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An Exploratory Analysis of How Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors Radicalized
The Meaning and Practice of Self-Care

By

Melanie Marie Lindsay

Claremont Graduate University

2022

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Melanie Lindsay as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies.

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Abstract

An Exploratory Analysis of How Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors Radicalized The Meaning and Practice of Self-Care

By

Melanie Lindsay

Claremont Graduate University: 2022

My dissertation, “An Exploratory Analysis of How Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors Radicalized The Meaning and Practice of Self-Care,” hypothesizes that we can conceive a practice of self-care using an abolitionist lens to examine the writings and performances of the Black feminists Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors. Abolitionist self-care is a response to the political structures that directly affect marginalized communities, and it evaluates the numerous ways that Black women have used their voice to challenge systems of oppression. If we examine their thinking as expressed through their poetry, their performances (including activism), and their self- life-writing, would we be able to locate a practice that robustly sustains lives often lived under conditions of duress? If we can respond to this question affirmatively, how does their expressions yield such an ethics of self-care? The questions of my project are animated by an interest in how Black feminist intellectuals enact their practice ethically. Their work challenges current literature that focuses on self-care, which has, in recent decades, come to be understood as a commoditized experience of individualistic wellness.

The turn in the literature on self-care exists in tension with Lorde’s assertion that “[C]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare”. My project emerges from the following question. How does Lorde’s claim about self-care fit into the discourse of self-care composed by other feminist, particularly Black feminist, poets, essayists, and educators? My dissertation takes up Lorde’s claim, which is contrary to self

care advocates and explores how she as well as Angelou and Cullors produce practices of self-care that are sourced in the communal lives of Black women and resist commoditization.

My dissertation further evaluates how Black women have historically developed and deployed practices of self-care that were also forms of activism and empowerment. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Pauli Murray, and Mary Church Terrell among numerous other Black women were activists, abolitionists, and educators who devoted their lives to fighting for equality and justice. They were Black feminist pioneers who inspired Black women to resist the social norms of their times and served as an example of what is possible when Black women work together and exercise their humanity. During their era, their actions were referred to as “racial uplift”. My dissertation will ask whether “racial uplift” is congruent with abolitionist self-care. I will argue that Black women historically, have been encouraged to be silent, and to embrace a subordinate role. Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* acknowledged that social norm and stated “[I]f you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.” Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is fiction, yet it powerfully represents an aspect of Black women’s culture; namely, that silence will lead to figurative and literal erasure. My dissertation seeks to understand how the lives and art of Angelou, Lorde, and Cullors build upon the history of activism, and community organizing.

Dedicated to my parents Emery and Pearl Lindsay
and children, Pierre, Cleo, Sydni, and Chandler

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Without community, there is no liberation!

—Audre Lorde

It takes a village to be successful. I thank the Creator for my gifts, talents, and abilities. I want to acknowledge the sacrifices of my parents and thank them for instilling in me values that enabled me to excel. They taught me that in order to be successful in life, I needed a relationship with God, and that education would open doors of opportunity. Thank you, Mom, and Dad, for giving me the tools that I needed to find fulfillment in life.

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Introduction

Without community, there is no liberation!

—Audre Lorde

As a Black, single, divorced mother of four residing in the United States of America, I faced many obstacles while raising my children. I didn't have many resources. Every month, I prayed, saved, and hoped that ends would meet. It sometimes seemed that there wasn't enough money, enough resources, and yet I knew that I had to keep my head above the water, as my Grandmother Velma would often say. I had children who were depending on me to keep us afloat therefore I couldn't give up. Not only did I have to take care of the financial aspects of child rearing, I also had to ensure that they were being raised in an environment where their spiritual, and physical needs were met. As an African American mother, I faced unique challenges. As my children began to mature, I was aware that there were unforeseen / seen dangers that African American's historically have encountered.

There were many things that kept me awake at night: with the invention of cell phones, I began to witness police brutality, and the murder of countless Black people. I began to think about my responsibility as a mother to give my children the tools needed to survive and thrive in a society in which they would confront racism, sexism, classism, and inequality. I then began to think about my ancestors and how they were able to survive.

I thought about the Black women who came before me and how their, faith, and strong communal, and familial relationships aided them throughout their lifetime. Originally, I thought that this dissertation would focus on the practical ways in which Black women practiced self-care; however, after the murders of countless Black people that took place while pursuing my doctorate degree, including the public lynching of George Floyd and murder of Brianna Taylor by the police in 2020, I began to think of activism and abolition as a form of self-care. It was

after I began my research and numerous conversations with my mentor Dr. Darrell Moore, that my research shifted, and my focus became clear.

My dissertation, “An Exploratory Analysis of How Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors Radicalized the Meaning and Practice of Self-Care,” seeks to understand how Black women challenge systems of oppression. I’m using the term abolitionist self-care to describe the ways in which Black women confront these systems and the actions that they utilize that increase the life chances of those whose lives are affected by racism, classism, sexism, and capitalism. I will examine the interconnection between communal self-care, activism, and abolition.

I’m defining communal care as a way in which people, specifically Black women, work together to forge more robust lives within a context of societal norms that does not take their desires for how to live their lives freely seriously. I’m defining activism as the way in which Black women unite and work together for a common cause. Activism in this context, is a verb used to describe the way that Black women protest and strategize to dismantle systems of oppression. I’m using the term abolition to describe the way in which systemic change occurs as a result of actions of those who have challenged racism, classism, sexism, and injustice.

My dissertation is located in three fields Cultural Studies, Africana Studies, and Women and Gender Studies each of which are interdisciplinary. My dissertation contributes to an ongoing conversation that focuses on the yearning of Black women to have access to the rights, and privileges necessary to thrive in a society that undermines their needs, devalues their contributions, and frequently mandates that their concerns are kept in the margins. I will argue

that abolition can be a form of self-care. My work examines what I'm referring to as abolitionist self-care, as a means to advocate on behalf of oneself and one's community.¹

I further argue that abolitionist self-care requires the reader to reimagine forms of care. The term abolitionist self-care is used to describe the ways in which Black women have cultivated, shared, and employed myriad forms of care.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there is a pivotal conversation between the main character, Janie Mae Crawford, and her grandmother Nanny, in which her grandmother states, "De niggah woman is de mule un de world so fur as Ah can see."² Even though this text was published 85 years ago, this belief in some respects is still prevalent today. Nanny's assertion is a common myth that must be dispelled, this ideology has contributed to the paralysis of some who simply collapse because of unattainable social, cultural, and political expectations of what it means to be a Black woman. Scholars such as Melissa Harris Perry, in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* has written extensively about negative connotations adopted by the mass media that are rooted in historic fallacies, such as the notion of the strong Black woman, the Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare Queen, and Sapphire, which have caused long-lasting harm to Black women.

I develop the concept of abolitionist self-care to describe the ways in which Lorde, Angelou and Cullors address multiple inequalities, that have had long-lasting, debilitating affects within the Black community. My argument is that these Black women became activists and

1. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square, 2005), 113.

McMillan Tressie Cottom, *Thick and Other Essays* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2019), 23. Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (New York City, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2017).

2. Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. 14. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999.

abolitionists out of necessity. They became abolitionists because of the systemic forms of racism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and injustice that affected their daily lives and the lives of those in their communities. They became abolitionists because they realized that for systems of oppression to change, one must challenge, one must critique, and one must vocalize their anger, rage, and discontentment. I argue that the actions taken by Black women freedom fighters is rooted in a strong love and commitment to their communities.

June Jordan in *Life As Activism* argues, “Pride develops as we resist our misery, as we revolt against, and as we exorcise all misery from our days and nights. And so I know pride as a black woman and as a woman of color because black people and people of color resist oppression and because we loathe, actively, every source of our unequal liberty, our unequal entitlement under law. We behold our racial identity as a call to arms, a summoning of ourselves into battle for power and territory and wealth and happiness and well-being.”³ Abolitionist self-care require one to continue to resist oppression, and to utilize one’s skills in the fight for freedom.

Abolitionist self-care demystifies the reason why Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors devoted their lives to fighting for justice. My argument for abolitionist self-care draws from the history of abolitionist movements in Black history and a strong affective desire to advocate for Black people. I draw from scholars Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Paula Giddings, Barbara Smith, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor,⁴ who have illuminated abolitionist practices as well as unknown

3. June Jordan, Stacy Russo, and Angela Davis, *Life as Activism June Jordan's Writings from the Progressive* (Sacramento, Calif, CA.: Litwin Books, 2014), 113.

4. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Davis, Angela Y. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

Black women whose practices are less well known. If one thinks of the contributions of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, Maxine Waters, and countless women who we may unfortunately never know their names, we understand that their stance, their actions, their deeds were rooted a belief that one's life could serve as a catalyst for change in the United States.

I will argue that the foundation of abolitionist self-care among Black women is based on love. Based upon my research the notion of self-care during the 21st century is often viewed as an individualistic practice. I will argue that abolitionist self-care is practiced in tension with this understanding. I develop my argument through an analysis of writings, performances, and activism of Angelou, Lorde, and Cullors.

I read and analyze selected works of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Patrisse Cullors to develop the concept of abolitionist self-care. Reading their work separately and together yields a Black feminist theory that supports a notion of abolitionist self-care. Their work read together yields a path to interpret an effective history of abolitionist Black feminist practices of self-care that is oriented to abolition.

I will argue that there are several commonalities between the work of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors. They are well respected writers, educators, orators, and activists who were deeply committed to women's rights, human rights, and gender equality. I begin this dissertation by

Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1984.

Smith, Barbara. *Home Girls A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick, NJ u.a: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *How We Get Free Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017.

Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. London: Verso, 1990.

focusing on Lorde, and Angelou whose contributions I argue, influence the current work of Cullors.

Chapter one examines the work of Lorde. The problem that I will explore is the historic notion that Black women should be docile, silent, submissive, and not politically astute. Shirley J. Yee, in *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828- 1860* addresses this phenomenon. Yee argues, “From the beginning, female participation was an important feature of abolition. Male abolitionists, like leaders of other morally based social reform movements of the period, accepted women into a campaign that was bent on persuading slaveholders of the sinfulness of their institution. But as in other reform movements, women were expected to participate within the confines of women’s “sphere,” which was interpreted as limited to organizing all-female societies and raising funds to support the male leadership. Black women’s participation in the movement, however, held a dual significance. Although, like middle-class white women in antebellum society, free black women felt bound by contemporary ideas of respectable womanhood, for them these gender conventions underscored an irony inherent in black abolitionist goals. On the one hand, images of women as morally superior, physically delicate, and submissive to their men actually liberated black women from racist stereotypes of black female sexuality, which depicted them as physically strong and sexually promiscuous- but on the other hand, the adoption of “true womanhood” ideology in the free black community only imposed white standards of inequality. Furthermore, ideas about what constituted “ladylike” behavior reflected illusions about female respectability that were narrowly applied only to native-born, white, middle-class women. Thus, constructing a life that truly reflected “freedom” meant adopting many of the values of white society, in part symbolized by male dominance and

female subordination.”⁵ Yee’s argument is important because provides an historical context regarding the importance of Black women’s contribution to abolitionist movements on one hand as Yee argues, Black women were valued because they were organizers, they had a pivotal role in providing monetary support, and they supported male leadership. However, they were also silenced. They were silenced because of the contradictions found within American society. The notion of “proper forms of womanhood” were used to keep them in a subservient position. Women were important in the abolitionist movement during the time period in which Yee focuses on, (1828-1860), and they remain important in the abolitionist movement of 2022. While Yee focuses on the abolition of slavery, contemporary abolitionist concentrate on the injustices that remain after enslavement, and the reconstruction period. These injustices are engrained in American society, and its cultural practices. Contemporary abolitionists build upon the work of those who came before them. While the fight may differ in some ways the need for equality, equity and justice continues.⁶

Lorde understood the ways in which gender inequality, racism, homophobia, and sexism shaped the culture, laws and practices in the United States. The notion that silences, submissive gestures and behaviors were deemed to be an example of womanhood, was an indelible truth that infuriated and emboldened Lorde to use her writings as a form of protest, and activism. I argue that there is an underlining theme found in the work of Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, *The Cancer*

5. Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1992), 3-4.

6. Daina Ramey Berry and Kali N. Gross, *A Black Women's History Of The United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021), 65.

Joy DeGruy Leary and Randall Robinson, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (United States: Joy DeGruy Publications Inc., 2018).

Journals, The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance: Poems 1987-1992, and Coal in which she proclaims that Black women should use their voice to challenge dominant ideologies that place their concerns in the margins. These concerns include health disparities.

An example of Lorde's writings as a form of self-care can be found in *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989*. In this particular text, Lorde and Parker share intimate details of their lives. Lorde and Parker both battled breast cancer and would eventually succumb to the disease. In *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989* one is able to witness the importance of friendship, transparency, and sisterhood among Black women. Lorde, in the letter dated February 6, 1988, expresses her concerns with Parker regarding her diagnosis and the strategy that Parker will adopt as she fights breast cancer. Lorde writes,

Pat, I respect your decision about chemotherapy. ANY DECISION WE MAKE ABOUT OUR OWN BODIES AFTER CONSIDERING FACTS IS THE RIGHT DECISION! Our decisions do not kill us, they are you and me making a move for life. What kills us oh my sister is indecision and despair and turning ourselves over unheeding to any of those others-well -meaning and otherwise-you are always so sure THEY have the right answers. You are a survivor, Pat, and that battle on a physical level is now braided into our lives, but the war is not alien, now is it? You and me, we've been fighting all over lives. Cancer is not a punishment or a demerit. It's a fucking scourge that's getting worse because there very existence is big business as well as cost-intensive population control. You've got to root that one out, sweetheart. It has nothing to do with your failure. Because that feeling comes around a lot, and it's really destructive. It's never been that simple, anyway Patti. BULLSHIT on it's our anger that caused our cancers! How much strontium- 90 and racism have you absorbed today? I feel it's my anger that has helped keep me alive and what the hell else are we supposed to erect against their homophobic racist sexist poison- a submissive grin? WE WERE NEVER MEANT TO SURVIVE so under the circumstances, girlfriend, I think we've done pretty well, give or take a bad spell or two. Neither one of us is lying in the gutter gutted with no mind to be elsewhere, no work to do, and no one caring. And each one of us could have been and you know it and I know it, so let's not kid ourselves. Think of yourself as a one-breasted dahomeian amazon. It helps counterbalance the sense of loss. I'm glad you're getting into your body. She's different and she's yours. Love her.⁷

7. Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker: 1974-1989* (Dover, FL: s.n., 2018), 89-90.

This exchange is powerful. Lorde, who also battled breast cancer shared many commonalities with Parker. They were writers and activists who confronted societal ills in their work. They were poets who wrote about their experiences as Black women in the United States. They were mothers, who raised children in a world in which they were often targeted because of their race, class, sexuality, and gender. Parker and Lorde shared many experiences that created an unbreakable bond. I would argue that all of these experiences contributed to the premature death of Parker at age of 45 and Lorde at the age of 58. I would also argue that it was the internalization of pain, sorrow, and despair that often lead to health problems such as Breast cancer, among Black women. As Lorde, stated in the excerpt above, they both had been fighting throughout their lifetime. The fight for justice often takes its toll on those who are the most committed to eradicating systems of oppression. Lorde's letters to Parker were comforting and encouraging. Sisterhood is essential when one is fighting a terminal illness. The letters between Parker and Lorde, I would assert, were a lifeline. Lorde's affirming words are an example of self-care: Lorde's language of love, and support encouraged Parker to speak her truth, and to embrace the changes, and challenges that came with breast cancer. Lorde's insistence that self-care is an act of political warfare is an importance stance when one thinks about the disproportionate ways in which breast cancer affects the lives of Black women. Lorde argues in *The Cancer Journals*, "According to the American Cancer Society's statistics on breast cancer survival, of the women stricken, only 50% are still alive after three years. This figure drops to 30% if you are poor, or Black on in any other way part of the underside of this society. We cannot ignore these facts, nor their implications, or their effect upon our lives, individually and collectively. Early detection and early treatment is crucial in the management of breast cancer if those sorry statistics of survival are to improve. But for the incidence of early detection and early

treatment to increase, American women must become free enough from social stereotypes concerning their appearance to realize that losing a breast is infinitely preferable to losing one's life."⁸ Lorde's insistence that Black women care for themselves mentally, and physically is a form of self-care. In this instance self-care is political and personal. It's political because Lorde names several factors that contribute to the adverse statistics that affect the lives of Black women who are diagnosed with breast cancer including racism and classism. Lorde argues that self-care is personal and is also an act of self-love for Black women. Black women must advocate for themselves, and they must take care of themselves, this care includes having mammograms and physical exams that will detect early signs of breast cancer.

Lorde's empowering spirit was apparent in the secondary, and primary texts that I examined. At the Lesbian Herstory Archive, I had the privilege of closely examining detailed descriptions of Lorde's ingenious idea of creating a printing press to highlight the work of women of color. My hypothesis is that Lorde believed that creating a press imagined and managed by women of color would be one important avenue for them to have their ideas and desires published as well as abolish the belief that women of color are a monolith.

Lorde, who referred to herself as a lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet, challenged Black women to affirm themselves, to care for themselves, and to view that care as an act of resistance. In Lorde's essay, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," she emphasizes that "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that in itself is an act of political warfare."⁹ My dissertation examines Lorde's notion of self-preservation which I hypothesize is political, communal, and familial.

8. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco, CA, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 63.

9. Audre Lorde. *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (Ixia Press edition. Mineola, New York: Ixia Press, 2017) 183.

