests that, in a frightening and divisive political time, many Americans were trying to figure out how to attend to their mental and physical well-being.

Several mainstream articles have attempted to track the rising cultural interest in self-care, noting how the term's use, particularly on social media, seems to encourage conspicuous consumption and performative self-improvement that can be harmful (Penny 2016; Meltzer 2016; Lieberman 2018). In the *New Yorker*, Jordan Kisner (2017) also noted that, despite the recent uptick in uses of the term, the concept of self-care can be traced back much farther in American culture in relationship to such ideas as self-reliance and self-development or cultivation: "Self-care in America has always required a certain amount of performance: a person has to be able not only to care for herself but to prove to society that she's doing it." At the same time as this first set of mainstream articles critiquing contemporary performances of self-care was being published between 2016 and 2018, another group of essays were also appearing. In these pieces, authors who identify as people of color and/or queer attempt to reclaim the term as a political survival concept, frequently also critiquing the loose, performative, and capitalist uses of *self-care* in the contemporary moment (Dionne 2015; Mirk and Dionne 2016; Harris 2017; Rupiah 2017). These authors each grounded their understanding of self-care in the work of black feminist lesbian poet and theorist Audre Lorde. In the titular essay "A Burst of Light," in her 1988 book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*, Lorde ([1988] 2017: 130) wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." In this second group of articles, many of which include this quote, authors argue that the concept of self-care as Lorde theorized it is deeply political, based in experiences of racialization, womanhood, and/or queerness.

As queer women of color working in disability studies, we both noticed a conspicuous absence in nearly all of the mainstream discussions of self-care: disability seemed nowhere to be found—except, perhaps, in the unspoken shadow of what might happen should one not take care of one's health. This, we thought, was highly ironic considering that "A Burst of Light" is a series of journal entries about Lorde's experience as a black lesbian living with cancer. For us, understanding self-care as Lorde theorized it and understanding the importance of self-care in our current political moment are deeply grounded in experiences of disability. As a result, in this article we

propose a reclamation of the radical crip, feminist, queer, and racialized roots of self-care offered by Lorde. We argue that a radical politics of self-care is inextricably tied to the lived experiences and temporalities of multiply marginalized people, especially disabled queer people, disabled people of color, and disabled queer people of color. Our work here attempts to hold the complexity of claiming time for ourselves to slow down, to take care, while also understanding the real urgency of our contemporary moment. We thus propose that, while crip time is often about slowing and adapting models of time and productivity, crip time as a concept is urgently needed to understand self-care outside capitalist imperatives. To perform this reclaiming of the radical politics of self-care, we engage in crip-of-color critique.

Crip-of-color critique is a concept developed by Jina B. Kim that models potential affinities between feminist of color/queer of color and disability theorizing. It offers a method of analysis drawn from the intersection of antiracist, anticapitalist, and feminist disability politics, highlighting the centrality of ideologies of ability to racial-gendered violence and management, as well as the refusal of women and queers of color to submit to those ideologies.¹ In so doing, it follows the call issued by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (2011: 3) in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, which stresses the urgency of developing relational, coalitional, and cross-categorical analytics that can appraise “how particular populations are rendered vulnerable to processes of death and de-valuation over and against other populations” in the decades following civil rights and decolonization. A crip-of-color critique thus highlights how the ableist language of disability, dependency, and laziness has been marshaled by state and extralegal entities to justify the denial of life-sustaining resources to disabled, low-income, immigrant, and black and brown communities, with women, queer, and gender-nonconforming populations often suffering the greatest costs. It further examines how writers, artists, and activists, primarily women and queers of color, generate systems of value, aesthetic practices, and liberatory frameworks that center the realities of disability, illness, and dependency. As such, a crip-of-color critique reads for relations of support, care, and regeneration in a world for those “never meant to survive,” understanding care as itself vital political work that simultaneously asks us to slow down and to pay attention and learn quickly (Lorde 1997: 255).

In what follows, we first provide a brief overview of Lorde’s work, with an emphasis on “A Burst of Light,” to establish how Lorde discussed caring for one’s self. Building on Lorde, then, we make arguments for how and why

we must understand self-care as political, followed by a theorization of what it means to practice both self-care and care, beyond the individual and outside capitalist temporalities focused on productivity and profit. Throughout, we center work by people of color, queer people, and disabled people (and those who live at the intersection of more than one of these categories) whose lives continue to be threatened, who continue to experience harm in this white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, heteropatriarchal settler-colonial nation state, and for whom a radical politics of self-care is necessary for survival.