Lorde's poetry and prose grounds my claim that joining forces with like-minded Black women is essential to survive. It was also through intimate conversations with women, Black and non-Black with whom she disagreed that several of her concepts emerged. Lorde understood the importance of having conversations with women whose viewpoints vastly differed from her own. Part of her multivalent practice was to create spaces for vigorous dialogues oriented to Black women's health and liberation regarding the institutional practices that undermined their mental, emotional, and physical health. An example of this can be found in Lorde's journal entry dated March first 1979 in *The Cancer Journals*, in which she states, "I must tend my body with at least as much care as I tend the compost, particularly now when it seems so besides the point. Is this pain and despair that surround me a result of cancer, or has it just been released by cancer? I feel so unequal to what I always handled before, the abominations outside that echo the pain within. And yes, I am completely self-referenced right now because it is the only translation I can trust, and I do believe not until every woman traces her weave back strand by blood self-referenced strand, will we begin to alter the whole pattern."¹⁰ The notion of the importance of self-examination is a common theme found in Lorde's writings. Lorde, it appears, believed that there was a connection between one's health and one's thoughts. She also believed that women must evaluate their positionality, their values, and their morals. Lorde, I would argue, believed that the actions, and inactions created circumstances by which one's physical health, and mental health would either prosper or fail. For Lorde, it appears that the notion of living one's life in obscurity, with the idea that ambiguity would guarantee a fulfilling life was an idea that she strongly opposed. Lorde, believed that societal norms had to be challenged, I would argue that this ideology is a form of abolitionist self-care.

10. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco, CA, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 9.

In *Sister Outsider* Lorde asserts, “I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism. But anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with who we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. Anger is loaded with information and energy. When I speak of women of Color, I do not only mean Black women. The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us.”¹¹ Lorde’s belief that women regardless of their, race, ethnicity, political, social, or economic background, should find common interests and that it was imperative to the survival of all women is an idea that I this dissertation will further explore. I would assert that through the bonds built on difference as well as commonalities, is a form of self-care.

One of the claims that is essential to my development of a concept that I refer to as abolitionist self-care is Lorde’s ingenious tactic of using the experiences of women, the voice of women, and the action of women to disrupt systems of power as a means to reimagine, and reinvent sisterhood, and redefine what it means to be a woman and a part of the human race. The Combahee River Collective, which was founded by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier is an example of the importance of uniting with women who share the same passion and

11. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015), 128.

commitment to devoting their lives to advocate for causes that were important to the collective survival of all. They were committed to fighting for the liberation of Black people; the Combahee River Collective Statement, is an example of these concerns and asserts, “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.”¹² My dissertation seeks to further understand how Lorde found strength within the formation of the collective, and if the Movement for Black Lives is a contemporary example of abolitionist self-care and an extension of the Combahee River Collective. Both groups inspired Black women to use their voices, and to fight to be seen and heard. The Combahee River Collective, the Kitchen Table Press, and the Movement of Black Lives acknowledged the disparities in their communities and realized that being audacious and outspoken was essential to their survival.

Chapter two focuses on poet, activist, writer, educator, and entertainer Maya Angelou. There are many issues that those who are in the public eye encounter. As someone who hasn't had that experience, I often wondered how does one handle the expectation of perfection in the midst of insurmountable pressure by those within and outside of one's social networks. My curiosity led me to the archives at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. Before arriving at the archive, I hypothesized that Angelou had meaningful relationships with well-known and unknown personal and professional relationships that enable Angelou to become a highly respected public, and political figure. I utilized primary sources and secondary sources, which include, Angelou's texts *The Heart of A Woman*, *Letters to My Daughter*, *Gather*

12. Hull, G. T., Bell-Scott, P., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Feminist Press.

Together In My Name, I Shall Not Be Moved, and *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*, to illustrate the healing benefits that are a result of Angelou's close friendships. I further hypothesize that those friendships are an example of communal care which are an essential component of abolitionist self-care.

Chapter three focuses on the work of educator, feminist, abolitionist, Patrisse Cullors. While there is no archive that houses Cullors' papers, I utilized her memoir, *When They Call You A Terrorist*, her newly released text *An Abolitionist Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* and her artistry to support my argument that abolitionist practices are a form of self-care. I hypothesize that through a close reading of Cullors' published work I will understand how she actively uses her voice, platform, and writings to challenge numerous forms of oppression. I also hypothesize that the focus of her work on disassembling the carceral state, and her commitment to fight against injustice, inequality, police brutality, racism, classism, gender inequality, and sexism are forms of communal care, self-care, and abolitionist self-care.

My dissertation employs qualitative research methods to analyze Angelou's, Lorde's, and Cullors' written works and performances. Through close readings of their respective memoirs, poetry, essays, and performances I make an argument for how they developed and incorporated abolitionist self-care strategies into various aspects of their lives. The orientation of my close readings will be toward their respective implicit and explicit practices of self-care. The central question of my dissertation is how are the writings of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors demonstrations of self-care and how does their writings transformed their lives and the lives of those who were (are) affected by it?

My dissertation is a liberation project itself in that it endeavors to understand how Black women's cultivation and practices of abolition and self-care, can be a force for positive cultural

and political transformation. By using Black feminist methodologies to write about self-care, I challenge the ideology that self-care is not and should not be a political, and cultural practice utilized by Black women. I use an intersectional approach that examines how race, gender, sexuality, and class affect how Black women practice self-care.

I utilize Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought Critical Social Theory to analyze the works of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors. Collins argues “As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like, but the purpose of Black women’s collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/ or behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/ or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. In the United States, for example, African American social and political thought analyzes institutional racism, not to help it work more effectively, but to resist it.”¹³ My dissertation utilizes Collins’ Black Feminist Thought Social Theory as a methodology approach. As I examined the memoir, poetry, letters, and literature written by Angelou, Cullors, and Lorde, I kept the concept of freedom, and liberation as two key concepts to guide my research and analyzation. While analyzing the numerous documents, the research question that was at the forefront of my mind was what is being explicitly and implicitly expressed by Angelou, Cullors, and Lorde.

Collins argues, “Social theories expressed by women emerging from diverse groups typically do not arise from the rarefied atmosphere of their imaginations. Instead, social theories

13. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

reflect women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion. Black feminist thought, U.S. Black women's critical social theory, reflects similar power relationships. For African American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African – American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that U.S. Black women do not suppress others. Black feminist thought identity as a “critical” social theory lies in its commitment to justice both from U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups.”¹⁴ My research focuses on Black women in the United States and their lived experiences. As Collins states, Black women are not a monolith. Our experiences are unique, however the importance of advocating for ourselves, the importance of leaning in and reaching back are some of the ways in which we survive. I also utilized Black Feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw's work and the term she coined intersectionality. Black Feminist Thought Theory examines the intersectionality of oppressions faced by Black women therefore, my research project utilizes textural analysis methodology to locate these intersectional concepts within the literature written by Angelou, Lorde, and Cullors.

I argue that while it is important to locate the intersectional oppressions that affect the lives of Black women in the United States, it is also important to examine how activism,

14. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

abolition, and freedom are liberatory practices that have historically been essential to the survival of Black women amid institutional practices that are not designed with Black health in mind.

My dissertation hypothesizes that there are several forms of abolitionist self-care. Lorde, Angelou and Cullors practiced self-care in a myriad of ways. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors are writers whose texts serve as forms of inspiration. Their texts encourage, uplift, and challenge readers to reflect upon the world in which they live. Their texts are thought provoking, as they critiqued cultural norms in the United States. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors understand the power of words, and more importantly the power of actions that are a result of the words used throughout their texts. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors are Black feminists who are outspoken, bold, and unafraid of the public backlash that often occurs in the aftermath of books published that challenge and critique societal and world views regarding the value of Black life. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors are well-known, multitalented individuals whose viewpoint has shaped the 20th and 21st century. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors used their gifts which included writing, dancing, acting, directing, singing, and community building to make the world a just place. Black feminists can learn from the work of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors as the struggle for freedom and liberation continues.

Chapter I. Audre Lorde
February 18, 1934–November 17, 1992
Abolishing Oppression through the Power of Words

A Litany for Survival
1978

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so, their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours.

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear?
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises, we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets, we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full, we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty, we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone, we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak, we are afraid
our words will not be heard

nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So, it is better to speak
Remembering

we were never meant to survive.¹⁵

Audre Lorde, Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, revolutionary, feminist, utilized the skill of writing and rhetoric to address the silences within our society that often create an illusion. The illusion of peace when there is suffering, the illusion of good will when there is evil, the illusion of prosperity when there is poverty, and the illusion of wellness when there is disease. Lorde claimed that these illusions are detrimental to the psyche, soul, and health of Black women. This chapter begins by examining Lorde's writings, grassroots organizing, upbringing, and community building and how they enabled her to cultivate a practice of self-care which resisted forces that undermined the capacity of Black women to enact care.

Writing as an Abolitionist Practice

I've decided to begin my analysis using Black Feminist Critical Social Theory by examining some of Lorde's most influential writings. Lorde was a highly respected writer who unapologetically critiqued the cultural, and social practices in the United States. At the time of her death *The New York Times* acknowledged her contributions and stated, "From the publication of her first book in 1968, Ms. Lorde's 17 volumes of poetry, essays and autobiography reflected her hatred of racial and sexual prejudice."¹⁶

15. Lorde, Audre. *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

16. "Audre Lorde, 58, A Poet, Memoirist And Lecturer, Dies," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1992, National edition, sec. A, p. 23.

In “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde argues that the dominant culture in the United States has created an illusion of inclusivity. She contends that movements that were designed to address the concerns of women fail to acknowledge the ways in which they also uphold racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. Lorde claims that those who are often directly affected by racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are charged with educating those who are the source of discrimination and states,

Traditionally, in American society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for who oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be the watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children’s culture in school. Black and Third-World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy, which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.¹⁷

Lorde’s powerful assertion provides examples to those in positions of power of how their cultural, political, and economic structures function as systems of oppressions. Lorde is also introspective and admonishes those who are oppressed by stating that they should also examine the ways in which they internalize oppressive ideologies. Lorde claims, “As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not

17. Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, and Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Class, And Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” Essay. In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, 284–91. New York, NY: New Press, The, 2011.

possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.”¹⁸ Lorde’s writings in some respects are a blueprint on how society can establish patterns of relation. These patterns break barriers and encourage self-reflection that focuses on human similarities instead of differences. Lorde’s argument is important if one has a desire to abolish oppressions that lead to cultural, and physical barriers within capitalist societies.

Lorde’s stance on the importance of first acknowledging societal ills is an important component of abolitionist self-care. Lorde’s writings are a form of resistance and serve as a tool that Black women can utilize as a means to express their lived experience in the United States. Lorde skillfully crafts several essays that have parallel themes that focus on the ways in which Black women have been oppressed, and more importantly how Black women can survive in a society where their oppression is a normality. An example of such works are found in Lorde’s *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* which consists of some of her most well-known works, for example “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power, Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface”, “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” “Learning from the 60’s” and “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger”. These essays are important when one thinks of self-care as a political act. Lorde intentionally calls upon the reader to think of their own self-actualized power. Lorde’s writings are political and empowering. Lorde’s writing challenges the reader to think of how they can

18. Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, and Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Class, And Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” Essay. In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, 284–91. New York, NY: New Press, The, 2011.

shape the trajectory of their lives through the practices of writing, activism, anger, as well as strategic partnerships with those who may share common interests and those whose differences cause tension.

Lorde begins, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” by stating, “the quality of Light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are- until the poem- nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.” Lorde’s poetic writings are cathartic in nature, her poetic essays created an avenue for her expression. Lorde’s writings are a form of self-care, they are personal, and introspective. For Lorde, Poetry is not a mindless freewriting form of art, but an essential component for survival. Poetry is a mechanism that gave her the freedom to express her deepest emotions. Poetry gave Lorde the freedom needed to express her anguish, her pain, as well as encouraged her to scrutinize the society in which she lived and thrived. Poetry is the light that she refers to in the opening of the essay, this light provides Lorde with a way to communicate and express herself. Poetry’s cadences enabled Lorde to express her disdain, pain, frustration, as well as unadulterated hope for a future where differences were seen as assets upon which society can flourish. Lorde’s poem “Story Books on a Kitchen Table” is an example of the ways in which Lorde expressed her anguish of being born within a society that didn’t value her existence.

Story Books On A Kitchen Table

Out of her womb of pain my mother spat me
into her ill-fitting harness of despair
into her deceits
where anger reconceived me
piercing my eyes like arrows
pointed by her nightmare

of who I was not
becoming.

Going away
she left me in her place
iron maidens to protect me
and for my food
the wrinkled milk of legend
where I wandered
through lonely rooms of afternoon
wrapped in nightmare
from the Orange Red Yellow
Purple Blue Green
Fairy Books
where white witches ruled
over the kitchen table
and never wept
or offered gold
nor any kind enchantment
for the vanished mother
of a Black girl.¹⁹

This poem focuses on the plight of Black women and girls, and their complex relationship. It examines the mother daughter relationship and their relationship with a society that often doesn't affirm their value. The opening sentence addresses the way in which Black girls enter the world. Lorde's illustration of being spat out of the womb is an example of being born into a world in which Black girls are unloved, unwanted, and uncared for. Lorde alludes to the notion that the anger, pain, and the disappointment of one generation lingers and is inherited like a birthright by the next generation. The wrinkled milk of legend and the empty kitchen table are an analogy of the lack of resources and opportunities that aren't substantial enough to sustain the dreams of the next generation. Lorde's writings about the plight of Black girls and women and the notion of poverty being generational and inescapable is compelling. Lorde believes

19.Lorde, Audre. *Coal*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1996.

Black women are unable to imagine a world in which fairy tales become reality because they have never experienced a world without suffering. This poem is important because Lorde is demonstrating the importance of community, the importance of Black women shaping a new reality, one that is different from the experiences of those who preceded them. In this poem self-care is an act, it calls for one to create, envision, and embrace a new form of being.

There are parallel themes found in Lorde's essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and "Story Books On A Kitchen Table." Lorde asserts in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."²⁰ This essay written seven years after, "Story Books On A Kitchen Table," shows that there has been a shift in her thinking regarding the ways in which Black women should confront systems of oppression. Instead of accepting the plight of being a part of a marginalized group Lorde states that one should voice their discontentment, and that the anger should be expressed and used as a mechanism for healing. Abolitionist self-care calls for those who are oppressed to utilize their voice, their agency, to challenge systems of power. It also calls for minority groups to work together to find solutions to societal ills. In the essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde evaluates her own silences, and fear, and labels those silences and fears as regrets. Lorde asks, "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them still in silence?"²¹ These questions were presented to those attending the Modern Language Association Conference in 1977. Lorde's

20. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015.

21. *Ibid.*

questions required that those in attendance become self-reflective and examine their own internal racism, sexism, and oppression. This self-examination and vocalization Lorde believed created an avenue for healing. Lorde's assertions addressed the silences, and uncomfortable truths that existed among the attendees. Lorde was called upon to deliver a paper as a part of the Lesbian and Literature Panel and realized that she had to address the multiple oppressions that she experienced as a Black, feminist, lesbian in the 1970s. She utilized her positionality as a panelist to express the unheard sentiments of those in attendance. Lorde claimed, "Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself- a Black woman warrior doing my work-come to ask you, are you doing yours?"²² Lorde's poignant questions challenge those who are considered the elite, those who in attendance were academics and had access, power, and privilege. Lorde's mission was to create an environment where uncomfortable conversations become a normality and not a rarity. Lorde was advocating on behalf of those whose presence would not have been welcomed at an academic conference. Lorde believed that it was her responsibility to address the issues that affected Black women within and outside of the academy. Lorde understood the interconnection between the academy and the community in which she belonged. Lorde's stance and boldness is a form of abolitionist self-care. Lorde's ability to use the privileged space that she held during the conference to speak of the suffering of those in her community, is an example of communal care which is a component of abolitionist self-care. Those who have power, those who have privilege and those who understand the needs, and desires of those who are marginalized have a responsibility to lift as they climb, this lifting includes calling into question the actions of the elite.

22.Ibid.

Lorde's critique of the academy in her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," is an example of abolitionist self-care because of the ways in which her rhetoric purposely admonishes the privileged few, she argues, "It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the narrowest perimeters of change are possible and allowable."²³ Lorde's observations at New York University's Institute for the Humanities conference compelled her to address the blatant devices employed by those in positions of power that often lead to the erasure of marginalized groups. Lorde's ability to utilize her voice, to speak on behalf of those whose words would never be heard within academic spaces is an example of abolitionist self-care. The ability to utilize public platforms to challenge spaces where on the surface appear to be inclusive but at the core are exclusionary is a form of abolitionist self-care.

Lorde didn't limit her critique to those who were members of the academy she also critiqued the feminist movement and its lack of effort to address the issues that affected the lives of Black feminists. In her essay "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface", she focuses on the different ways in which Black feminists and white feminists understand the mission of feminism. Lorde asserts, "BLACK FEMINISM is not white feminism in blackface. Black

25.Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015.

women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women and addressing those issues doesn't make us any less Black."²⁴ Lorde uses an intersectional approach by focusing on how Black feminists must survive in poverty, while having to confront patriarchal sexist beliefs and violence in the Black community. She argues that Black men need to address the complexities of their inferiority and their treatment of Black women. She specifically calls attention to the rape of Black women by Black men, and the silence surrounding that violence. Lorde's critique of Black men and the culture that allows their violence to exist illustrates that she was indeed critical of intramural cultural practices including the ways in which Black folk embody anti-blackness and masculine expressions of violence that undermine Black health. Lorde argues that Black women have historically been compassionate and supportive of Black men, however that support hasn't been reciprocated which causes tension within the Black community. Lorde asserts, "Whatever the structural underpinnings" for sexism in the Black community may be, it is obvious that Black women who are bearing the brunt of that sexism, and so it is in our best interests to abolish it. We invite our Black brothers to join us, since ultimately that abolition is in their best interest also. For Black men are also diminished by a sexism which robs them of meaningful connections to Black women and our struggles."²⁵ Lorde sheds light on the sexism, and the silences that encourage Black men to abuse, demean, and ignore the plight of Black women. Lorde's call for abolition of the hierarchical structure within the Black community is a form of communal care. This form of care will enable the relationship between Black men and women to be healed and entails that Black women and Black men evaluate the ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, sexism, and injustice

24.Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015.

25.Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015.

create what appears to be insurmountable differences that could lead to the total destruction of the Black community.

Lorde in her essay “Learning from the 60s,” continues to critique the complex relationship between Black women and Black men. She argues that the issues within the Black community are multilayered and asserts that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King Jr. knew this. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone. We are not perfect, but we are stronger and wiser than the sum of our errors. Black people have been here before us and survived.”²⁶ Lorde’s hope is that Black people would remember their internal and collective strength and work together in support of a common goal that would enable them to rise above the restraints of living in a capitalistic racist society.