Defining Self-Care, Returning to Lorde

How do I want to live the rest of my life and what am I going to do to ensure that I get to do it exactly or as close as possible to how I want that living to be?
—Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light”

This quote from Lorde that caring for one’s self “is not self-indulgence” but, rather, “self-preservation” and “an act of political warfare” is one that, like many beloved quotes, is often taken up outside of its original context (Lorde [1988] 2017: 130). The quote appears in the epilogue of “A Burst of Light,” and understanding how and where it appears in the text, as well as the content of the text overall, is useful in understanding how Lorde defined and mobilized the concept of self-care. First, “A Burst of Light” is a collection of journal entries written between January 1984 and August 1987. In the text, Lorde chronicles her life as she discovers her breast cancer (written about previously in her 1980 collection *The Cancer Journals*) has metastasized to her liver. She chooses to pursue homeopathic treatments, including a specialty clinic in Switzerland, rather than undergo another surgery. “A Burst of Light” captures not only Lorde’s experiences with the medical industrial complex, alternative medicine, weight loss, pain, and other people with cancer but also her theorization of these experiences in relationship to her writing, her political activism, and her understanding of racism, sexism, homophobia, apartheid, and imperialism. At its core, “A Burst of Light” is about “living with cancer in an intimate daily relationship” as a multiply marginalized person, a black disabled lesbian (109). This daily relationship with cancer embodies the simultaneous temporalities of a crip-of-color approach to self-care, in that Lorde is forced to slow down and focus on her well-being and that slowing down remains urgent and necessary, as refusing to do so risks quickening the pace of her debilitation and illness.

The quote about caring for one’s self appears toward the end of this essay, in the last sentence of the first paragraph of the epilogue, which reads in total:

Sometimes I feel like I'm living on a different star from the one I am used to calling home. It has not been a steady progression. I had to examine, in my dreams as well as in my immune-function tests, the devastating effects of overextension. Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference. Necessary for me as cutting down on sugar. Crucial. Physically. Psychically. Caring for myself is not a self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. (Lorde [1988] 2017: 130)

In the sentences preceding the more famous quote, Lorde suggests that learning to live with cancer feels like a different world, a different temporality than she lived within before—it is not a steady progression. Although Lorde was visually impaired and therefore already living with a disability, her work in “A Burst of Light” and *The Cancer Journals* suggests that living with cancer brought her into a new relationship with her bodymind. In the epilogue, Lorde describes the changes she has had to make as crucial for both physical and psychic well-being, and these crucial aspects of self-care then lead into the more recognized quote about caring for one’s self as an act of political warfare. Reading the quote in the context of both “A Burst of Light” as a whole and this particular opening paragraph of the epilogue begins to demonstrate what exactly Lorde understood self-care to be: physical and mental, thoughtful, purposeful, necessary, political, and resistant to normative, capitalist approaches to time that stand in opposition to wellness for marginalized people.

In concrete terms, Lorde described her self-care as thoughtfully taking care of herself to ensure both quantity and quality of her remaining time. This included things we would associate with self-care today, such as reducing sugar, not overworking one’s self, and meditation, but it also meant educating one’s self in order to make informed, conscious decisions about one’s health and life. Lorde journals about going to Barnes & Noble to read in the medical section, talking to other cancer survivors, and seeking out alternative treatments. Lorde ([1988] 2017: 114) noted, however, that obtaining this knowledge “does not mean I give into the belief, arrogant or naive, that I know everything I need to know in order to make informed decisions about my body. But attending to my own health, gaining enough information to help me understand and participate in the decisions made about my body by people who know more medicine than I do, are crucial strategies in my battle for living.” Self-care is not, therefore, a rejection of medicine but, rather, an active and informed participation with medicine that recognizes the knowledge and insights of both patient and practitioner. In multiple places

in the text Lorde is critical of the medical-industrial complex for being controlling, capitalist, racist, and sexist, such as when doctors tried to rush her decision about surgery using fear tactics rather than allowing her time to process the shock of her cancer's return, or when a specialist calls her "girl" during a consultation and describes her in his notes as having an "obese abdomen" and a "pendulous breast" (110, 11). In these moments, we see why Lorde feels compelled to care for and educate herself in order to make health choices that truly center her needs and holistic well-being.