Lorde’s critique of Black men in her essay “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface” and her argument in “Learning from the 60s” illustrates that she developed critiques of patriarchy embodied by Black men. Lorde’s belief that the need for communal care and unity as an essential component is evident throughout the essay “Learning from the 60’s”. Lorde examines the divisive strategies that cause separation within the Black community, she argues “In the 60s, white America- racist and liberal alike- was more than pleased to sit back as spectators while Black militant fought Black Muslim, Black Nationalist badmouthed the nonviolent, and Black women were told that our only useful position in the Black Power movement was prone. The existence of Black lesbian and gay people was not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America.”²⁷ Lorde’s assessment of how certain groups were pitted

26. Ibid.

27. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015.

against each other as a distraction to disrupt social movements who could in fact change the social structure, laws and policies in the United States is valid. This division was caused by white supremacy, racism, and capitalism. The purpose of abolitionist self-care is to dismantle systems of oppression and build upon the different facets within marginalized communities in order to create progressive liberatory actions.

Lorde in “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” focuses on the importance of women using their voice to express their anger. When one thinks of self-care it is imperative that one can speak their truth. The notion that one must bury their sentiments to appease those in positions of power is problematic because it leads to conditions in which those who don’t have power remain in a deferential position. Lorde argues that anger is a powerful tool that can be used to change inequitable conditions in which women are expected to flourish. Lorde argues that “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.”²⁸ I agree with Lorde that women are often silenced and are not given permission to express themselves. Anger that hasn’t been expressed often turns into certain cancers, and mental health disorders. I argue that if women were transparent about their struggles, their angers, and the sources of their pain, they could form a liberatory collective that would promote change in the United States, and around the globe. Lorde also speaks to the silences that often linger when white women and women of color interact. Lorde argues that the discomfort of some shouldn’t silence the majority of marginalized women. Lorde’s powerful, insightful writings were impactful, and continue to serve as a blueprint for those who are currently dedicating their lives to the eradication of silence

28.Ibid.

and oppression. Lorde's writings serve as an example of how one can invoke change through literature. Lorde's writings were cathartic, informative, and strategic. Lorde's writings encourage readers to observe the world in which they live, and challenge systems that don't improve their lives and the lives of those who live in their communities. Lorde's writings provide the language, thoughts, and affirmations needed to summon change. Abolitionist self-care has multiple forms, which include writing, protesting, and organizing.

Grassroots Organizing

There are themes found throughout Lorde's writing that emphasize the importance of putting theory into practice. She wrote about the value in women working together towards a common goal. The goal I would assert always revolved around the notion of freedom, and liberation. Lorde wasn't a writer who wrote about concepts, she was one who strongly believed in working towards establishing a just world in which human beings regardless of their class, gender, or sexual orientation could work together. I decided to focus on Lorde's grassroots organizing as an example of liberation, activism, and abolition in practice.

Filling in the Gap: The National Black Feminist Organization, the Combahee River Collective, and the Formation of the Kitchen Table Press

In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization was formed to address the oppression that Black women experienced while being a part of the feminist movement.²⁹ Beverly Davis in "To Seize the Moment: A Retrospective on the National Black Feminist Organization," argues "Although as Black women we resoundingly stated our interest in feminism our formal, societal

29.Laporte, R. (1974, Feb 28). Notes prompted by the national black feminist organization. *Off our Backs*, 4, 2. Retrieved from <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/magazines/notes-prompted-national-black-feminist/docview/197132024/se-2?accountid=10141>

voices were mostly, mute, if not actively hostile to those ideas. It was in this atmosphere of profound contradictions that NBFO was born.” The founders of the NBFO deemed it necessary to create a movement that addressed the oppression, racism, and sexism disregarded by white feminists. While they agreed with white feminist that they should earn equal pay, power and share the same privileges as white men and black men, they also believed that it was also important that they were treated with dignity and respect. They argued that their humanity needed to be recognized. The founders of the NBFO utilized the skills that they learned within the feminist movement to create a movement that was inclusive, whose mission was to reach a segment of the population whose concerns were often ignored. The organizers of the NBFO appealed to a broader audience and saw an increase in membership. Davis asserts, “After the founders of NBFO had their initial press conference in August of 1973, they received over four hundred calls on the first day. These calls came from all over the country. The callers were inspired by the mission of the NBFO and wanted to know how they could become members of this new movement. The response was phenomenal and within the first year of operation, the organization had over two thousand members with more than ten chapters across the country. The organization had many prominent members including Margaret Sloan, Jane Galvin-Lewis, Beverly Davis, Alice Walker, and Shirley Chisholm.

The members of the NBFO created the following mission statement in 1973,

Statement of National Black Feminist Organization:

The distorted male-dominated media image of the Women’s Liberation Movement has clouded the vital and revolutionary importance of this movement to Third World women, especially black women. The Movement has been characterized as the exclusive property of so-called “white middle-class” women and any Black women seen involved in this movement has been seen as "selling out," “dividing the race,” and an assortment of nonsensical epithets. Black feminist resent these charges and have therefore established THE NATIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATION in order to address ourselves to the particular and specific needs of the larger, but almost cast aside half of the Black

race in Amerika, the Black Woman. Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being Black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist. There has been very little real examination of the damage it has caused on the lives and minds of Black women. Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be placed on Black male suffering. No one of us would minimize the pain or hardship or the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced by Black men. But history, past or present rarely deals with the malicious abuse put upon the Black Woman. We were seen as breeders by the Master; despised and historically polarized from the Master's wife; and looked upon as castrators by our lovers and husbands. The Black woman has had to be strong, yet we are persecuted for having survived. We have been called "matriarchs" by white racists and Black nationalists, we have virtually no positive self-images to validate our existence. Black women want to be proud and dignified and free from all those false definitions of beauty and womanhood that are unrealistic and unnatural. We, not white men or Black men, must define our own self-image as Black Women and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal- which is even being rejected by white women. It has been hard for Black women to emerge from the myriad of distorted images that have portrayed us as grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires, and pancake box Jemimahs. As Black Feminists we realized the need to establish ourselves as an independent Black Feminist Organization. Our above ground presence will lend enormous credibility to the current Women's Liberation Movement, which unfortunately is not seen as the serious political and economic revolutionary force that it is. We will also strengthen the current efforts of the Black Liberation struggle in this country by encouraging all of the talents and creativities of Black women to emerge, strong and beautiful, not to feel guilty or divisive, and assume positions of leadership and honor in the Black community. We Will encourage the Black community to stop falling into the trap of the white male Left, utilizing women only in terms of domestic or servile needs. We will remind the Black Liberation Movement that there can't be liberation for half a race. We must together, as a people, work to eliminate racism from without the Black community which is trying to destroy us as an entire people, but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within.³⁰

This powerful statement encompasses the concerns of Black women who were visionaries, activist, and whose thoughts were progressive. However, when one closely analyzes the mission of the National Black Feminist Organization, they still failed to address all of the multiple forms of oppression that affected the lives of Black women. Due to this exclusion the Combahee River Collective was formed by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Damita Frazier, to

30. Davis, Beverly. "To Seize the Moment: A Retrospective on the National Black Feminist Organization." *Sage* 5, no. 2 (Fall, 1988): 45, <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/seize-moment-retrospective-on-national-black/docview/1300126142/se-2?accountid=10141> (accessed March 2, 2022).

address, sexism, racism, classism, gender biases, and homophobia.³¹ They created the Combahee River Collective Statement in April of 1977 which provided a framework for Black feminist who felt excluded from the feminist movement. The statement had four components, listed below, which served as the framework for a comprehensive feminist movement that addressed the needs and concerns of Black women and women of color.

1. Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism
2. What We Believe
3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists
4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects

The Combahee River Collective Statement was important because it was one of the first of its kind to address the concerns of Black, Lesbian feminists by asserting the following,

Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement. We have had to fight and still do for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.³²

The actions of Black feminists were a “breaking away of sorts” from a movement that was supposed to be all encompassing. The issues that affected Black feminists were not being addressed therefore the need to create a movement, a name, an identity was pivotal for Black

31. Davis, Beverly. "To Seize the Moment: A Retrospective on the National Black Feminist Organization." *Sage* 5, no. 2 (Fall, 1988): 45, <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/seize-moment-retrospective-on-national-black/docview/1300126142/se-2?accountid=10141> (accessed March 2, 2022).

32. Lorde, Audre, and Roxane Gay. *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, 12.

women. The Combahee River Collective statement was created because of the blatant racism within the feminist movement. This statement was one of the first documents produced by Black Lesbian feminists that addressed the multiple oppressions of Black women. The collective impact served as a catalyst for the Kitchen Table Press: Women of Color Press. This printing press was unique because it addressed the intersection of activism, feminism, sexuality, and literature.

Barbara Christian in “Your Silence Will Not Protect You,” provides insight as to why there was a need for a press created by Black, Lesbian, Women. She states, “In 1968, to be a black person and to be homosexual (James Baldwin notwithstanding) was to be against the revolution, to be tainted by white evil.”³³ Lorde, who became a member of the collective, addressed prominent issues in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Lorde refused to suppress her multiple identities. In Lorde’s essay, “Learning from the 60s” she addresses the multiple oppressions that she encountered, and why she refused to be silent about the interlocking forms of oppression.

Christian affirms Lorde’s stance and asserts that, “Her insistence on speaking, whatever the consequences, became a model for many women, who had begun to realize that when the words “Black Liberation” were spoken, they were not referring to us, precisely because we were women.”³⁴ Black Liberation was a term used during the 60s and 70s to describe the ways in which Black people were uniting to fight against racism and equality that were imbedded in the political, cultural, and social structure of the United States. However, within movements that

33. Barbara Christian. “Your Silence Will Not Protect You - a Tribute to Audre Lorde.” *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 8, no. 1 (2013).

34. Barbara Christian. “Your Silence Will Not Protect You - a Tribute to Audre Lorde.” *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 8, no. 1 (2013).

Christian, Barbara. 1993. “Remembering Audre Lorde.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 19 (19): 21–24.

were created to unite the Black community, there were conditions within both the civil rights movement and the Black power movement, that stifled, and silenced the voices and concerns of women.

Rhonda Y. Williams addressed the disparities within the Black panther party, in “Revolution, Struggle, and Resilience,” “Panther women-just like other women, in the words of Ericka Huggins-confronted “sexist and abusive thinking” and male chauvinism.” Higgins continued, “Men and women don’t stop being in the roles we were trained to play because we join an organization, right? The socialization was there before we joined the BPP.” As a result, Panther women confronted and challenged the “-isms” not only outside but also inside their organizational ranks. The lives of Panther women indubitably reveal a great deal: black women’s radical activism, varied expressions, and sites of revolutionary internationalism; the range of societal inequalities experienced by black people and black women more specifically; and the prophetic work of the Black Panther Party as well as its contradictions.”³⁵ These well-known contradictions within the Black Panther Party and the Civil Rights Party were great concern for Black feminist.

Due to the exclusion and the blatant disregard for Black lesbian women, and women of color Lorde believed that by creating a press it would provide an avenue for them to express the ways in which they were also oppressed and more importantly guarantee that their voices wouldn’t be silenced. Barbara Smith in, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color

35. Bryan Shih, Yohuru R. Williams, and Rhonda Y. Williams. “Revolution, Struggle, And Resilience.” Essay. In *The Black Panthers: Portraits from an Unfinished Revolution*, 102–9. New York: Nation Books, 2016.

Press” asserts, “In October 1980, Audre Lorde said to me during a phone conversation, we really need to do something about publishing.”³⁶ It was this conversation that created a movement.

When I first became aware of the Kitchen Table Press: Women of Color Press, I wondered if Lorde’s work had been rejected by mainstream publication presses, and if this is the case I wondered if Lorde felt the need to censor herself in order to have publication opportunities. After completing my research, I began to understand that there was limited opportunities during the 40s, 50s, and 60s to publish literature written by Black women.³⁷ Writers were a reflected the dominant societal values in the Black community, as well as the larger society that existed in the 1960’s, impacted the 70’s, and empowered Black feminists in the 80’s to create a press of their own. The creation of the Kitchen Table Press was a form of activism and abolitionist self-care. The founding of the Kitchen Table Press was a form of abolitionist self-care because of the way in which it served as a network for those who were a part of minoritized communities to speak their truth through the publication of their writings. The act of writing as a way to protest against the inhumane ways that Black women and women of color were being treated helped to abolish the notion that women should have a deferential role in society. Black feminists were demanding to be seen, heard and that their work be read and respected.

Barbara Smith described the process of creating the Kitchen Table Press,

Planning for the press began in October of 1980 when a group of women from Boston and New York met in Boston to discuss the possibilities of doing publishing. An initial decision was made about whether to publish a periodical, books, or both. Most women involved decided that our commitment was publishing books. We felt that books made a kind of lasting impact that is harder to achieve in a periodical; that the kinds of political and cultural visions we had would travel farther in book form. When two Boston based

36. Barbara Smith, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” JSTOR, March 11, 2014, http://www.kitchentable.org/uploads/2/3/1/9/23196432/kitchen_table_barbara_smith_1989.pdf, 11.

³⁷

women in the group moved to New York, meetings continued here, and the Press was named and officially founded on September 19, 1981. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was founded in September 1981 after a year of planning sessions, which began in the fall of 1980. We started the press because it was obvious to us those women of color have virtually no means of getting our work published and also have no autonomous means of communicating with each other.³⁸

Smith's historic account shows that the founders of the Kitchen Table Press were methodical, they realized that they were inhabiting unfamiliar territory and still proceeded. The ways in which these women worked together and decided what genres they would produce as well as the political tone of the press is remarkable. I would assert that the joining of likeminded individuals who shared a common mission is an important aspect of abolitionist self-care.

Archival Findings: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press

My curiosity regarding the founding of the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press led me to the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York, where I closely examined primary sources which included pamphlets, meeting minutes, and numerous other documents. It was at the Lesbian Herstory archive where I examined handwritten and typed documents that provided the contextual framework needed to understand the radical underpinnings of the press.

The mission statement for the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press stated the following,

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is committed to producing and distributing the work of Third World Women of all racial/ cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes that will further the cause of Third World Women's personal and political freedom. Although other presses may at times publish work by women of color, we are not their top priority and fewer works by women of color get published by both independent and trade publishers than those of any other racial-sexual group. On the other hand, the amount and quality of work actually being produced by Third World women writers and artist is phenomenal (especially considering the social and economic conditions under which we create) and is in no way accurately reflected by the disproportionately small volume of work that actually gets published. Too often Third World women writers find ourselves in the position of having a completed manuscript and then facing the dilemma of having no real options as to where to submit it in order to get it produced. The establishment of

38. Typescript of the Founding of the Kitchen Table: Women Of Color Press by Barbara Smith, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Brooklyn NY.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press addresses this need. We are a group of Third World women writers, cultural workers, and community activists who have been involved in the early planning stages of this venture.³⁹

The mission statement was extremely important because it serves as a guidepost to those who were interested in publishing with the Kitchen Table Press, and it established a foundation that signaled to writers and reader alike that the press would be inclusive and welcoming to those whose work may not have been accepted and respected by other well-known publication companies.

The Kitchen Table Collective, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Sonia Alvarez, Myrna Bain, Brenda Joyce, Cherrie Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona (November 1982) began the press by sending sponsor letters to their supporters requesting financial contributions, and materials. The women who started the press were transparent regarding their lack of funding and resources, one of the letters that I examine at the archive stated the following, “Unlike some other successful alternative publishers, no member of our collective brings to Kitchen Table personal wealth that would keep Kitchen Table Functioning. As women of color the resources that we do rely upon are our minds, bodies, our commitment, and our dreams of a global communication network that will connect women of color everywhere.”⁴⁰ It was important that the Kitchen Table Collective explicitly stated that they didn’t have an abundance of resources, because of the need for outside resources and support from the community. The founders also intentionally shared this because they were grassroots organization who didn’t have financial backing from entities that could silence their voice.

39. Typescript Mission of The Kitchen Table Press: Women Of Color Press, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Brooklyn, NY.

40. Kitchen Table Press: Women Of Color Press, Letter, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive Brooklyn, NY.

The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was specific in their requests to potential writers, one of the pamphlets that I examined stated the following, “Manuscripts- Please don’t send us completed Ms! As of January 1, 1982, we will be happy to look at outlines for book projects, accompanied by a short letter telling us something about yourself and your work and a self-addressed envelope with enough postage (S.A.S.E) We will only publish women of color with good (intentioned) hearts and strong minds. All retrogrades get back! Third World Women- Any women of color in the NY area who are interested in helping make this press work. This means women who want to be involved in the day-to-day, un-romantic, un-dramatic labor of love this press will demand.”⁴¹

Each member was responsible for various duties. Audre Lorde was selected to examine the submissions that were received. Her duties were as follows, “After manuscripts have been collectively reviewed, signs letter of acceptance, referrals, rejections etc. Coordinates the distribution of manuscripts with the office manager.”⁴² Lorde, it appears was the first point of contact. She decided which manuscripts would be accepted, and which manuscripts would be rejected. Lorde was highly respected amongst her peers because of her critical eye. Lorde played an integral part in the Kitchen Table Press and committed her time and resources to building the reputable press. Between the years of 1981- 1992, The Kitchen Table Press successfully published several books, and manuscripts.

Lorde’s Personal Journey: Experiences That Influenced an Abolitionist

41. Kitchen Table Press: Women Of Color Press, Pamphlet, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive Brooklyn, NY.

42. Typescript of duties, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Brooklyn, NY

It is important to understand how Lorde's childhood impacted her work as an activist, abolitionist, and feminist. The familial relationship between Lorde's mother and father as well as the relationship between Lorde and her parents served as motivation for her future work. The tragic death of her childhood friend impacted Lorde's sensitivity, to the needs of those who are often overlooked and discarded. Lorde's childhood experiences served as a catalyst for her career as a writer, poet, and social just activist.