In addition to these concrete elements of self-care in "A Burst of Light," Lorde also makes clear that the process of self-care must be integrated into living life, not separate from it, and that self-care is not exclusively oriented toward cure. Lorde must take time for self-care consistently, demonstrating that care cannot occur outside of time or only during what capitalism would consider "personal time" but, rather, is an ongoing engagement that cannot necessarily be adapted to a forty-hour work week or a nine-to-five job. At one point Lorde ([1988] 2017: 114) wrote, "I fight hard to keep my treatment scene together in some coherent and serviceable way, integrated into my daily living and absolute. . . . This not only keeps me in an intimate, positive relationship to my own health, but it also underlines the fact that I have the responsibility for attending my own health. I cannot simply hand over that responsibility to anybody else." This commitment to caring for one's self while living a full life is clear in the way Lorde, despite the tumor and the urgency from doctors, continues to work as she desires, attend black literary events, visit with friends, and write. She refuses to allow her disability to stop her from living, but this is not an overcoming narrative; it is instead a rejection of the notion that health or achieving able-bodiedness should be the sole focus of disabled people's lives at all times. This becomes most clear in the epilogue, when she wrote, "I try to weave my life-prolonging treatments into a living context—to resist giving myself over like a sacrificial offering to the furious single-minded concentration upon cure that leaves no room to examine what living and fighting on the physical front can mean. What living with cancer can teach me" (131). Here Lorde rejects an exclusive, compulsive focus on cure while acknowledging the need for care and well-being. For her, survival is not merely about being not-dead, about having more time at all costs, but, rather, about living fully for the time one has and learning from one's experiences, identities, and embodiment.

As this overview makes clear, disability is central to Lorde's conceptualization of self-care: not the avoidance (or cure) of it entirely but living as well as possible with it and understanding experiences of disability, illness,

and disease in the context of her other social identities (race, gender, and sexuality), as well as the ordinary aspects of her everyday existence, her life passions, and her political commitments. This, then, is why, in addition to recognizing the concrete practices of Lorde's own particular self-care for her particular embodiment, disability, identities, passions, and goals, we must also understand self-care as always inherently political.

Self-Care as Political

I respect the time I spend each day treating my body, and I consider it part of my political work . . . a kind of training in self-love and physical resistance.
—Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light”

Self-care for Lorde is an inherently political project that we contend cannot be divorced from disability politics and that derives its sense of political urgency in part from the foreshortened time of a cancer diagnosis. Lorde explicitly theorized how to be political while sick/ill/disabled and understood cancer, disability, illness, and disease as sites of political theorization. In other words, a particular kind of politicized knowledge emerges directly from Lorde's experience with cancer and from the truncated life span that comes with such a diagnosis. When you live in a world that seeks to do you harm or one that neglects you in such a way that your death is allowable, even necessary, both how you live and how you die are political. And when your death looms imminently due to the “economics of disease in america,” the temporal framework of terminal illness inevitably shapes your creative and intellectual output (Lorde [1988] 2017: 95). Crip temporality, in this context, also accelerates the clock and the rhythms of living and writing in conversation with Sarah Lochlann Jain's (2007) concept of “living in prognosis.” As Lorde ([1988] 2017: 53–54) wrote, “I wasn't supposed to exist anyway, not in any meaningful way in this fucked up whiteboys' world. I want desperately to live, and I'm ready to fight for that living even if I die shortly.”

Throughout “A Burst of Light,” Lorde makes clear not only that self-care and survival are political but also that what she has learned from living with cancer informs and is informed by what she has learned as a black feminist lesbian activist and poet. This is clear in the way that in both “A Burst of Light” and *The Cancer Journals* Lorde weaves in imagery and discussions of the civil rights movement, apartheid, indigenous land rights, and environmental racism. Again, her identities, her race, gender, sexuality, and disability mutually inform one another and her theorization of self-care. As Lorde

([1988] 2017: 41) asserted, “The struggle with cancer now informs all my days, but it is only another phase of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph.” As the phrase “all my days” suggests, these battles, while not synonymous, are mutually entwined and continue with no clear end date for multiply marginalized people.

In addition to the personal political context of being a black disabled lesbian, Lorde’s theorization of self-care was also developed in the particular social, historical, and political context of the 1980s and Ronald Reagan’s administration, which, not unlike our current political regime, was slowly dismantling the welfare state and its provisions of state care for low-income communities. The Reagan administration reduced benefits for most working parents in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, eliminated 4 percent of food stamp recipients, lowered state subsidies for Medicaid recipients, and cut spending on federal housing, school lunch assistance, and social service programs nationwide. This erosion of state and federal supports and protections for various marginalized groups is critical for understanding both the practical and political nature of self-care for Lorde. Further, this historical context also makes clear why, for Lorde, insisting on caring for one’s self and surviving in a hostile climate was inherently tied to her political work for social and political change, for self-determination and liberation for marginalized people.

Indeed, it is impossible to understand “A Burst of Light” and its assertion of self-care outside of the shaping influence of Reaganomics, which Lorde references throughout the text as a primary antagonist in both personal and collective bids for survival. Reagan’s antiwelfare policies constitute the center of one of the first entries in “A Burst of Light,” dated February 9, 1984:

So. No doubt about where we are in the world’s story. It has just cost \$32,000 to complete a government-commissioned study that purports to show there is no rampant hunger in the U.S.A. I wonder if they realize *rampant* means *aggressive*.

So. The starving old women who used to sit in broken-down rooming houses waiting for a welfare check now lie under park benches and eat out of garbage bins. “I only eat fruit,” she mumbled, rummaging through the refuse bin behind Gristede’s supermarket, while her gnarled Black hands carefully cut away the rotted parts of a cantaloupe with a plastic Burger King knife. ([1988] 2017: 44)

Cataloging welfare reform's contradictions, as well as the intensified cruelty enacted by a state committed only to the bare minimum, Lorde's frank condemnation of Reaganomics issues an abrupt break from previous entries, which described sensuous meals with the black lesbian group Sapphire Sapphos and her own experience watching the movie *King*. The first passage in "A Burst of Light" not written from a first-person perspective, the above entry radiates Lorde's meditations on survival outward from the sphere of immediate personal experience, attaching them to structural violence on a national (and, later in the essay, international) scale. The decimation of state care, meager to begin with, is co-articulated with her own struggles for self-care and preservation in an antiblack, misogynist, heteronormative, and profiteering medical industry. For Lorde, such struggles are part of the same machinery that seeks to delimit black life. Rather than something depoliticized and relegated to individual concern, then, care emerges as a political problematic that resonates across a number of scales, from Lorde's own bids to determine her own course of medical care to the death-dealing denial of state care and the foreshortening of life for the nation's most vulnerable.

An additional key component of Lorde's conceptualization of self-care is that it is not just political but political *work*. Routing this discussion now toward the politics of labor, Lorde's condemnation of Reagan-era welfare reform evokes what Nancy Fraser (2016) and others have termed a "crisis of care": the inability to perform the work of care in an increasingly unforgiving context of not only reduced state support but also eviscerated labor protections and ever-accelerating mandates for productivity.² The crisis of care is thus also a crisis of time, in which the unforgiving temporalities of capitalism increasingly disappear the slivers of time available for replenishment and renewal. According to Fraser (2016: 99), capitalism's relentless drive for sustained accumulation effectively "[squeezes] a key set of social capacities: the capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally." In Marxist feminist traditions, such capacities travel under the term of *social reproduction*—the unvalued, invisibilized, and feminized labor of support, care, and maintenance that simply make life more possible and that demand temporalities outside of frameworks of productivity and efficiency. Although worker productivity and well-being are contingent on social reproductive labor, capitalism's "orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" (100), or in other words, the temporal demands of unlimited accumulation eviscerate the labor-time available for

social reproduction. As Fraser makes clear in her analysis, this crisis of care is simultaneously a crisis of labor, which in turn furthers an ableist ideology that denies the physical and psychological needs of workers, as well as their capacity to provide care for others. Another politicized feature of self-care, then, is its relationship to labor and labor-time—whether it is marshaled in the service of producing better workers and thus reclaiming time for care or, in the case of Lorde, it entails working toward a world adverse to the violence of capitalism altogether.