In Lorde's Bio-myth-ography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, she states, "American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, must less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *why* was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will. Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, I was surprised to know without being told. It always seemed like a very strange injunction coming from my mother, who looked so much like one of those people we were never supposed to trust. But something always warned me not to ask my mother why she wasn't white, and why Auntie Lilah and Auntie Etta weren't. even though they were all the same problematic color so different from my father and me, even from my sisters, who were somewhere in between"⁴³ The numerous silences that were apart of Lorde's childhood affected her stance regarding the importance of using one's voice. Lorde's childhood played a pivotal role that influenced her writing. The silences caused Lorde to question the importance of race, and class. Lorde understood as a child that there was a hierarchy

43. Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1982), 69.

within American society, and that the hierarchy was predicated by race. Even though her parents didn't explicitly talk about the implications of race, Lorde knew that to have a darker hue meant exclusion, and that exclusion would be the basis upon which she wrote, opposed, and fought to demolish.

Lorde provides a meticulous description of her mother Linda Gertrude Blemar Lorde's demeanor, silences, and unexpressed creativity, she asserted, "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as her hidden angers."⁴⁴ I would argue that it was her mother's silence and inability to express her anger that deeply impacted Lorde's viewpoint. Lorde's insight and understanding of what it meant to be female, Black, was shaped by her first teacher which was her mother. It was the silences in her home that influenced the intuition of Lorde. Lorde had the unique ability to decipher what was being said and what was unspoken and the consequences of both. The silences in the home appear to cause Lorde to be introspective, anxious, and in some ways fearful. Lorde sought the approval of her parents, and needed to be affirmed however, it appears that the cultural and social norms prohibited such affection.

As a result of her traumatic childhood Lorde continued to write, and publish her poetry, and prose. Beginning with *The First Cities* in 1968 and ending with *The Marvelous Arithmetic of Distance* published in 1993, Lorde was intentional, unafraid, courageous, outspoken, and determined to leave a legacy of words that spoke truth to power. It was through her writings that she felt that she could liberate herself and others. Writing was resistance, resistance to the barriers placed upon her by her parents as well as barriers placed upon her by the society in which she was supposed to be docile, acquiescent, and modest.

44. Lorde, Audre. *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1982.

Lorde boldly forged new territory and used her voice to identify and define the oppressions that she was trying to overcome. In “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” she outlines the concepts that she believed impacted her writings and her life, “Racism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance. Heterosexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance. Homophobia: The fear of feelings of love for members of one’s own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.”⁴⁵ Lorde believed that racism, sexism, and heterosexism created silences, and barriers that were challenging for Black lesbian, women to subdue.

Lorde was aware of the social norms and the expected role that women were supposed to embrace during the era in which she lived. Lorde it appears used her writings to challenge women to push back against those norms and encouraged them to forge a new path of understanding. As with the Kitchen Table Press, it appears that Lorde was always thinking of profound ways to use her greatest resource her voice, and her writings.

Throughout Lorde’s texts she writes about the dangers of silence⁴⁶. Lorde’s argument is that silence operates as an incubator for racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Lorde’s stance on the importance of using one’s voice to speak against societal ills, I would argue, is a form of abolitionist self-care. Lorde’s texts serve as an abolitionist handbook because of the instructive examples of the importance of women working together with the goal of eradicating silence, racism, classism, and homophobia.

45. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Random House, 1984, 45.

46. Lorde, Audre. “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” Essay. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 36–39. Berkeley, CA.: Crossing Press, 2015.

Perhaps the reason why Lorde repeatedly focuses on the correlation between death and silence in her multiple texts is because of the silence surrounding the suicide of her childhood friend Genevieve. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name; A Biomythography* Lorde writes about the friendship she shared during her teenage years with Genevieve, and how her death impacted her life. Lorde focuses on Genevieve's troubled home life, and her own silence, and inability to express her concerns to her parents. Genevieve's first failed suicide attempt was deeply concerning for Lorde. Genevieve's first attempt to self-harm should have been a signal to those who claimed to care about the teenager, and resources should have been immediately available to prevent another attempt. However, it appears that no such measures were put into place. Lorde writes about this failed suicide attempt and its aftermath to express her feelings of being unable to secure resources that were needed as well as the emotional support that Genevieve desperately craved. Perhaps she blamed her own silence as a contributing factor that caused Genevieve's death. Lorde asserted that Genevieve often talked about wanting to commit suicide; therefore, Lorde was aware of some of the trauma that Genevieve endured.

This pivotal moment during her adolescent years appears to influence her convictions, and deeply impacted her belief that silence equals death in a literal sense. Lorde wrote the following poem following the suicide of her friend.

We did not weep for the thing that was once a child
Did not weep for the thing that had been a child
Did not weep for the thing that had been
Nor for the deep dark silences
That ate of the so-young flesh.
But we wept at the sight of two men standing alone
Flat on the sky, alone,
Shoveling earth as a blanket
To keep the young blood down.
For we saw ourselves in the dark warm mother-blanket
Saw ourselves deep in the earth's breast-swelling-
No longer young-

And knew ourselves for the first time
Dead and alone.
We did not weep for the thing-week for the thing-
We did not weep for the thing that was
Once a child.⁴⁷

May 22, 1949
(Lorde was 15 years old)

Community Organizing

In the aftermath of a turbulent childhood, shaped by the death of a close friend, and during Lorde's young adulthood she began to think of the importance of care. In *A Burst of Light: and other Essays* Lorde claims that "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." In recent years this quote has been used to justify the need to care for oneself. What I seek to understand is how did Lorde define the terms, care, and self-preservation, and if the act of preserving oneself is a singular or communal act and how are they a component of political warfare which I would assert is self-care.

In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Lorde writes, "We are African women, and we know, in our blood's telling, the tenderness with which our foremothers held each other. It is that connection which we are seeking. We have the stories of Black women who healed each other's wounds, raised each other's children, fought each other's battles, tilled each other's earth, and eased each other's passages into life and into death. We know the possibilities of support and connection for which we all yearn, and about which we dream so often."⁴⁸ Lorde believed that it was imperative that women work together. Lorde's book titled *Zami* is a Carriacou name form

47. Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1982), 97.

48. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Random House, 1984, 153.

women who work together as friends and lovers.⁴⁹ Lorde understood the importance of words, she understood the power that they possessed. By naming her book *Zami*, she gives the reader a glance at the contents, and the thesis of the text before reading a single page.

The connection first between Black women and then with women of other nationalities to challenge social and political structures is the strategy that it appears Lorde believed was the most affective. The commitment to carry each other's burdens as a means of healing each other's is an underlining theme found in most of Lorde's writings, and speeches.

Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* quotes Lorde's famous argument, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. In this passage Audre Lorde explores how independent self-definitions empower Black women to bring about social change. By struggling for self-defined, womanist perspectives that reject the "master's" images, African American women change ourselves. A critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness can in turn foster Black women's collective empowerment. A changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives."⁵⁰ Lorde's and Collins' argument that Black women must work together, share our stories, in order to dismantle the master's house is essential. I would argue that the dismantling of the master's house is not only an example of abolitionist self-care, but it is the result of abolitionist self-care.

49. Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1982).

50. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 117.

In Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, she makes a claim that the abolition of silence is a cure that has the ability to aide in the physical as well as psychological healing process. Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1977, it was after the diagnosis that she began to evaluate every area of her life. Lorde viewed her diagnosis as another opportunity to address the silences in our society especially regarding the silences pertaining to healthcare, treatment, and death. This experience caused her to critique the ways in which women are silenced in regard to the healthcare system was after her mastectomy. After her mastectomy she was encouraged to wear a garment to make her feel "normal", and to give the appearance that her body hadn't been ravaged by breast cancer. She was told how she should present herself when attending doctor's visits by one of the nurses when she arrived for a routine doctor's appointment. It was during the appointment that she was informed that her appearance as a one breasted woman made the patients feel uncomfortable therefore, she should wear a garment to the office to appear "normal". This had a profound impact on Lorde and made her even more determined to push back against this type of rationale. Following this experience Lorde argues, "The emphasis upon wearing a prosthesis is a way of avoiding having women come to terms with their own pain and loss and thereby, with their own strength."⁵¹ Lorde believed that one would never be the same after being diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. Lorde refused to act as if she hadn't faced her own mortality after battling breast cancer.

During Lorde's 14-year battle with breast cancer, she used her voice to encourage women to use theirs, and to share the issues that deeply affected their lives. During the MLA conference in December of 1977, Lorde was invited to be a part of the Lesbian and Literature panel and was invited to share a paper. Lorde titled the paper "The Transformation of Silence into Language

51.Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals: Special Edition*. S.n., 2006.

and Action” Lorde used this conference to share her personal battle with breast cancer as well as to speak about the importance of women using their agency, their voice to make their presence known in the world. Lorde stated,

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive and might not have been. Less than two months ago I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent change that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.⁵²

Lorde understood the power of sharing her experience with those in attendance because it served as an example of the importance of transparency as a mode of healing. Lorde’s ability to share her experiences is a form of social capital. Lorde didn’t allow her battle with breast cancer to silence her and refused to battle the disease privately. Lorde believed that for breast cancer to be abolished, women warriors must share their experiences to encourage others to be transparent about their own personal battles.

Breast cancer’s ability to metastasize is in a sense a metaphor of silence and its ability to mutate and aide in the prevalence of societal norms that have deadly consequences. Lorde, in *The Cancer Journals* states that, “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I have ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I have made contact with other women while we examined the words to it a world in which we all believed, bridging our difference”⁵³ This bridge that Lorde writes about connects women regardless of one’s socioeconomic status, political

52. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Ca.: Crossing Press, 2015), 42.
53 Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals: Special Edition*. S.n., 2006.

affiliations, or nationality. This bridge can only be formed if the silences of racism, class, privilege, access, power can be used as a building block to make the world a place in which all women have the ability to thrive. Lester C. Olson states, "Lorde's remarks stress her perception of silence as detrimental to the extent that it results from violence, abuse, and shame. Her speech to the MLA in 1977 focuses entirely on harmful aspects of silence as an insidious destroyer. Lorde's speech, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," adds to our understanding of silence specifically as a response to internalized shame or wrongful deeds by underscoring that such silence is as devastating to a healthy sense of self as cancer is to the body. Delivered as a part of a panel at the MLA during 1977, the speech endeavored to deal in public with what had been a very private issue."⁵⁴

Lorde became a prolific writer with social standing in the United States and abroad. This social standing created opportunities where she discussed her political beliefs with some of the world's most important political writers and activists. In the conversation between activist, writer James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, *Revolutionary Hope* (1984), she discusses societal norms that affect the lives of Black women.

Baldwin: You're trying to deal with the man, the woman, the child- the child of whichever sex and he or she and your man or your woman has got to deal with the 24-hours- a day facts of life in this country. We're not going to fly off someplace else, you know; we'd better get through whatever that day is and still love each other and still raise children-somehow manage all of that. And this is 24 hours of every day and you're supposed by all of the paraphernalia of safety.

Lorde: Even worse than the nightmare is the blank. And Black women are the blank. I don't want to break this all down then have to stop at the wall of male/female. When we admit, and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them,

54. Olson, Lester C. "On the Margins of Rhetoric: Audre Lorde Transforming Silence into Language and Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 5 June 2009, nca.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00335639709384171.

it's like looking at death. Hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear.

Lorde: We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.⁵⁵

In the conversation between Baldwin and Lorde, she continues to advocate on behalf of Black Women and focuses on the importance of difference. Barbara Christian in, "Your Silence Will Not Protect You, A Tribute to Audre Lorde," focuses on the ways in which Lorde's identity was often debated depending on the audience, she writes, "I cannot help but think of the irony that we split her into separate parts: So many white feminist/ lesbians respond only to her lesbianism; blacks to her race activism; literary critics to her poetic craft; mother goddess followers to her African goddesses."⁵⁶

It appears that Lorde's beliefs regarding silence impacted every area of her life. The annihilation of silence to Lorde, was imperative in order for Black women and women of color to survive. In her conference keynote address: *Sisterhood and Survival*, Lorde stated "Each of us is called upon to take a stand. So, in these days ahead, as we examine ourselves and each other, our works, our hopes, our fears, our differences, our sisterhood and survival. I urge you to tackle what is most difficult for us all, self-scrutiny of our complacencies, that idea that since each one of us believes she is on the side of right, she need not examine her position. We are sisters, and our survivals are mutual."⁵⁷ Lorde call to self-examination as a means of healing is essential to

55. Typescript of article "Revolutionary Hope" for Essence Magazine, 8323, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Brooklyn NY.

56. Barbara Christian. "Your Silence Will Not Protect You - a Tribute to Audre Lorde." *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 8, no. 1 (2013).6

57. Lorde, Audre. "Sisterhood and Survival." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1986, pp. 5-7. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.com/stable/41067253, 7.

the dismantling of systems of oppression. Lorde adamantly believes that women from various backgrounds, cultures, and religions, should work together to adopt an intersectional approach in order to utilize their strengths to uplift all communities.

In her final years she was unequivocal. In the documentary *Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde*, she states, “I am dying- only I do not want to do it while looking the other way. Today is not the day. It could be the day, but it is not. Today is today, in the early morning. Death dangles her stethoscope over the rearview mirror working through another equation.”⁵⁸ These words show that towards the end of Lorde’s life she accepted the fact that her health was failing yet she decided to be fearless. She was courageous throughout her lifetime and in her death.

Beverly Threatt Kullii et al. in “Audre Lorde’s Life and Career” wrote about Lorde’s final days, “Before she died, Lorde in an African naming ceremony took the name Gambia Adisa, meaning Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known”⁵⁹ In her final act of defiance, she once again asserted her power, and named herself a warrior deity, whose writings ensured her eternal existence. In closing, Lorde utilized the gift of writing passed down from her mother, influenced by the suicide of a childhood friend, affirmed through the creation of a printing press, and utilized after a terminal diagnosis to empower women. Lorde left behind a powerful legacy that serves as an example of how women can use their agency to work together to create a just world. Lorde’s efforts have empowered women and continue to inspire women to use their voice. Lorde’s contributions, and radical outspoken approach is a form of self-care. Lorde’s realization

58. Parkerson, Michelle and Ada Gay Griffin, directors. *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde*. Third World Newsreel Film Collective, 1995.

59. Kullii, Beverly Threatt, Ann E. Reuman, and Ann Trapasso. “Audre Lorde's Life and Career.” Audre Lorde's life and career. Accessed March 4, 2022. http://maps-legacy.org/poets/g_l/lorde/life.htm.

that equality, equity, and justice must be interwoven within organizations, community and the academy serve as an example of abolitionist self-care. Lorde was a trailblazer for justice who committed her life to abolishing societal norms that were harmful to women. The work that Lorde began still continues today as Black feminist work towards eradicating oppression.

Chapter II. Maya Angelou
April 4, 1928–May 28, 2014
The Importance of Communal Care

One of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.⁶⁰ —bell hooks

Still, I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain

60. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 227.

I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise⁶¹

In the previous chapter I focused on Audre Lorde and the ways in which she used her voice, poetry, and prose to dismantle systems of oppression. Similarly, to Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou was also a prolific writer, and poet who used her skillset to challenge ideologies that directly affected marginalized communities. There are several analogous themes found in the writings of Lorde and Angelou. In the Lorde chapter I focused on the ways in which her writings and self-expression were a form of abolitionist self-care; in this chapter I focus on the importance of community and friendships as a form of abolitionist self-care.

Throughout this chapter I will examine the ways in which I argue that Angelou practiced self-care. Angelou was a mother, Black feminist, activist, educator, dancer, playwright, artist, humanitarian, poet and essayist. With respect to her most well-known roles, for the purpose of my dissertation, I've decided to focus on the importance of communal care as a form of self-care. My research examines Angelou's well known and lesser-known friendships.

I'm particularly interested in how Angelou used her platform to join causes with likeminded individuals who shared the same political and cultural beliefs. I utilize primary and secondary sources to evaluate some of Angelou's public and private friendships. The primary sources that were evaluated for this chapter were found at the Schomburg Center for Research in

61. Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." Essay. In *The Complete Poetry*, 159. New York: Random House, 2015.

Black Culture in New York where there are over 400 boxes that hold Angelou's personal manuscripts, letters, photographs, cards and numerous other documents.

Angelou was a highly sought-after writer, dancer, speaker, and educator which presented unique challenges. Angelou was also a devoted mother, I often pondered how she was able to thrive while having numerous responsibilities and while living her life in the spotlight. It was through the examination of the documents found at the Schomburg Center that I began to understand the complexities of her life and the ways in which she managed her numerous obligations.

In addition to the numerous roles that she embodied; she was also an activist who devoted her life to fighting for justice. Through my examination of her art, speeches, and numerous books, it was clear that activism wasn't an abstract idea but a principle that governed the projects that she accepted as well as the motivation that inspired her to publish over thirty books.

There have been many texts, speeches, and articles that focus on her work and friendships. I argue that communal care, community building, and friendships are a form of abolitionist self-care. Angelou had friends from various backgrounds who had different opinions about the way in which one should live their lives. Angelou thoroughly enjoyed the diversity of those friendships and found beauty in the midst of the differences. Angelou in *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* argues, "It is time for the preachers, the rabbis, the priests and pundits, and the professors to believe in the awesome wonder of diversity so that they can teach those who follow them. It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter their

color; equal in important no matter their texture. Our young must be taught that racial peculiarities do exist, but that beneath the skin, beyond the differing features and into the true heart of being, fundamentally, we are more alike, my friend than we are unlike.”⁶² Angelou also wrote the poem titled Human Family that focused on the differences within mankind.

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.
Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women
called Jane and Mary Jane,
but I've not seen any two
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different
although their features jibe,
and lovers think quite different thoughts
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,
we weep on England's moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.

62. Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (New York, NY: Random House, 1993), 123.

We seek success in Finland,
are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.⁶³

Angelou strongly believed that people should acknowledge their differences and find common interests to make the world an equitable place. While in the archives I read letters from people who appear to have many differences, yet Angelou respected the differences and formed long lasting friendships.

I begin this chapter by focusing on Angelou's publicized friendships with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. that developed during the 1960s. I then focus on her personal relationships with well and lesser-known individuals engaged in the Civil Rights Movement. I also examine her social networks and end the chapter by examining some the self-care techniques that were evident in the numerous documents examined at the Schomburg Center. I will be utilizing the BREATHE model created by Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans to conduct my analysis. Evans defines the BREATHE model as, "a set of principles by which one can engage the process of restoration and lifestyle change as well as increase one's understanding of Black women's health. The BREATHE model is defined as follows:

B-Balance

63. Maya Angelou, "Maya Angelou – Human Family," Genius, 2022, <https://genius.com/Maya-angelou-human-family-annotated>.

R-Reflection
E-Energy
A-Association
T-Transparency
H-Healing
E-Empowerment

This model is important when thinking of Angelou and the ways in which she lived her life, the relationships that she formed, and her numerous political, social, and cultural contributions.