Indeed, as self-care went viral in the past few years, circulating across mass, popular, and social media, the concept soon became inextricable from the imperatives of work and productivity. One of the most prominent uses of the term connects self-care to the optimization of work—one cares for the self in order to increase one's capacity as a productive worker. In other words, taking time for self-care is acceptable only insofar as it enables the further optimization of one's time spent at work. A 2017 *Huffington Post* article, "Want More Productive Employees? Encourage Self-Care" (Kline 2017), encapsulates this particular usage, acknowledging the rise of chronic work-related stress affecting the American workforce and suggesting "employee self-care" as the antidote. The article suggests that "encouraging employees to tend to their own health and well-being produces a number of benefits, including reduced absenteeism and staff turnover, reduced health-care costs, happier employees, and greater productivity overall." Among the activities grouped under employee self-care are "mindfulness practices," "exercise," and "spending time in nature." Many scholars have observed how suggestions such as these deflect the possibility of corporate accountability to workforces, placing the onus of responsibility for worker well-being on the employees themselves. Certainly, the redirecting of self-care toward the well-being of corporations is part of an overall trend to dismantle public and collective structures of care and to depoliticize care labor by relegating it to individual spheres of concern. It is also a means of further compromising the time already belonging to the worker, insofar as these corporate self-care suggestions do not imply increased time away from work.

Yet, even in ostensibly progressive circles, the concept of self-care (and, at times, care more broadly) is cast outside the realm of political work and positioned as a waste of time. Often, care or social reproductive labor is seen as, in the words of disability justice activist and theorist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 143), "a sideline or afterthought to our movements." For instance, in the piece "An End to Self Care," labor organizer B. Loewe (2012) critiques the co-optation of Lorde's call for self-preservation, calling for, as

the title suggests, an “end to self-care.” The mainstream circulation of self-care, Loewe argues, stands in for “an importation of middle-class values of leisure,” one that ignores power dynamics and collective responsibility for others. Loewe (2012) casts this version of self-care as not just outside of but antagonistic to radical political work: “We cannot knit our way to revolution.” While “An End to Self Care” does indeed acknowledge the importance of collective models of care and does not wholly dismiss care labor, it nonetheless promotes a vision of round-the-clock organizing work that seems to deny the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of working bodyminds, positioning the movement itself as self-care. This ethos of endless work, while oriented toward political liberation, nonetheless upholds capitalism’s wish that we never be “off the clock” and that care for the self should occur only in the (increasingly disappearing) slivers of time granted to nonwork and non-activist activities.

In her insightful cri(p)tique of B. Loewe’s anti-self-care polemic, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) highlights the evacuation of care labor and radical care politics from Loewe’s conception of political work. Loewe’s (2012) idealization of a “politics and practice of desire that could . . . ignite our hearts with a fuel to work endlessly,” as Piepzna-Samarasinha points out, ignores the necessity of rest, joy, and self-preservation in movement work. It promotes an understanding of movement organizing implicitly centered on ideologies of ability, or a preference for bodyminds with seemingly endless energy reserves and the capacity to “optimize” their time. Further, Loewe’s polemic again casts certain forms of care labor as outside political possibility. The work of knitting and other forms of cultural work, Piepzna-Samarasinha argues, have in fact long been central to movement building. Of course, the bourgeois model of self-care rooted in individual responsibility “has been co-opted by people who want to make money off it,” but this model does not mean we should do away with self-care altogether or see self-care as a distraction from political work (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018: 210). As Piepzna-Samarasinha observed in an earlier essay, “A Time to Hole Up and a Time to Kick Ass” (2006: 172, 171), the self-care and survival work done “on a daily basis” by women of color in fact counts as activism, and to sustain movements for the long haul—to ensure that their time is not limited—it is also necessary to take “time on the couch.” Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 210–11) thus advocates for forms of self-care that replicate “a model of sustainability that comes from disability justice,” which entails that we “[listen] to broke-ass, disabled, and femme communities about how we actually create ways of organizing where we’re not just grinding ourselves into the dust.”

Though Lorde's "A Burst of Light" was written far before the advent of *disability justice* as a term, in returning to it we enact this type of listening practice, one that directs attention to how disabled and sick women of color conceive of and carry out movement building against the temporal imperatives of productivity and efficiency. Akin to Piepzna-Samarasinha's theorization of care, Lorde's ([1988] 2017: 51) political imaginary as encapsulated in "A Burst of Light" posits self-care, self-preservation, and care work more broadly as political projects fundamentally rooted in social change and transformation: "I am saving my life by using my life in the service of what must be done." This, too, can be understood as a radical reclaiming of time insofar as Lorde uses her limited days left in the work of political liberation and the nurturance of black queer collectivity. In fact, Lorde begins "A Burst of Light" with an entry describing a special dinner thrown by the group Sapphire Sapphos during their regular monthly meeting. The rich, sumptuous details of the food and shared company stand in pointed contrast to Loewe's (2012) characterization of "comfort food" as "supplemental" to the work of revolution. Lorde ([1988] 2017: 41–42) wrote:

Coming in out of the D.C. winter storm felt like walking into an embrace. The roaring fireplace, the low-beamed wooden room filled with beautiful Black and Brown women, a table laden with delicious foods so obviously cooked with love. There was sweet potato pie, rice and red beans, black beans and rice, pigeon peas and rice, beans and pimentos, spaghetti with Swedish meatballs, codfish and ackee, spinach noodles with clam sauce, five-bean salad, fish salad, and other salads of different combinations.

The description of the nourishing spread, which features food traditions from multiple corners of the African diaspora, continues onward for several more lines; indeed, the cataloging of the food takes up about half of this introductory entry. Here, then, the time of the narrative dilates as description subsumes action, mirroring the time of rest, renewal, and replenishment. And while this gathering is not explicitly for disabled women of color, Lorde's description of the meeting nonetheless foregrounds some of the physical, psychological, and social needs of the body (and, more specifically, the bodies of black and brown women), as well as outlining what it looks like for those needs to be met. What is more, this breaking of bread has a temporal axis: it not only ensures the endurance and survival of bodies in the present—performing the labor of maintenance and reproduction—but also imagines a future world that these bodies might inhabit. In other words, the Sapphire Sapphos' dinner positions the care labor of preparing and shar-

ing food as a world-making practice in and of itself; this gathering is the “past dreaming the future real and tasty into the present” (Lorde [1988] 2017: 41). Political liberation, in the context of this dinner, is thus also a temporal project—the expansion and prioritization of time spent toward care and replenishment.

The directing of the group’s care work toward their own pleasure, endurance, and survival, and Lorde’s purposeful recollection of this process, feels particularly significant given the historic uses of black women’s social reproductive labor, namely, to sustain and reproduce white families. In the pathbreaking essay “From Servitude to Service Work,” Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992: 6, 3) identifies “domestic labor in private households” as a primary example of the “racial division of reproductive labor” that accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century (see also Chang 2000). In the South, black women made up the vast majority of the domestic servant class, though the racial-ethnic identities of such workers varied based on region (e.g., Chicana women in the Southwest, Japanese women in Hawaii and California). White women conscripted black domestics to perform the burdensome tasks that they themselves refused to do, at the rate of about “one-third of [white women’s] wages” (Glenn 1992: 10). This, too, came at the expense of black women’s own children and families: “A black child nurse reported in 1912 that she worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day caring for her mistress’s four children. . . . She reported that she was allowed to go home ‘only once in every two weeks, every other Sunday afternoon. . . . I see my own children only when they happen to see me on the streets’” (18). In other words, white women stole black women’s time for self- and other-care and redirected it toward the replenishment of their own families.

Lorde displays an acute awareness of such labor practices and histories in her writings. In the oft-cited “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” she critiques the contemporary manifestations of the racial division of reproductive labor, even within the ostensibly progressive circles of white academic feminism. Addressing a largely white audience at “The Second Sex” conference, Lorde ([1984] 2020: 102) declared: “If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us . . . then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend to your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of color?” Care, then, is a political practice not only because of its function as a key method of social change but also because of the particular histories surrounding black women’s social reproductive labor, which endure into our present moment.

To reorient black women's practices of care toward the self, and toward reproducing black, queer, and disabled life rather than the structures of white supremacy, is not only a profoundly political gesture but also a mode of production toward alternate social and political worlds altogether. In this context, self-care is less about caring for one's individual body, and thus replicating what is, than about speculating on what could be. What would it look like to understand black, queer, disabled, and low-income populations as worthy recipients of care? What would it mean for black women to actually care for themselves? What would it mean for black women to use their time toward self-renewal and the renewal of their communities? What would we have to imagine and build in order to bring this world into being? Self-care, then, for Lorde, is a practice of political creation, a practice of reclaiming time, and a practice that necessarily goes beyond the boundaries of the self and toward the genesis of other ways of being.