Political Activism

During the 1960's Angelou worked closely with human rights leader, minister, Black nationalist Malcolm X later known as El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz. Malcolm X was a revolutionary who challenged white supremacy, inequality, and the racist practices that upheld unjust lawful practices and cultural beliefs. Angelou published several articles in which she spoke of her close friendship with Malcolm X, and how his death was an unfathomable source of pain that deeply affected her life.

In her sixth autobiography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, she gives a firsthand account of their friendship, and how his commitment to justice affected her activism. It was apparent that Angelou had a profound connection to Malcolm X based upon her text *A Song Flung Up To Heaven* and the primary sources that I examined at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture in Research in New York, where I examined correspondence between Angelou, and Malcolm X.

The first correspondence that I examined in Angelou's papers between Malcolm X and Angelou gave insight into how their relationship developed. During Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca, he visited the country of Ghana. It was there that Angelou and Malcolm X's relationship was solidified. While Malcolm X was in Ghana, he had numerous conversations with Angelou about the political structure in the United States. Angelou who had established friendships in

Ghana introduced Malcolm X to several of her acquaintances who graciously provided financial assistance to further the work of Malcolm X.

Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca and visit to Ghana marked a turning point in Malcolm X's life. While in Mecca he realized that some of the teachings that he had embraced no longer served a purpose in his life. While in Ghana he confided in Angelou and shared with her his plans to depart from the Nation of Islam, and his plans for the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Upon his return to the United States, in June of 1964, Malcolm X sent the following letter to Maya Angelou.

June 1, 1964

Dear Maya,

May these lines find you and all of the other wonderful people whom I left behind enjoying the best of health, wealth, and happiness. Things have been moving swiftly since my return and I will try and give you an up-to-date progress report in a later letter. I got everybody address in Ghana except Julian Mayfield. Please give all of them my regards and many thanks for their generous support while I was in Ghana.

I failed to see the man in Algeria. I was successful in making some friends on my own initiative, but whatever was set up in advance evidently failed to materialize. All in all, my trip to the Middle East and Africa was wonderful success, especially my stay in Ghana. All of you will be thankful one of these days for the part that you played in making it successful and fruitful.

It is of vital importance that I get some copies of the pictures that were taken at the cocktail party given by Armando as soon as possible, especially the picture that was taken when I addressed the Ghanaian Members of Parliament. So far there has been no open effort made to revoke my passport, but I suspect some strong maneuvering going on behind the scenes.

The true reason for my splitting from the Muslim movement is being told here in the states, so don't be shocked when you hear it. It will be exactly as I explained it to you. Please give my regards to Dr. Makannen, that Mayfields, Vicki, Helen, Elis, Mrs. Du Bois and all of the other wonderful people who helped me while I was there.

Hoping to hear from you real soon.

Sincerely,
Malcolm X⁶⁴

It is in this letter that Malcolm X acknowledges confidential conversations that he had with Angelou while in Ghana. He also mentions the ways in which Angelou aided him while being in Ghana. It was Angelou's connections that assisted Malcolm X as he transitioned from being a leader within the Nations of Islam to establishing a new organization. This letter also serves as an example of how the friendship between Angelou and Malcolm X created a space where he could be vulnerable and state some of the challenges that he faced because of his outspoken critique of the policies in the United States.

Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley*, also writes about the transformation that took place after he made his pilgrimage to Mecca and traveled to Ghana. Malcolm X asserts, "My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all races, all colors, -blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans- in true brotherhood! In Unity! Living as one! Worshiping as one! No segregationists- no liberals; they would not have known how to interpret the meaning of those words. In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again- as I know now that some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man. The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks."⁶⁵ Angelou was aware of Malcolm X's

64. Malcolm X to Maya Angelou, 1 June 1964, box 43 folder, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York, NY.

65. Malcolm X. and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1999), 369.

transformation and more importantly how his transformation could have dire consequences.

Angelou's responds to Malcom X's letter by writing the following,

July 11, 1964

Dear Malcolm,

Sorry, that we haven't heard from you in so long, but we continue to listen to Voice of America and BBC, so at least we know that you still live and lead. I hope that you have received the films and understand what happened from my last letter.

About my going to Cairo, I tried and talks with officials were going along at a very positive pace, however when I thought about the possible negative returns, I cancelled said talks. Since we haven't heard from you, I don't know what you think about my suggestion to go to Cairo, but more than ever, I am certain that the gains we could make would be tremendous if you would simply make an appearance. We began drafting a resolution with the hopes that the Freedom Fighters would table it for us. I talked with leaders (political) from South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Basutoland when they passed through here enroute to Mali for the All-African Trade Union Federation conference. They agreed to try. But if I plain Maya Angelou, went to that conference, no matter how sincere and maybe eloquent I was, I could command very little attention from those people who would be more comfortable if certain demands were not made on them. Those of our African brothers, who want as the last thing they do in life to offend the US, would immediately ask me "who do you represent?" And thereupon I would be stuck. I could answer stock replies like "20 million black souls reaching for freedom", but these guys will not be put off, and it's just possible that I could unintentionally set a stage where they could deny support to a real leader, like you, using my gaffs as reason. Hence, I chickened out. But if you could only go, and contact Ahmed Ibrahim, and Indian representative of the radical Pan African Congress of South Africa. If the Freedom Fighters were unable to table a resolution asking African Heads of State to condemn the US for its radical policies, any one of them could include a statement of censorship which would at least be positive. But as I see it. Every African leader knows you, your policies etc., and would be forced to give you an audience. Whether you could petition or not you could do so much behind the scenes and set the stage for further tap in the various countries. I expect that will be foot dragging on the part of those that are committed to the US, on the pretext that since the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, we should give America a chance to change her actions. I know that you would handle that expertly.

Malcolm, I'm sure that we have not had a leader like you since the dear dead days of Fredrick Douglass. Take care of yourself and know that we certainly those in Accra, are with you, for you and love you.

Try to write soon,
Maya⁶⁶

Undoubtedly, Angelou was concerned about Malcolm's safety because of his decision to split from the Nation of Islam. Even though she doesn't explicitly write about his separation from the Nation of Islam, she informs him that she has been staying informed with the political climate since he left Ghana. Malcolm X wanted to utilize his notoriety to change the conditions in the United States. He believed that through the relationships that he formed in Ghana and his political connection in the United States he could help change tumultuous political climate. Malcolm X states the following regarding what he felt was a lack of urgency amongst Negroes when he returned to the United States, "I must be honest. Negroes- Afro Americans- showed no inclination to rush to the United Nations and demand justice for themselves here in America. I really had known in advance that they wouldn't. The American white man has so thoroughly brainwashed the black man to see himself as only a domestic "civil rights" problem that it will probably take longer than I live before the Negro sees that the struggle of the American black man is international."⁶⁷ Malcolm X wanted Angelou to use her connections to assist him as he began to prepare to go to the United Nations for assistance to charge the United States with the inhumane treatment of African Americans.

Angelou responds by writing about the cultural norms in Ghana and her positionality as a Black woman living abroad. Even though she was passionate about fighting on the behalf of the disenfranchised, she understood that because of sexism and the patriarchal structure in Ghana that her voice wouldn't not be heard.

66. Maya Angelou to Malcolm X, 11 July 1964, box 43 folder 1, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture Archive, New York, NY.

67. Malcolm X. and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1999), 371.

Angelou's hesitancy is an example of what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the othering of Black women, she claims, "The controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the other persists. Particular meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of intersecting oppressions. African American women encounter this ideology through a range of unquestioned daily experiences. But when the contradictions between Black women's self-definitions and everyday treatment are heightened, controlling images become increasingly visible." Angelou was very well connected in Ghana. Angelou's partner, Vusumzi Make was a highly respected political leader, and she had established herself as a prolific writer, social justice activist, and leader. However, she still faced many challenges and found it difficult to push back against societal beliefs that placed the concerns and needs of women in the margins. The prevalent social norms were a great cause of concern for Angelou, and she believed that because of her gender regardless of her connections created insurmountable tension between her and the Ghanaian leadership. Angelou however, requested that Malcolm X, and the freedom fighters return to Africa and make an appeal to the African leaders.

In August of 1964, Malcolm X published "The Cancer that is Destroying America" in the Egyptian *Gazette*. A printed copy of this essay was found in Angelou's papers with a handwritten note written by Malcolm X on the back. It is in this letter that Malcolm X writes about the importance of human rights and the need for African Americans to establish allies in the United States, and if this isn't possible, he encourages them to create relationships with those who live abroad. I would assert that it was in the formation of relationships during his visit to

Mecca, Cairo, and Ghana that Malcom X began to understand the importance of Pan Africanism.

Below is an excerpt of his speech:

Written Special for the Egyptian Gazette- August 25, 1964
Speech Titled: Racism: The Cancer That Is Destroying America

I am not a racist, and I do not subscribe to any of the tenets of racism. But the seed of racism has been firmly planted in the hearts of most American whites ever since the beginning of that country. This seed of racism has rooted itself so deeply in the subconsciousness of many American whites, that they themselves oftentimes are not even aware of its existence, but it can be easily detected in their thoughts, their words, and in their deeds.

In the past I permitted myself to be used by Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the sect known as the “Black Muslims”, and to make sweeping indictments of all white people, the entire white race, and these generalizations have caused injuries to some whites who perhaps did not deserve to be hurt. Because of the spiritual enlightenment which I was blessed to receive as the result of my recent pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of any one race.

My religious pilgrimage (HAJJ) to Mecca has given me a new insight into the true brotherhood of Islam, which encompasses all the races of mankind. The pilgrimage broadened my scope, my mind, my outlook, and made me more flexible in approaching life’s many complexities and in my reactions to its paradoxes...

The 22 million Afro Americans do not have HUMAN RIGHTS only because the U.S. government refuses to enforce its own constitution where the HUMAN RIGHTS of the Afro American is concerned. Four hundred years ago the rights of the Afro American to be a human being in America was taken away. The U.S. government has refused to restore our right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness....”

If the 22 million Afro Americans don’t get sincere allies in America, we must seek allies elsewhere. If we can’t find friends in America in our struggle for HUMAN RIGHTS and HUMAN DIGNITY, we definitely have friends abroad.⁶⁸

[On the back of one of the pages is a handwritten note by Malcolm X.]

I’m still in Cairo. When I leave, I’m going to forward my mail to your box there in Accra so it will be waiting when I arrive- which will be about two weeks after I leave here.

68. Malcolm X, 25 1964 August, box 43 folder 1, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture Archive, New York, NY.

X⁶⁹

This handwritten letter to Angelou demonstrates the friendship and connection between Angelou and Malcom X. Angelou was considered an ally and a confidant. Due to Angelou's devotion, Malcolm X trusted her. After Malcolm X returned to the states he continued to write Angelou. The month prior to his assassination he sent the following letter to Angelou.

January 15, 1965

Dear Maya,

I was shocked and surprised when your letter arrived, but I was also pleased because I only had to wait two months for this one whereas previously, I had to wait almost a year. You see I haven't lost my wit. (smile)

I am very happy to learn that Sylvia returned rejuvenated and has since been rejuvenating all the rest of you there. It is true that I certainly have wished many times that you and Alice and Helen were here in the states again because all of you have so much on the ball it seems to be almost a waste of time. For some strange reason I never get mail from Alice. Since I've written her several times, I began to wonder if she gets my mail. When you write to her call this to her attention.

Your analysis of our people's tendency to talk over the head of the masses in a language that is too far about the head of the masses is certainly true. You can communicate because you have plenty of (soul) and you always keep your feet firmly rooted on the ground. This is what makes you, you. Where is Helen and what is she doing and what is her address?

What is Nana and Nkesia's position in the field of culture there? A girl who has been highly instrumental in helping us get the OAAU started here is planning on coming there. Her boyfriend is an artist whose last name is Feelings. He is there already, and you have probably met him, at least, I know he has met Efua Southerland and was highly impressed by her as I myself was also highly impressed by Efua Southerland. This girl's name is Muriel Gray, and she is going to send her "prospectus" to Nketsia in hope that he can help her in securing position there in the cultural field so that she can move there and be with her future husband. I am enclosing some articles that will give you somewhat of an idea of my daily experiences here and you will then be better able to understand why it sometimes takes me a long time to write. I was most pleased to learn that you might be

69. Malcolm X to Maya Angelou date unknown, box 43 folder 1, Maya Angelou Collection Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture Archive, New York, NY.

hitting in this direction this year. You are a beautiful writer and a beautiful woman. You know that I will always do my utmost to be helpful to you in any way possible so don't hesitate.

I hope that you will get this letter before James Farmer arrives. The Afro-American community there should not shun him but should encircle him and make sure that he is exposed to the right kind of thinking. I hope he has an opportunity to meet Mr. DuBois and also the President. Please convey that message to her for me so that he will be exposed to the most undiluted African thinking.

Hoping to hear from you real soon.

Your brother,
Malcolm X⁷⁰

This is the last letter between Angelou and Malcolm X found in the Angelou papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Malcolm X would be assassinated five weeks after Angelou received this letter. Malcolm's assassination deeply affected Angelou because of their close friendship. Angelou had returned to the United States to help Malcolm with his organization the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

Malcolm X had returned to the United States after his pilgrimage to the Mecca with a newfound understanding of the importance of unity. His philosophy had changed, and he understood the importance of having Angelou involved with the OAAU. Angelou understood Malcolm's mission and was determined to work towards fulfilling his mission. After Malcolm X's death, Angelou felt personally responsible to combat false narratives that were used to tarnish his reputation and contributions. Angelou often talked about her relationship with Malcolm X, his demeanor, his humor, and his commitment to human rights.

YouTube Transcript

Interviewer: What should young people know about Malcolm X?

70. Malcolm X to Maya Angelou, 15 January 1965, box 43 folder 1, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture Archive, New York, NY.

Angelou: Well, this is going to sound strange and even frivolous, they should know that he had an incredible sense of humor. They should know that about Martin too. Martin Luther King had an incredible sense of humor. One of the things some historians do and some of the mistakes made is the historian and the social historian in particular off times recreate the man or woman as larger than life which puts the person beyond the reach of a young person so if Malcolm and Martin and Abraham Lincoln and Kennedy if Dr. Dubois and Mary McLeod Bethune are beyond their reach then they say well there's nothing I can do they those people were bigger than life. I'm just myself I was born in Boston and I'm just myself I was born in Kansas City what can I do. So, the wisest thing is to make the people accessible show their wilds, and their wits, and their warts show them so a person can say you know given the same circumstance I think I'd have done that too. I'd like to think I could have done that so what both men I knew Malcolm so much better than Dr. King, but Malcolm was a faithful man great loving person who really loved Black people and then one of the most courageous persons I've ever known. Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently you can't kind consistently fair, merciful, just, loving you cannot. Malcolm having said that all whites were blue-eyed Devils all this right so then he went to Mecca, and he came to West Africa, and he said I have met what skin blue eyed men who I've openly me called brother. I was wrong now it takes a great deal of courage to say that even when the person feels that they were wrong I see this today people who don't believe what they say but because they have the habit of saying it and are known is saying they are afraid to say listen everybody you remember when I said las week I no longer believe that so among other things his courage and his exquisite sense of humor young people should be reading the books read the books.⁷¹

Angelou and Malcom X were united. They had a close friendship that was predicated on their mutual beliefs. Angelou was a confidant and remained a loyal supporter after his death. Angelou's ability to encourage and uplift Malcolm X during a period in which the organization upon which he devoted many years of his life disowned him, served as a lifeline that Malcolm X treasured. Angelou was willing to advocate on behalf of Malcom X, their bond, their belief in the concepts of unity, justice, and equality is an example of abolitionist self-care. The importance of likeminded individuals working together to improve the lives of African Americans is an essential component when one thinks of abolitionist self-care.

71. Maya Angelou, "Maya Angelou: Malcolm X," YouTube (YouTube, January 29, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ktbLy5euvY&t=6s>.

Angelou also worked closely with Civil Rights leader, humanitarian, and activist Martin Luther King Jr. Martin Luther King Jr's nonviolence approach was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi served as the basis for the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. approached Maya Angelou and requested that she work with the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Angelou in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* asserts, "Martin King said to me, "And you, Maya. I wanted to talk to you. What are you doing now?" I said I was writing a play. "Can you put a bookmark on a page and give me one month of your time? This poor people's march we are girding up for is not a black march or a white march. This is a poor people's march. I want us to stay in Washington D.C., until legislation is passed that will reduce the poverty in our rich country. We may have to build tent cities, and if so, I want to be able to do that." "But what can I..." "I need someone to travel this country and talk to black preachers. I'd like each big church to donate one Sunday's collection to the poor people's march. I need you, Maya. Not too many black preachers can resist a good-looking woman with a good idea." Martin went on, "Also, when anyone accuses me of just being nonviolent, I can say, "Well, I don't know. I've got Maya Angelou back with me." Jimmy said, "Yes. Of course, she will do it." I saw, or thought I saw, how Reverend King was planning to expand the reach and influence of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He asked for only one month. I said, "Yes, but only after my birthday. I have to give a party to explain to these hard-nosed New Yorkers why I'm going back to the SCLC. They think I'm much more of an activist, a real radical." "What I'm planning is really radical. When is your birthday?" I said, "April fourth." We both nodded.⁷²

Angelou was a highly sought-after speaker because of her ability to impact audiences. Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of*

72. Maya Angelou, *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (London: Virago, 2008), 177.

Empowerment, writes about the importance of language and activism, she argues, “Black feminism and other social justice projects require a language of power that is grounded within yet transcends these approaches. Social justice projects need a common, functional vocabulary that further their understanding of the politics of empowerment.”⁷³ Due to Angelou’s powerful speeches, prose and poetry, King realized that Angelou was an asset and that she could help his cause. After the assassination of Malcolm X, she began to work closely with Martin Luther King Jr. Angelou used her gift of writing, and rhetoric to work with Martin Luther King Jr. Angelou served as the northern coordinator of the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership conference.⁷⁴ Angelou was committed to the uplift of African Americans throughout her lifetime. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on Maya Angelou’s birthday which deeply affected Angelou. Angelou continued to preserve Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X’s legacy after their deaths.