Conclusion: From Self-Care to Care Work—Moving beyond the Self

For the first time I really feel that my writing has a substance and stature that will survive me.

—Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light"

If one black woman I do not know gains hope and strength from my story, then it has been worth the difficulty of telling.

—Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light"

Having now explored Audre Lorde's theorization of self-care as an inherently political work that emerges from experiences of marginalization, especially disability, race, gender, sexuality, and class, reclaiming self-care's radical potential, we want to conclude with thoughts on what it might mean to take the politics of self-care beyond the self, to care work more generally, particularly as theorized by disabled women and femmes, especially disabled women and femmes of color. In doing so, we want to emphasize crip-of-color temporality: our lineage, our survival and futurity, grounded in creative-critical practices that emerge from marginalized knowledges and experiences. As our epigraphs for this section suggest, Lorde wrote with the hope and understanding that telling her individual story, sharing her individual knowledge and practices, would have a wider, collective impact.

We contend that the logical outcome or future of Lorde's radical politics of self-care is care work, because for Lorde caring for one's self was never

about the individual self alone but, rather, as this article has detailed, about caring for the self in order to do one's political work of change, including involving others in the work of care through networks of support. In other words, the self for Lorde was never about the individual, bounded body but about how the self exists in relation to and in support of other bodies. In this sense, self-care is socially reproductive, productive of both a social field and a viable future and time for socially dispossessed populations. We see this in "A Burst of Light" and *The Cancer Journals* when Lorde continually discusses and names the many people, particularly black women, who provide support, advice, and love beyond romantic relationships and biological kinship alone. At one point in "A Burst of Light," Lorde even expresses sadness and frustration with her friends with breast cancer whose deaths feel like betrayals of their promises to survive together. More contemporarily, we see the connection between individual self-care and care work more generally in the emergence of care collectives and online communities of sick, ill, and disabled people who share knowledge, support, and resources in order to help another survive, physically, mentally, and emotionally. These contemporary networks of politicized care are documented in Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work* (2018) in ways far more eloquent and detailed than we can or should do here, as scholars who have not actively participated in these networks. But we argue that this work, like Lorde's ([1988] 2017: 97), seeks to "acknowledge all those intricate connections between us by which we sustain and empower each other," no matter how big or small, across time and space, both in the sense of Lorde providing us sustenance through her work from the past and in the sense of the digital networks of disabled activists using the internet to organize and provide care. In this way, we want to highlight the strong genealogical connections between Lorde's radical politics of self-care and the care work documented and theorized by Piepzna-Samarasinha, urging our fellow scholars, especially those working in feminist and critical race disability studies, to learn from the work of disability justice and healing justice activists who are currently creating and sustaining new forms of self-care and care work that are just as radical and essential as Lorde's.

Too often our activist heroes, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Audre Lorde, get hollowed out into static figures after their deaths, mined for punchy quotes, with their radical roots and visions obscured by (neo)liberal interpretations. By reclaiming the radical politics of self-care as theorized by Lorde and making genealogical connections between her work and the work of Piepzna-Samarasinha specifically (and disability justice writ large), we aim to resist the depoliticization and devaluing of radical queer, racialized, and

disabled care work. In “A Burst of Light” Lorde ([1988] 2017: 117) wrote: “Most of all I think of how important it is for us to share with each other the powers bearing within the breaking of silence about our bodies and our health, even though we had been schooled to be secret and stoic about pain and disease. But that stoicism and silence does not serve us nor our communities, only the forces of things as they are.” Lorde’s emphasis on disabled wisdom as a means of serving marginalized communities reminds us that crip temporality also entails generating forms of sociability that can sustain individuals and collectivities into the future. Further, disability justice activists are currently breaking these silences through social media threads and groups, blogs, memoirs, and performance art, as well as more traditional forms of activism, such as the summer of 2017 ADAPT protests against the plan to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, which included sit-ins and die-ins at government buildings, speak-outs at congressional hearings, and sharing stories of how the destruction of the Affordable Care Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, as proposed by the current administration, would harm and kill many disabled people.