Personal Relationships

I often wondered how Angelou was able to accomplish so many things in her 86 years of life. Angelou often talked about the importance of mentorship, friendship, and community. Angelou’s ability to maintain close bonds with women and men I would argue is how she survived and how she was able to inspire so many.

Ruth E. Davis states in, *Discovering Creative Essences in African American Women: The Construction of Meaning Around Inner Resources* used the findings of “Lockhart and White (1989) asserts that historically some African American women have the ability to confront their

73. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 275.

74. Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 107.

oppression and rise above the boundaries that are often used to question their humanity even when they are faced with seemingly insurmountable stressors. One of the critical ways African American women mediate daily stress is through external, coping systems, such as social support networks. Social support systems and interpersonal network are considered to be extremely critical in the lives of African American women. These interactions are viewed as life affirming.”⁷⁵ Angelou had numerous support systems and she would often refer to those who supported her the rainbow in her clouds.

When one thinks of activist movements, one often points to those who worked together to push back against societal, cultural, and political injustices. History has shown that systemic change often occurs when people work together in community. As one who often admired Angelou’s work, I didn’t realize the importance of her social, professional, and political connections until I examined her personal papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Before my visit to the archives at the Schomburg library, I had an idea of who Angelou was: I thought of her as a larger-than-life figure who had a perfect life, enormous wealth, and famous friends. What I came to realize as I combed through the numerous documents, letters, cards, speeches, is that she indeed had her own struggles. She had moments of great sadness, anger, loneliness, and she also experienced profound grief.

Angelou often shared that it was the support of her community, her friends, and supporters whose aid was a lifeline and who were a bridge over troubled water. Angelou had

75. Ruth E. Davis, “Discovering ‘Creative Essences’ in African American Women: The Construction of Meaning around Inner Resources,” *Women's Studies International Forum* (Pergamon, January 4, 1999), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539598000661>.

many friends who extended themselves to her, and she also extended her friendship to them as an act of self-care. bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin To Center* wrote about the importance of sisterhood in the Black community. The bonds that are shared between Black women is how historically they survived. hooks asserts, “I had not known a life where women had not been together, where women had not helped, protected, and love one another deeply.”⁷⁶ The relationships among Black women have always been a sustaining force within the Black community. Angelou, also wrote about the value of community amongst Black women. One of Angelou’s most famous quotes states, “Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.”⁷⁷ Angelou understood that one woman has the power to make a difference. Angelou also understood that when women gather, systems can be changed, polices can be overturned, and humanity benefits.

Angelou was a prolific writer who often spoke of the events that led to the writing of her autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The days following his assassination her friend, James Baldwin came to her home because he was concerned after not being able to contact her for several days, he insisted that she leave her home and accompany him to a friend’s home. This friend Jules Feiffer changed the trajectory of her life by encouraging Angelou to write an autobiography. It was through the encouragement of others, her community, that she courageously wrote her best-selling book, critically acclaimed book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969. It appears that after the success of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, writing became a cathartic practice for Angelou.

76. Beverly Guy-Sheftall and bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York, NY: New Press, The, 2011), pp. 270-282, 278.

77. Emma Gray, “11 Ways Maya Angelou Taught Us to Be Better Women,” HuffPost (HuffPost, December 7, 2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/maya-angelou-women-quotes_n_5404284.

While in the archives, I found several documents in which Angelou is transparent regarding what motivated her to write, as well as self-care practices that she used to uplift her spirit during times of sadness, and stress. Angelou in an article written for *Playgirl* Magazine in 1975 shared, “I keep a mental card index of heroes and heroes. In times of stress, I flip through their names and choose the one or ones whose actions most relate to my predicament. Their strength and weaknesses allow me to rise from my morning’s bed and jump into the day with energy and excitement. I am careful not to build them out of proportion. In thanking them, I remember that an idol demands adulation and imitation. A shero/heroess encourages each person away from imitation and toward a fuller realization of her own, his own self. Sheroes, Heroes, for that I salute you.”⁷⁸ It is apparent that Angelou also needed inspiration. She relied upon those who came before, and those who walked through life with her to help carry the weight of being a public figure, and empath.

It was through the words, deeds, and actions of others that Angelou is inspired and gathered strength. Angelou was a voracious reader who often memorized sonnets, scriptures, and other forms of writing.

Angelou believed that in order for her to remain sane in a world devoted to her erasure she needed an army of sorts around her to uplift her and encourage her. Angelou asserted, “Because I am serious about my survival and because I know I need a constant infusion of inspiration in order to survive with passion, compassion, humor, and style, I do not indulge manmade differences between human beings, neither generation gaps nor racial barriers. When I need to be strengthened in their personal achievement of individuality, I am likely to think of Gertrude Stein, Fanny Lou Hamer, or Madam Sun Yat Sen. My roster of younger heroes

78. Maya Angelou, “Expanding Our Lives,” *Playgirl*, May 1976, pp. 10-14.

includes Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni, Bernadette Devlin, Joan Baez, Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave, Sonya Sanchez, and Marcia Gillespie. These young women inspire me because of their approach to life, to live my own life more fully.”⁷⁹ Angelou believed that one could be inspired by those who came before her and encouraged by those whose youth and vitality brought new insight and new modes of understanding. Angelou believed that it was important to acknowledge the sacrifices of those who paved the way, as well as join forces with those who were forging a new path in the fight for freedom

I would argue that it was her relationships, her community, and the people she trusted that were life-giving. Stephanie Y. Evans argues in “Healing traditions in Black Women’s Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy”, “In essence, Black women must find balance between strength and vulnerability and navigate our way to private peace and public voice.”⁸⁰

Angelou wasn’t a deity, in which she didn’t experience pain or disappointment. It was clear in the multiple letters that I read that Angelou was deeply affected by the injustices that plague our world.

Following the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy on June 6, 1968, which occurred almost exactly two months to the day of King’s assassination she wrote a letter to her friend Dolly McPherson. In this letter she discussed her anguish and the hopelessness that she felt.

June 6, 1968 [Unpublished]

Dear Dolly,

This country is no longer sick. It is mad. Words cannot carry the thoughts, and the mind cannot contain the horror, of what Americans, Arabs, Africans, Russians, Chinese,

79. Maya Angelou, “Expanding Our Lives,” *Playgirl*, May 1976, pp. 10-14.

80. Stephanie Y Evans, “Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy,” Taylor & Francis (*Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 166.

Britons, in a word, Mankind is doing to itself. The guilt at the core, is a gangrenous mob, that imperils our total future. How sad, how shocking.

Love, I know you're upset, and there's nothing I can write to you that can allay, or ease, although you know I wish to desperately. Only that out of mankind comes hope. And hope is a kind of faith. Faith that we will continue, and if we're to survive as a species, we must improve. I sympathize with the ill-starred family of Kennedys. I sympathize with the ill-starred family of man.

Love you securely,
Maya⁸¹

Angelo wrote this letter the day after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Angelou was deeply affected by the assassination and felt the need to reach out to a friend to express her anger. Angelou relied on her friendships, to anchor her during turbulent times. The Kennedys during the 1960's represented hope, vitality, and many believed that they would usher in a new era. Some believed that this era would end discrimination, racist policies, and have a positive effect on the political climate in the United States. After Malcolm's and King's assassinations Robert Kennedy commitment to changing the political climate in the United States gave marginalized communities hope.⁸² After Kennedy was assassinated, it appears that Angelou began to wonder if the political, cultural, and social structure in the United States would ever change.

It appears that Angelou's first response to, yet another assassination was to write and confide in her friend Dolly McPherson. The relationship between McPherson and Angelou provided a space where she could be transparent, and where she could share her pain, anger, sadness, and disappointment. Angelou once again used her gift of writing to express her innermost feelings. As Angelou tried to work through her feelings of despair, McPherson is who

81. Maya Angelou to Dolly McPherson, 6 June 1968, MG830 box 33 file 13, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York, NY.

82. Larry Tye et al., "The Most Trusted White Man in Black America," *POLITICO Magazine*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/robert-f-kennedy-race-relations-martin-luther-king-assassination-214021/>.

she turned to for support, and understanding. It appears that McPherson's friendships sustained her. Angelou closed the letter by signing it, love you securely which demonstrates that she may have felt insecure in regard to the political climate, but she wanted her friend to know when all else fails, she loved her, and that love would never change. Angelou had many friends who played a vital role in her life.

While in the archives I read letters between Nina Simone and Angelou. Simone composed songs as a response to the times in which she lived. Simone's songs became the soundtrack of the tumultuous 1960's. Simone was committed to using her talent to compose music and perform to challenge the social and political norms of her day. Between 1963 and 1969, she wrote several songs that made her a household name. Her songs, *Blackbird*, *Blues for Mama*, *Do I Move You?* *Four Women*, *Images*, *Mississippi Goddam*, and *To Be Young Gifted and Black* were the soundtrack of the turbulent 1960's. African American's embraced Simone's music because she was unapologetic, she was outspoken, and she was proud to be African American despite the racism, and prejudice that she encountered. It was after the release of some of her greatest hits that some became concerned by her erratic behavior. It appears that the anti-Black conditions in which she lived contributed to mental health challenges that affected her life and her career. Angelou was concerned and asked the following question, "What happened, Miss Simone? Specifically, what happened to your big eyes that quickly veil to hide the loneliness? To your voice, that has so little tenderness, yet overflows with your commitment to the battle of Life. What happened to you?"⁸³ Out of concern for Simone, Angelou wrote a letter to express her support.

November 30, 1971

83. Nicole Kempksie, "What Happened, Miss Simone?," BAM.org, 2022, <https://www.bam.org/education/2015/study-guide/what-happened-miss-simone/story>.

Ms. Nina Simone
406 Nueber Avenue
Mount Vernon, New York

Sister Love,

I've tried 49,000 times to reach you.
Now Nina, I know you're going through something, and I am too, and I also know that
keeping in touch with each other makes the going through a little bit easier.

My good thoughts and love and friendship are with you wherever you are, physically,
mentally, and spiritually.

Let us not lost each other again for 2 or 3 years.

Joy!
Maya Angelou⁸⁴

Angelou was a supportive friend. Angelou's concerns were valid because of Simone's mood swings and behaviors that were well documented by the media. The times in which she lived caused Simone to be under a tremendous amount of pressure. Angelou's heartfelt letter is an example of the importance of communal care. Angelou understood the importance of being connected and supported by one's peers. Angelou also understood the pressure associated with fame. Evans's argument in "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy", validates Simone's erratic behavior, "Black women's mental health issues are intimately tied to experiences defined by social locations."⁸⁵ The emotional, mental strain caused by the racist conditions of the 1960's took their toll on Simone. Simone was a musician who deployed her craft to contribute to the Civil Rights Movement, who wrote songs to challenge the

84. Maya Angelou to Audre Lorde, 30 November 1971, MG830 box 37 folder 19, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York, NY.

85. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (*Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 166.

conditions in which she lived. She was unapologetic in her approach and demanded to be heard and respected. Her song called for the abolition of inequality, racism, classism, that directly affected the Black community. Simone was outspoken, bold and courageous. Angelou forged a friendship with Simone because of their commitment to fighting for equality, as well as their social location as celebrities who were often under public scrutiny. Simone's Lyrics and Angelou's poetry often addressed the political climate of the 1960's:

Mississippi Goddam by Nina Simone (1964)

You don't have to live next to me
Just give me my equality
Alabama gotten me so upset
Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddamn

Angelou was also committed to staying in touch with Simone regardless of the challenges that they were both facing. Angelou's epistolary practice created links require to sustain activist practices and, was integral to her practice of creating a powerful feeling of sisterhood necessary for health, wellbeing, and self-care. The practice of letter writing enacted affective sharing. Angelou also believed that by sharing that she was also "going through something" could potentially encourage Simone to respond to her letter. Angelou's letter expressed that she was genuinely concerned about her, and more importantly that she wasn't alone. Angelou believed that her survival as well as Simone's survival was in direct relation to those whose they surrounded themselves with. Angelou spoke fondly of Simone's gift, and when questioned about Simone's life she stated, "Poets, sculptors, and singers, offer the human truth to the world. Nina Simone and her song, spoke of the loneliness of trust betrayed, the bitterness of heartbreak, the

anguish of racial prejudice and the beauty of the melody when the human heart speaks lovingly of love.”⁸⁶

Social Networks: The Elks

Angelou had many social networks. She was an active member of The Elks. Historically the Elks were, “A fraternal order with hundreds of thousands of members and a 150+ year history, whose mission is to “inculcate the principles of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity; to recognize the belief in God; to promote the welfare and enhance the happiness of its members; to quicken the spirit of American patriotism; to cultivate good fellowship; to perpetuate itself as a fraternal organization, and to provide for its government, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America will serve the people and communities through benevolent programs, demonstrating that *Elks Care* and *Elks Share*.”⁸⁷ Angelou was a member of the Elks and financially supported a Black female chapter and Lodge, Carnation Temple #734 in Stockton California. Angelou deeply believed in service. Warner and Jones, in “Evaluating Culturally Responsive Group Work with Black Women” argue, “The act of support, caretaking, and educating one another through groups is a cultural phenomenon that has been used throughout history by Black women and their communities.”⁸⁸ Even though the Elks were not a predominately Black organization, there were numerous chapters where the majority of their members were Black. It appears that the members of Carnation Temple #734 focused on issues that affected the Black community. In Angelou’s personal papers at the Schomburg Center

86. Maya Angelou, “Maya Angelou: Nina Simone Spoke the Anguish of Racial Prejudice,” HuffPost (HuffPost, December 7, 2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/maya-angelou-nina-simone-racial-prejudice_n_1251192.

87. “The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elk.” ELKS, 2022. <https://www.elks.org/>.

88. Lani V. Jones and Lynn A. Warner, “Evaluating Culturally Responsive Group Work with Black Women,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 21, no. 6 (2011): pp. 737-746, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731511411488>.

for Research in Black Culture, there was a document distributed by the Elks, that focused on the prevalence of heart disease in the Black community.

Christine Woyshner argues in “Black Civic Organizations in the History of Education, Leadership, Curriculum, and Resistance,” “Black civic voluntary organizations were essential in the fight for equality, social justice, and racial and economic advancement from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Given that African Americans were virtually excluded from mainstream political and public life during this time, they established a range and number of organizations to help provide services and programs for black communities, as well as offering literary and artistic outlets. Central to the mission of black civic organizations were education and the schooling of black youth. Almost universally, the associations developed programs in education for adults and youth, shaped the curriculum in segregated schools, and educated members and the wider community about American civic ideals and the need for social justice and political reform. Through membership, African Americans learned leadership skills and cultivated important national networks.”⁸⁹

According to Neal-Barnett et al in “Sister Circle As A Culturally Relevant Intervention for Anxious African American Women,” argues that “Sister circles are support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among African American females. Originally embedded in the Black club movement, sister circles have been a vital part of Black female life for the last 150 years. Sister circles exist directly in the community and within organizations that are components of women’s lives. Many women have

89. Christine Woyshner, “Black Civic Organizations in the History of Education,” SpringerLink (Springer, Singapore, January 1, 1970), https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-10-2362-0_40.

ties to these organizations that go back generations.”⁹⁰ Angelou’s participation in the Elks is an example of her involvement in sister circles. Angelou’s mother was also a member of the Elks, Carnation Temple #734.

Rainbow in the Clouds

Angelou had many well-known friendships. At the Schomburg I read numerous letters between Angelou and some of her famous friends. Angelou was always gracious and extremely hospitable. As I think about abolitionist self-care one of the components that is most important is the need for a village. Angelou’s village including activist, pastors, singers, actors, and academics. Before I visited the archive I wanted to know if the way in which she lived her personal life was different than her public image. I left the Schomburg Center after examining her papers with a new appreciation of Angelou. Angelou was extremely gracious, and willing to advocate on behalf of those who may not have fame or wealth. In the letter below Angelou is being praised for her hospitality and willingness to open her home to a friend. One of the ways in which Black women have inspired a new generation of feminists, activists, writers, and academics is by sharing their experiences. bell hooks in *All About Love* writes about the importance of sharing one’s wisdom, she writes, “Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to express in public and private decisions.”⁹¹ The following letter written to actress, and singer Pearl Bailey Angelou’s letter is an example of the power of Angelou’s commitment to a love ethic. Angelou wrote this

90. Angela Neal-Barnett et al., “Sister Circles as a Culturally Relevant Intervention for Anxious Black Women,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 18, no. 3 (2011): pp. 266-273, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2011.01258.x>.

91. bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2001).

letter while Bailey was hospitalized. Angelou's sentiments were uplifting. Although Angelou was well known, and had a busy schedule, she still took time out of her day to encourage Bailey.

February 28, 1972

Ms. Pearl Bailey
c/o Mount Sinai Hospital
8720 Beverly
Hollywood, California

Dear Pearl,

The love and good thoughts which are coming from people all around the world, all ages, all faces, both sexes (and others), must keep that silly hospital bed 2 feet off the floor. I am sure the nurses and doctors and hospital attendant are required to be over 6' tall just in order to see you.

Pearl, you love, and you are loved. And speaking personally, my own prayers for you are working like a bust seamstress, knitting here, fine stitching there, and along with all other prayers they're making you better than new.

My Aries sister, I long for the day when we can open our mouths and laugh as fully as we both laugh, and the next minute have our eyes filled with tears of gratitude for being alive. Since I know that you are God's child and I am your sister, I also know that everything will be alright.

Some added Love,
Maya Angelou⁹²

Angelou's faith gave her hope. Her letter is an example of the power of friendship amongst Black women. Her letter begins with ensuring Bailey that she is deeply cared for by people from around the world. Angelou knew that this would bring solace and joy to Bailey. hooks, *In All About Love* states "Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all the dimensions of love- care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge, in our everyday lives. We can successfully do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine

92. Maya Angelou to Pearl Bailey, 28 February 1972, box 13, folder 4, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York, NY.

our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn. Understanding knowledge as an essential element of love is vital because we are daily bombarded with messages that tell us love is about mystery, about that which cannot be known.”⁹³ Angelou’s correspondence with Bailey serves as an example of the power of love, and friendship.

In the following letter historian Nell Painter is transparent regarding the need for assistance regarding the biography that she was working on that focused on the contributions of Sojourner Truth. One can gather from the letter that Angelou was approachable, and that those connected to her knew that she would assist them when they had a need.

21 February 1990

Department of History
129 Dickinson Hall
Princeton, New Jersey 08544-1017

[excerpt]

Dear Maya,

At present I am working on a biography of Sojourner Truth. She is a fascinating character; smart, inspired, powerful, insightful, and completely outside the ken of most of the abolitionists and women’s rights people she dealt with. There’s no question of her importance in both movements. But because she was so unusual, I’m having difficulty finding the words to express her power. I wondered whether you would have any advice that might help me understand Sojourner Truth, for in some ways, I think that you move educated audiences with the same combination of right thinking and oral artistry. You are a poet; she was a prophet. But your gifts, I think, overlap.

Can you tell me anything about poetic inspiration that needs to be available on call and on a regular basis? About balancing the need to inspire with the need to entertain? About the spontaneity of inspiration and appreciation of what works? About challenging stereotypes while playing on what educated audiences need from a black lecturer? About what blacks and whites in your audiences expect of you and get from you?

93. bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2001), 94.

One enormous difference between you and Truth is that it is your writing that bring audiences to you. They come to hear you talk after having read you. Truth was illiterate, so she relied on the power of her speaking/preaching and singing. But she initially reached antislavery and women's rights audiences by selling her Narrative at their meetings. I wonder how inspired writing and inspired speech reinforce each other. Can you help me with this?"

Warmest Regards,
Nell Painter⁹⁴

Angelou, as previously stated was highly respect and a voracious reader. Angelou often shared her wisdom with the public as well as her close circle of friends. Painter who was a professor at Princeton, respected Angelou's perspective and called upon her knowledge to discuss the contributions of abolitionist Sojourner Truth. Painter understood the importance of preserving Truth's legacy and called upon Angelou to help her formulate Truth's contributions. In order to inspire a new generation of abolitionists one must preserve the history of those who sacrificed their lives on behalf of freedom. The preserving of that history is an example of abolitionist self-care.

Abolitionist Self-Care: Standing in the Gap

Angelou had numerous friendships, some of them were highly publicized while others were private. Angelou's friendship with Coretta Scott King was well-known. Often times after civil rights activist were murdered, the families are left to create a new normal without their loved ones. They are left trying to pick up the pieces of their lives and sometimes forgotten. They are left trying to find new ways to financially support themselves, while being emotionally distraught. The family of Martin Luther King Jr. had to create a "new normal". King left behind a wife, and 4 children. Angelou as previously stated worked closely with King, felt a personal

94. Nell Painter to Maya Angelou, 21 February 1990, box 35 folder, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, New York, NY

responsibility to acknowledge his death every year by sending a token of remembrance to the Coretta. A component of abolitionist self-care is the belief that the contributions of those who have dedicated their lives to the fight for freedom, should be remembered. Angelou believed that it was her responsibility to acknowledge not only Kings death but also the family that was left behind.

[Card sent to Maya Angelou from Coretta Scott King]

May 9, 1995

My Dear Sister Maya,

Words are inadequate to express to you how uplifting it was to talk with you by phone and to receive a lovely plant from you on the anniversary of the darkest day of my entire life. As I said to you on the phone, it meant more to me than I could ever express. Your sensitivity to the impact of this anniversary on me and my family especially after 27 years shows how special you are, and I love you very much for the caring spirit that you are. I think of you often, wish I could see you more often and share more laughs and the beauty of your spirit. May God Bless and keep you my sister-friend.

With Special Love,
Coretta⁹⁵

Angelou was caring, thoughtful, and gave generously of her resources. She understood the importance of sisterhood. While examining Angelou's papers I came across countless letters sent by those who had received gifts, flowers, and monetary contributions. Angelou was a devoted friend.

Strategies for Healing: BREATHE Model

After examining letters between Angelou and some of her friends and colleagues and utilizing Stephanie Y. Evans BREATHE Model in *Black Women's Mental Health Balancing*

95. Coretta Scott King to Maya Angelou, 9 May 1995, SPC.MG830 Box 30, Folder 7, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

Strength and Vulnerability, I would argue that one can utilize this model to evaluate Angelou's correspondence and numerous friendships as a form of Abolitionist self-care. Evans argues,

The BREATHE model is presented as a set of principles by which one can engage the process of restoration and lifestyle change as well as increase one's understanding of Black women's mental health. The BREATHE model is defined as follows,⁹⁶

B-Balance
R-Reflection
E-Energy
A-Association
T-Transparency
H-Healing
E-Empowerment

Balance-Engage in the purposeful repositioning of one's commitments such that all priorities are addressed.⁹⁷

Reflection-Set aside time for contemplation and performing emotional and cognitive audits.⁹⁸

While examining Angelou's papers I used this model to think about the ways in which Angelou practiced self-care. Angelou created balance in her life by maintaining connections with those whom she cared about. She also set aside time to contemplate the words that she would utilize in her writings and poetry.

Maya Angelou adapted the 1896 poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," to express the complexities of being Black in the United States.

We wear the mask that grins and lies.
It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes.

96. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (Journal of Poetry Therapy, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>

97. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (Journal of Poetry Therapy, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 4.

98. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (Journal of Poetry Therapy, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 5.

This debt we pay to human guile
With torn and bleeding hearts . . .
We smile and mouth the myriad subtleties.
Why should the world think otherwise
In counting all our tears and sighs.
Nay let them only see us while
We wear the mask.

We smile but oh my God
Our tears to thee from tortured souls arise
And we sing Oh Baby doll, now we sing . . .
The clay is vile beneath our feet
And long the mile
But let the world think otherwise.
We wear the mask.

When I think about myself
I almost laugh myself to death.
My life has been one great big joke!
A dance that's walked a song that's spoke.
I laugh so hard HA! HA! I almos 'choke
When I think about myself.

Seventy years in these folks 'world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say "HA! HA! HA! Yes ma'am!"
For workin's sake
I'm too proud to bend and
Too poor to break
So . . . I laugh! Until my stomachache
When I think about myself.
My folks can make me split my side
I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died
The tales they tell sound just like lying
They grow the fruit but eat the rind.
Hmm huh! I laugh uhuh huh huh . . .
Until I start to cry when I think about myself
And my folks and the children.

My father sit on benches,
Their flesh count every plank,
The slats leave dents of darkness
Deep in their withered flank.
And they gnarled like broken candles,
All waxed and burned profound.

They say, but sugar, it was our submission
that made your world go round.

There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
The chains and slavery's coffles
The whip and lash and stock.
My fathers speak in voices
That shred my fact and sound
They say, but sugar, it was our submission
that made your world go round.

They laugh to conceal their crying,
They shuffle through their dreams
They stepped 'n fetched a country
And wrote the blues in screams.
I understand their meaning,
It could and did derive
From living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive
By wearing the mask! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!⁹⁹

Energy-Reinvigorate goals and set upon a path toward achieving them.¹⁰⁰

An example of this can be found in the ways in which Angelou prepared for various projects.

The letter below was written to Shirley Chisolm by Angelou after she was asked to contribute to a documentary that was being produced about Chisolm's life.

10/25/1984

Dear Shirley,

How you honor me. Of course, I will be delighted to be involved in any enterprise which include you. Let me hear more of it. What a pleasure I had speaking to you on the telephone. Your insight, courage, and generosity continue to instruct and inspire all of us.

Thank you, my dear sister,
Joy!

99. Maya Angelou, "The Mask by Maya Angelou," *Facing History and Ourselves*, 2022, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/mask-maya-angelou>.

100. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," *Taylor & Francis (Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 5.

Maya¹⁰¹

Below is another letter written to Angelou regarding the documentary.

[Letter from Terry Hodge Taylor, Representative for Hon. Shirley Chisholm]

January 22, 1985

Dear Professor Maya Angelou:

The Honorable Shirley Chisholm as requested that we contact you regarding the proposed movie-for-television based on her life.

Mrs. Chisholm has related your interest in writing the project. We are very open to your involvement, but the project has not reached the stage of retaining the writer. As you are well aware, the marketing of a life-story to the television networks is a slow process. As soon as we have reached that development stage, we will be in contact.

We concur with Mrs. Chisholm's enthusiasm and respect for your work. We are pointing to an early 1986 airing, so we hope to be able to meet with you this spring.

Sincerely,
Terry Hodge Taylor¹⁰²

[Letter from Terry Hodge Taylor]

January 15, 1986

Dear Ms. Angelou,

Shirley Chisholm spoke with you in late 1984 regarding the possible development of a new film based upon her 1970 autobiography "Unbought and Unbossed."

We represent Mrs. Chisholm in film-television, speaking engagements and publishing. Since your conversation with Shirley, we have pursued the commercial networks with the life story but have received only negative response. Shirley is a highly respected woman of the 20th Century, but due to current needs in television programming, her story is not high priority. Therefore, we have now taken a new direction in the project. We are forming an association with Greenroom Features, Inc. who will serve as Line Producers.

101. Maya Angelou to Shirley Chisholm, 25 October 1984, Box 17, Folder 11, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

102. Terry Hodge Taylor to Maya Angelou, 22 January 1985, box 17 file 1, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

Upon the suggestions of the two principals at Greenroom Features (Bruce Graham and Dina Merrill) We are now developing a sixty-minute documentary style project based on the Bill Moyers series but intend to re-create Shirley's recollections in a theatrical form. Dina has suggested Walter Cronkite to narrate.

Therefore, I'm contacting you to seek your interest in writing the script. Everyone involved and, most importantly Shirley, would like you to be part of the production team. We are rapidly approaching the stage to commission the script.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Terry Hodge Taylor¹⁰³

Lead Actress:
Cicely Tyson
Alfrie Woodard
Madge Sinclair
Lynn Thigpen
Ruby Dee

Association-Create and maintain social networks that promote, affirm, and encourage wellness.¹⁰⁴

While at the Schomburg Center I read letters between Angelou and Shirley Chisholm, Harry Belafonte, Oprah Winfrey, Johnnetta Cole, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Barbara Streisand, Martha Stewart, Alice Walker, Amiri Baraka, and numerous other celebrities, as well as those who weren't in the public eye. Angelou, it appears, had very strong, loving relationships and friendships. She was devoted to being a friend while balancing her own obligations. I examined hundreds of handwritten letters, and cards sent to her close friends, family and acquaintances. Angelou was committed to staying connected to both friends and family. She was often encouraging and reassuring.

103. Terry Hodge Taylor to Maya Angelou, 15 January 1986, box 17 file 1, Maya Angelou Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

104. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (Journal of Poetry Therapy, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 6.

Abolitionist self-care stresses the importance of relationships with others whom you share common beliefs. These social relationships provide support as one is fighting for equality and justice. Abolitionist self-care recognizes that through the bonds built in community and service to others one is able to gain the fortitude necessary to push back against oppression.

Transparency- Actively avoid remaining silent about painful experiences.¹⁰⁵

Angelou refused to be silent about the ways in which she was affected by Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. In her book, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, she's transparent in how she shares with readers her sadness and anger regarding his murder. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on Angelou's birthday, April 4, 1968.

Angelou writes about the day of his assassination, "The telephone ring surprised me. "Maya?" It was Dolly. "Yes?" "Have you listened to the radio or television?" I said no. "Maya, please don't turn either of them on. And don't answer the phone. Give me your word." "I give you, my word." "I'm on my way." I made a drink and sat down, trying to guess what could have happened that could cause her such alarm. Dolly stood at my door, her face ghastly with news. I said, "Come in. Nothing could be that bad." It was that bad and worse. She said, "Martin Luther King was shot. Maya, he's dead." Some words are spoken and not heard. Because the ears cannot accept them, the eye seems to see them. I saw the letters D E A D. Who was dead? Who was dead now? Not Malcolm again. Not my grandmother again. Not my favorite uncle Tommy. Not again. I didn't realize I was talking, but Dolly grabbed me and held me. "Maya, it's Martin

105. Stephanie Y Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," Taylor & Francis (*Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 6.

King. Reverend King.” “Stop talking nonsense. Stop it.” When I really heard her, the world capsized. If King was dead, who was alive? Where would we go? What was next?¹⁰⁶

Healing- Look for ways to nurture wellness in self and others.¹⁰⁷

Angelou advocated on behalf of singers and actors in the community as well as Martin Luther King Jr. She also encouraged those in the entertainment industry to support the Civil Rights Movement. She hoped that after they became involved that they would be provided with opportunities of employment. Angelou was advocating on behalf of those who may not have the opportunity to use their talents to support the movement. Angelou writes, “After Cabaret for Freedom, they would all be employed by suddenly aware and respectful producers. After Martin Luther King Jr. won freedom for us all, they would be paid honorable salaries and would gain the media coverage that their talents deserved.”¹⁰⁸ Angelou was disappointed that her efforts didn’t provide the opportunity for that she expected. This was the reality of being Black in the 1960’s. Many of those who were involved in the cabaret were unable to secure contracts with entertainment companies and were unable to continue to support themselves with their talents. Angelou states,

“The performers went back to the elevator-operating or waiting-on-tables jobs they had interrupted. A few returned to unemployment or welfare lines. No one was hired as a leading actor in a major dramatic company nor as a supporting actor in a small ensemble, or even as a chorus member in an Off-Broadway show.”¹⁰⁹ “For six months I had been coordinator of the

106. Maya Angelou, *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (London: Virago, 2008), 190.

107. Stephanie Y Evans, “Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy,” Taylor & Francis (*Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286>, 6.

108. Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 81.

109. Ibid

SCLC.”¹¹⁰ During those six months, Angelou worked as an activist on the frontlines. She helped coordinate several events as well as plan rallies, protests, and help in any capacity where she was needed. Angelou was committed to the Black community and was willing to devote her time, resources, and efforts to speak against racism, inequality, unemployment, and poverty that often plagued the Black community.

Empowerment- Enlist one’s own agency by accessing internal power sources and taking ownership of one’s own wellness.¹¹¹

She endured many hardships including being raped as a young child by her mother’s boyfriend. As a result of the rape, the rapist was murdered. Angelou blamed herself and believed that because she told who was her rapist that she was the reason why the rapist was killed. Angelou did not speak for five years because she had been traumatized by the rape and subsequent murder. Maya however during those five years found comfort in reading. She developed an enormous amount of interest in poetry. Words inspired Angelou and gave her life meaning. This love affair with words became her refuge throughout her life. Angelou was a prolific writer and orator. She used words to inspire others. She fought for justice and equality. When one thinks of Angelou’s life and her commitment to making a difference in the world one understands the importance of using the gifts, talents, abilities, and time on earth in a way that will benefit mankind. Angelou was indeed an abolitionist, who believed in the power of words to liberate people all over the world. Angelou who was a proud Black feminist often wrote about the responsibilities that one has to inspire and help the next generation.

110. Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 81.

111. *Ibid.*

In conclusion, Angelou was a humanitarian, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “one concerned with human welfare”¹¹², whose convictions governed the ways in which she lived her life. Angelou the writer of more than thirty books, including several autobiographies, and the recipient of several honorary degrees lived her life with great conviction. Angelou was an activist, who believed that words and love could change humanity. She believed that through writing and speaking she could shed light on societal ills. I would argue that through the numerous friendships that she shared, she provided support, kindness, and encouragement. A component of abolitionist self-care is the ability to work with those who share common interests as well as those whose values may differ. Angelou intentionally connected with people who share the same values, as well as those who didn’t. Angelou used those differences to find common interests because she knew that humanity would benefit if one saw that we had more in common than not. Angelou spoke against racism, classism, sexism, and gender inequality. When I think of the word abolition and its importance in dismantling oppression, Angelou’s books, poetry, films, speeches were a form of abolitionist self-care because she utilized the opportunity to speak, to inspire, and to provoke new ways of understanding.

112. Buxton, Charlotte. *Oxford English Mini Dictionary*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Chapter III. Patrisse Cullors Abolitionist Self-Care, Envisioning A New Future

Revolution begins with the self, in the self.¹¹³

—Toni Cade Bambara

When one thinks of the work of Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, the founders of the movement for Black Lives, one can assert that they are continuing the vision, of those who came before them. This chapter begins by acknowledging the names and deeds of Black women who were the predecessors of the founders of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Before Cullors, Garza, and Tometi were catapulted into the public sphere, they were activists who were destined for a national stage that would challenge and change the perspective for some and infuriate a new generation that adamantly denied that racism, inequality, and oppression were still embedded within the cultural beliefs, laws and policies in the United States. While the contributions of Cullors, Garza and Tometi are noteworthy. I must mention that there has been some controversy surrounding the Movement for Black Lives. After the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, the organization received contributions that some speculate were misappropriated. Cullors, Garza, and Tometi haven't been charged with a crime and have stated that all funds that they received were used to help with operational costs, they also stated that they used the money to invest in marginalized communities.

While the contributions of Garza, and Tometi are significant, I chose to focus on the work of one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Patrisse Cullors because of her Memoir, *When They Call You a Terrorist* that provided a firsthand account of the injustices that affected her family, and community, as well as how she developed an abolitionist practice that was utilized to create a global movement in the 21st century.

113. Heidi R. Lewis, "Feminists We Love: Toni Cade Bambara," *The Feminist Wire*, March 25, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/03/revolution-begins-with-the-self/>.

Contemporary abolitionism focuses on dismantling systemic oppression in the 21st century. Cullor's work is important because Black people, queer people, and members of other minority populations are still fighting for equality in regard to housing, employment, education, and the judicial system. Contemporary abolitionism examines the inadequacies and finds solutions to address the issues that perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism, and anti-blackness. It is important to state that it was Cullors who added the hashtag to the interjection Black Lives Matter. When the hashtag was added to Black Lives Matter in 2013, it quickly became a tweet that started in California, and circulated around the globe. Cullors understood the importance of the media; therefore, she recognized that in order for there to be a collective outcry within the Black community, there needed to be a phrase that expressed the anger, and sentiments that they felt after the murder of Trayvon Martin. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter united the Black community, and served as a form of communal care, which affirmed members of the Black community. The three words Black Lives Matter started a global movement. I believe that Cullors while in her youth envisioned a future without political, social, and cultural perimeters that negatively impact her community.