As feminist disability studies scholars, we need to do more to break down the activist-academic divide to support and lift up the work of marginalized activists and cultural workers. As people invested in sustainable social justice practices, we must work to develop, enact, share, and teach a radical politics of self-care, learning and following the lead of those who have had to work hardest for survival and resisting the allure of neoliberalism and capitalism within our care work. We ought to live our lives and do our political work (whatever that work looks like) with the fervor of Lorde, whose words about time, love, collectivity, and urgency we would like to end on: “I want to live the rest of my life, however long or short, with as much sweetness as I can decently manage, loving all the people I love, and doing as much as I can of the work I still have to do. I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my eyes, my nose holes—everywhere. Until it’s every breath I breathe. I’m going to go out like a fucking meteor” (Lorde [1988] 2017: 71).

Notes

- 1 The term *ideology of ability* comes from Tobin Siebers (2008: 10–11).
- 2 A valorization of work—waged labor in particular—also furthered antiwelfare policy in the 1980s and 1990s, in which low-paid, poorly protected jobs, referred to as “workfare,” emerged as the alternative to state dependency.

References

- Baratta, Maria. 2018. "Self Care 101." *Psychology Today*. www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/skinny-revisited/201805/self-care-101.
- Chang, Grace. 2000. *Disposable Domesticity: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Dionne, Evette. 2015. "For Black Women, Self-Care Is a Radical Act." *Ravishly*, March 9. ravishly.com/2015/03/06/radical-act-self-care-black-women-feminism.
- Donner, Francesca, et al. 2018. "Self-Care: A Working Definition." *New York Times*, August 11. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/11/style/how-i-self-care.html.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2016. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review* 100: 99–117.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 1992. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor." *Signs* 18, no. 2: 1–4.
- Google. n.d. "Google Trends: Explore: Self-Care." trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=US&q=self-care (accessed January 14, 2019).
- Harris, Aisha. 2017. "A History of Self-Care." *Slate*, April 5. www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2017/04/the_history_of_self_care.html.
- Hong, Grace Kyungwon, and Roderick A. Ferguson. 2011. Introduction to *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, edited by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, 1–24. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jain, Sarah Lochlann. 2007. "Living in Prognosis: Toward an Elegiac Politics." *Representations* 98, no. 1: 77–92.
- Kisner, Jordan. 2017. "The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care." *New Yorker*, March 14. www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare.
- Kline, Kenny. 2017. "Want More Productive Employees? Encourage Self-Care." *Huffington Post*, February 14. www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/want-more-productive-employees-encourage-self-care_us_58a3763be4boe172783aa19e.
- Lieberman, Charlotte. 2018. "How Self-Care Became So Much Work." *Harvard Business Review*, August 10. hbr.org/2018/08/how-self-care-became-so-much-work.
- Loewe, B. 2012. "An End to Self Care." *Organizing Upgrade*, October 15. archive.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/blogs/b-loewe/item/729-end-to-self-care.
- Lorde, Audre. (1984) 2020. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Mahogany L. Brown, 100–103. New York: Penguin.
- Lorde, Audre. (1988) 2017. "A Burst of Light." In *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*, 40–133. Mineola, NY: Ixia Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1997. "A Litany for Survival." In *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, 255–56. New York: Norton.
- Meltzer, Marisa. 2016. "Soak, Steam, Spritz: It's All Self-Care." *New York Times*, December 10. www.nytimes.com/2016/12/10/fashion/post-election-anxiety-self-care.html?_r=0.
- Mirk, Sarah, and Evette Dionne. 2016. "Audre Lorde Thought of Self-Care as an 'Act of Political Warfare.'" *Bitch*, February 18. www.bitchmedia.org/article/audre-lorde-thought-self-care-act-political-warfare.
- Nazish, Noma. 2017. "Practicing Self-Care Is Important: Ten Easy Habits to Get You Started." *Forbes*, September 19. www.forbes.com/sites/payout/2017/09/19/practicing-self-care-is-important-10-easy-habits-to-get-you-started/#391fo0o5283a.

- Penny, Laurie. 2016. "Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless." *Baffler*, July 8. thebaffler.com/latest/laurie-penny-self-care.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. 2006. "A Time to Hole Up and a Time to Kick Ass: Reimagining Activism as a Million Different Ways to Fight." In *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Activists*, edited by Melody Berger, 166–79. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. 2018. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Rupiah, Kiri. 2017. "Oh Lordey, Self-Care as Warfare." *Mail and Guardian*, June 15. mg.co.za/article/2017-06-15-oh-lordey-self-care-as-warfare.
- Siebers, Tobin. 2008. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.