Sankofa: The Past Influences the Future

It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and support one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains. —Assata Shakur¹¹⁴

Historically, activists from marginalized communities have devoted their lives to fight against systems of oppression. Abolitionist self-care requires courage, accountability, and communal engagement. I argue that activism is a form of abolitionist self-care within marginalized communities. If those who are oppressed are unable to challenge regulations and

114. Shakur, Assata, et al. *Assata: An Autobiography*. L. Hill Books, 2001.

laws that have an adverse effect on their communities, police brutality, unjust laws, and the murder of unarmed Black citizens will be considered a normalcy. There are systemic and structural policies that historically been used to create an environment dominated by fear, in marginalized communities whose purpose is to silence the revolutionary spirit that dwells amongst the oppressed. History has shown that Black women have been able to break through those boundaries and create sustaining, meaningful, avenues that have put them in the forefront of movements.

Melissa Harris-Perry in *Sister Citizen, Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, uses the analogy of a crooked room to refer the barriers that Black women must confront throughout their lifetimes. Perry argues, “When Black women confront race and gender stereotypes, they realize that they are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. They are often bombarded with warped images of their humanity, and some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.”¹¹⁵ Abolitionist self-care examines how Black women have asserted their humanity, empowered their communities, and became the backbone of their families. Black women and Black men which include the Black panthers, leaders within the Civil Rights Movement and the movement for Black lives have historically asked the following questions.

What can be done when the carceral state continues to victimize the Black community? How can Black people use their agency to challenge the ways in which their communities are surveilled? How can the defunding of the police benefit Black communities? How can one advocate for wealth to be distributed in a way in which Black people can have access to mental

115. Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 29.

health programs, better employment opportunities, legal representation, the elimination of food deserts, educational opportunities, and laws that enact policies that keep Black communities safe? Black women have also questioned how they can help enact policies that will hold the state accountable for the lynching of unarmed Black women and men. For this reason, Black women look to the past to understand how those who came before them used the resources or more importantly the lack of resources to fight for justice.

The notion of looking to the past is a belief system that is often found in African American literature, and is prevalent in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological, autobiographic, and fiction. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston contended, "there are years that asks questions and years that answer back."¹¹⁶ Black women understand that the isms that are prevalent today have a long history that precedes their current struggles, and that some of the strategies that are needed to continue to fight for equality can be found in the actions from previous generations. Racial injustice has a long history in the United States, and numerous Black women have used their lives to combat the societal ills that continue to inflict harm on the Black community. It is important to understand that Black women's activism is not a passive action, but a deliberate means to fight against oppression.

The experiences of African American women have been one of struggle beginning with the transatlantic slave trade to the current conditions in which the murder of unarmed Black women, children and Black men continue to be a daily occurrence. Black women face a myriad of struggles including but not limited to gender-based violence. Abolitionist self-care is

116. Hurston, Z. N. (2014). *Their eyes were watching God*. HarperCollins e-Books. <http://rbdigital.oneclickdigital.com>

important because the conditions in which Black people are expected to thrive continue to oppress and continues to fail to recognize their humanity.

Black women have a legacy of being fearless trailblazers who have dedicated their lives to fight for freedom and justice. There are also countless unnamed Black women whose narratives we will never know. Yet their contributions changed the era in which they lived and have impacted those that have proceeded them. Angela Davis asserts in *Reflections on The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves*,

It has been noted that large number of freed black women worked towards the purchase of their relatives and friend's freedom.... As it will be seen, black women often poisoned the food and set fire to the houses of their masters. For those who were also employed as domestics these particular overt forms of resistance were especially available. Most of the incidents to be related either tactically unsuccessful assaults or eventually thwarted attempts at defense. In all likelihood numerous successes were achieved, even against the formidable obstacles posed by the slave system. Many of these were probably unpublicized even at the time of their occurrence, lest they provide encouragement to the rebellious proclivities of other slaves and, for other slave holders, an occasion for fear and despair.¹¹⁷

Davis points out that the narratives developed to describe Black women during the early 19th and 20th century portray them as docile, submissive, and subservient. Davis pushes against these narratives by painting a different picture. She argues that Black women have always been resilient and have used their ingenuity to combat the harsh conditions in which they were expected to flourish.

Ubuntu

The African principal Ubuntu which asserts that I am because we are has been used to unify Black people throughout the diaspora. Africana studies, and Black Feminist studies are grounded in the notion that the past is connected to the future. The Sankofa principle which

117. Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 12, no. 6, 1981, pp. 2–15., doi:10.1080/00064246.1981.11414214.

further reinforces the belief that one must go back and fetch, knowledge, understanding, beliefs, and lessons from the past to empower future generations has been a principle upon which political movements have been built. When one witnesses the power of the Black Lives Matter Movement, one must understand that this movement was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, Labor Movements, the LGBTQ Movement, and the Feminist Movement.

When one views self-care through an activist lens, one can understand the importance of using an Africana Studies, Cultural Studies, and Black Feminist lens to understand how the right to one's autonomy to live a fulfilling life is imperative. Africana Studies and Cultural Studies are interconnected because they focus on how power, privilege, and oppression intersect. Abolitionist self-care provides a lens through which academics can evaluate this intersection.

My understanding of the ways in which power functions in the United States have influenced my assertion that the only way to dismantle interconnected oppressions caused by systemic ideologies is to be courageous, and to speak out on behalf of those who have been directly affected by the weight of oppression. The belief systems that continue to be the core upon which America's laws, educational system, penal system, and government has been structured need to be disassembled. Government officials need to uphold their oaths, and citizens need to demand that they are properly represented. Those whose lives have been placed in the margins need access to resources that will enable them to combat the systems that are designed to silence them. There needs to be a shift in the power dynamics within the United States, and those who have not been given a seat at the table need to demand that the table be rebuilt.

Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* asserts, "The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its

racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington D.C., our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America.”¹¹⁸ Alexander argues that the penal system in the United States is another form of slavery that has been legalized to cause irreconcilable trauma in Black families and communities. The penal system along with the calculated murders of Black women, men, and children by the police contribute to years of suffering and distress within the Black community. It's important to mention the generational trauma that has affected Black people; however, Cullors argues, “that it's important that we don't stay there because there is this thing called resilience.”¹¹⁹

Activism and Self-Care: Defunding Policing in the United States

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines activism as the activity of working to achieve political or social change.¹²⁰ It defines Abolition as the ending of a law, a system, or an institution.”¹²¹ Within the Black tradition Black women have used activism and abolitionist to call attention to the plaques that continue to torture their communities. These externally derived theories of Black womanhood were used to disempower, disrupt, and corrupt communities. These conditions empowered some Black women to create movements in which Black people finally had opportunities to be heard. Even though they worked tirelessly, often their humanity

118. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), 7.

119. Lowkey, “Patrisse Cullors and Lowkey | Studio B: Unscripted,” YouTube (YouTube, December 11, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AZXNypWKbE>.

120. Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/>.

121. Home: Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/>.

was questioned, and disregarded. My reading of three exemplary Black women-artist-activist yields a form of self-care that I name “abolitionist”. I construct the term abolitionist self-care through an analysis of scholar and activist, Angela Davis’s *Abolition Democracy*, which also focused on the importance of self-care, and communal care.

Abolitionist self-care is a response to one’s environment, and one’s evaluation of issues that directly or indirectly affect an individual or community. My research draws attention to this form of self-care and creates a lens to evaluate how Black women have historically used practical methods as a form of activism, and empowerment. My dissertation asserts that Black women have always been outraged by the lack of resources, injustice, and oppression that permeated their communities and the state and nation-state in which they existed. The awareness of some Black women saturates Black American culture has engendered a tradition of organizing.

Patrisse Marie Cullors defines herself as “an organizer versus an activist because I believe an organizer is the smallest unit that you build your team around. The organizer is the person who gets the press together and who builds new leaders, the person who helps to build and launch campaigns, and is the person who decides what the targets will be and how we’re going to change this world.”¹²² Cullors is a graduate of the University of California Los Angeles and a graduate of the University of Southern California. It wasn’t her prestigious degrees that catapulted her into the public sphere, but her devotion to her community and her ability to speak on behalf of those who are disenfranchised.

122. Patrisse Cullors, “Artist, Abolitionist, and Writer.,” Patrisse Cullors, 2022, <https://patrissecullors.com/>.

In February of 2012, a 17-year- old African American young man named Trayvon Martin, was murdered. He was fatally shot by George Zimmerman in Miami Gardens, Florida. Zimmerman, who lived in the same neighborhood as Martin’s father, harassed Trayvon and believed that because Martin was walking through the neighborhood and was African American that he was responsible the recent crimes that had taken place. He contacted the police and was told to not follow Martin, yet he continued to follow, harass, and torment Martin. Eventually an altercation ensued, and Zimmerman murdered the 17- year – old. After Martin was killed, there was a trial and the courts exonerated Zimmerman, and he was not charged. The aftermath of the acquittal and murder swept across the United States. There were protest in all 50 states The African American community was enraged by the lack of justice and for the complete disregard of human decency. As a result of the acquittal, a tweet became the motto for a world-wide movement called the Black Lives Matter Movement. This movement was founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors.

It was Cullors that created the #BlackLivesMatter in 2013. My research focuses on the contributions of one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement- Patrisse Cullors. Cullors is an artist, author, educator, political strategist, and organizer. She is also the executive director of the Black Lives Matter Global Network. Cullors has a B.A in religion and philosophy from the University of California, Los Angeles as well as an MFA from the University of Southern California in 2019.

Cullors considers herself to be an abolitionist, who strongly believes that society should get rid of police, prisons, and jails, surveillance, and courts. “Abolitionist isn’t about just getting

rid of something but it's about what we are replacing them with making communities safe and access to and public education, and access to healthy food, housing.”¹²³

Patrisse was raised in Van Nuys, California. She was raised by a single mother and is the 3rd child out of 4 children. Her mother was a devoted employee who had multiple jobs while trying to make ends meet. It was during Patrisse's childhood that she recognizes how those who live in poverty must overcome enormous obstacles. Cullors witnessed police brutality, as well the ways in which the police harassed her siblings and friends.

There were several incidents that impacted her commitment to abolitionist practices. When one thinks about the Black Lives Matter Movement, they often refer to the tweet that was sent on twitter in February 2012. However, Patrisse was involved in fighting for equality several years before that famous tweet started a global movement. The incarceration of her mentally- ill brother, Monty as well the incarceration of her father strongly influenced her realizations that the criminal justice system, and policing policies needed to change. Cullors asserted, “We rarely know what motivates somebody in their work, and it's usually a particular moment in their life. For me, that moment is my brother's incarceration and the ways in which this country has decided to neglect, abuse, and sometimes torture people with severe mental illness, especially if they're black.”¹²⁴

She also understood the correlation between wealth, power, and poverty. Due to her personal experiences, heartache, and pain, and from her feelings of helplessness, when she did not have the resources to hire private attorneys to advocate on behalf of her brother and father,

123. patrissemarie. “What Is Abolition and Am I An Abolitionist? | Patrisse Cullors.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 22 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RbFhM32YNI.

124. Bestquotes.top, “We Rarely Know What Motivates Somebody in Their Work and... - Patrisse Cullors Quotes,” Bestquotes.top, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://bestquotes.top/patrisse-cullors-quotes-631842.html>.

she became her own advocate. Patrisse became involved with several activist groups in the Los Angeles area and began to educate herself regarding the ways that she could push back against systemic racism, incarceration, and policies that continued to victimize those who she loved.

Cullors learned valuable strategies that influenced her commitment to social justice and therefore through her efforts have had world-wide impact. Patrisse used her rage, anger, desperation to fight on behalf of her brother Monty, and then co-founded a movement that fights on behalf of disenfranchised people throughout the world.

Cullors understood her positionality in the margins and has fought to center the experiences of minoritized populations. This is an example of abolitionist self-care. The invention of cell phones gave African Americans a firsthand account of the murder of Black people by the police. Since Trayvon Martin's death there have been countless murders of Black men and women. In 2020, citizens throughout the world witnessed the brutal murder of George Floyd by the police which caused protests to take place on every continent in the world. During this same time period Breanna Taylor was also killed, and Jacob Blake was maimed by the police. While the world faced the COVID 19 pandemic, Black people continued to be traumatized by the murder, and harm by the police in the United States. The uprisings that ensued were a result of years of mistreatment, abuse, and murder by those who are compensated to serve and protect communities throughout the United States. Patrisse Cullors and the Black Lives Matter Movement were instrumental in organizing protests, and rallies in the United States and abroad.

Michelle Alexander in 2010 released the highly anticipated book, *The New Jim Crow*, in which she taught about how the criminalization of Black people had increased substantially in the United States. Alexander's research found that "Most people imagine that the explosion in

the U.S. prison population during the past twenty-five years reflects changes in crime rates. Few would guess that our prison population leaped from approximately 350,000 to 2.3 million in such a short period of time due to changes in laws and policies, not changes in crime rates. Yet it has been changes in our laws and policies, not changes in crime rates. Yet it has been changes in our laws- particularly the dramatic increases in the length of prison sentences- that have been responsible for the growth of our prison system, not increase in crime. One study suggests that the entire increase in the prison population from 1980 to 2001 can be explained by sentencing policy changes.”¹²⁵ Alexander’s research was groundbreaking and further emphasized the need for reform and I would further assert laid the groundwork needed to critically look at the criminal justice system. Alexander’s research remains a seminal text eleven years after it was published. I would further assert that Alexander’s book set the framework used to invigorate activist and their commitment to create an equitable society. When *The New Jim Crow* was written in 2010, Cullors was a student at UCLA and a community organizer,

Due to Cullors personal experiences as well as empirical data that shows the disproportionate rate in which Black people are victims of laws and policies that destroy Black families and Black communities, Cullors argues that the police need to be defunded and that the funds need to be reallocated to provide services to marginalized communities. When I think about the components of abolitionist self-care, Cullors’ stance as well as her actions are an example of such care. Abolitionist self-care implores that activists, and grassroots activists strategize ways in which marginalized communities can push back against white supremacist policies that cause harm. In 2020, during the uprisings that took place over the summer there

125. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2012.93.

were numerous conversations surrounding the defunding of the police. The reasons why abolitionist like Cullors strongly supported the idea of defunding the police was a response to the countless murder of unarmed Black people as well as the multifarious number of incarcerated Black people in the United States. When Cullors was interviewed by Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show*, regarding her stance on defunding the police she explained that, “divesting out of the police is something that she has been concerned with for an extended period of time and that it did not just become an idea in 2010. Cullors further stated that the breathe act would, “invest in adequate health care, adequate healthy food, invest into human care, dignity and life of human beings. She also stated that the following things need to be decriminalized, “homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and mental health crisis.”¹²⁶ By decriminalizing homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and mental health, members of marginalized groups will be provided with services that will enable them to thrive instead of prison sentences that remove their voice, and purpose. The BREATHE Act’s framework is as follows:

1. Divest Federal Resources from policing and incarceration & ending federal criminal-legal systems harm, including the 1994 Crime Bill and reparations for the War on Drugs.
2. Invest in new approaches to community safety utilizing funding incentives.
3. Allocate new money to build health, sustainable & equitable communities for all people.
4. Hold officials accountable & enhance self-determination of Black communities.¹²⁷

Cullors has expressed the need to defund the police because of her own personal experiences as well as empirical data that show the disproportionate rate in which Black people are victims of laws, and policies that continue to destroy Black families, and Black communities.

126. “Patrisse Cullors - How to Phase Out the Police | The Daily Social Distancing Show.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Sept. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNhkvwmBCtQ.

127. M4BL. “The Breathe Act.” *The Breathe Act*, October 27, 2021. <https://breatheact.org/>.

When I write about radical self-care Cullors's stance as well as her actions are an example of the radicalization of care. Radical self-care implores that activist, abolitionist, grassroots activist strategize ways in which marginalized communities can push back against white supremacist policies that cause harm. In 2020, during the uprisings that took place over the summer there were numerous conversations surrounding the defunding of the police. The reasons why activist like Cullors strongly supported the idea of defunding the police was a response to the countless murder of unarmed Black people as well as the multifarious number of incarcerated Black people in the United States. When Cullors was asked about defunding the police by Trevor Noah on the Daily Show, she explained that, divesting out of the police is something that she has been concerned with for an extended period of time and that it did not just become an idea in 2010. She further stated that the breathe act would, "invest in adequate health care, adequate healthy food, invest into human care, dignity and life of human beings. She also stated that the following things need to be decriminalized, "homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and mental health crisis."¹²⁸

Activism has played a pivotal role in the lives of African American women. Systemic racism, inequality, inequity, and sexism have been a part of the judicial system as well as American culture. Black women have used radical self-care measures to pushback against dominant systems of power who have been devoted to their erasure. History has shown Black women across the diaspora have found ways to advocate for themselves and their communities. As previously mentioned, one generation builds upon the next and uses the guidance, wisdom,

128. Patrisse Cullors - How to Phase Out the Police | The Daily Social Distancing Show." *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Sept. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNhkvwmBCtQ.

and examples from the past to continue to fight. Abolitionist self-care is an example of those practices that will continue to uplift the Black community.

Cullors released her highly anticipated book, *12 Steps to Changing the Yourself And the World: An Abolitionist's Handbook*, in January 2022. Cullors begins the text by writing about her experience as a community organizer, she argues, “After 20 years of organizing and movement work, I’ve seen the bad and the ugly, from myself and others. A few years ago, I developed 12 principles or steps that I believe are an essential framework to grow and develop as an abolitionist. I put these ideas into practice, taking great pains to try to maintain my commitment.”¹²⁹ Cullors defines abolition as, “the action of abolishing a system, practice or institution.”¹³⁰ The 12 steps that Cullors believed were imperative if one desires to have an abolitionist practice are as follows,

1. Courageous Conversations
2. Respond v. React
3. Nothing Is Fixed
4. Say Yes to Imagination
5. Forgive Actively, Not Passively
6. Allow Yourself to Feel
7. Commit to Not Harming or Abusing Others
8. Practice Accountability
9. Embrace Non-Reformist Reform
10. Build Community
11. Value Interpersonal Relationships
12. Fight the U.S State Rather Than Make It Stronger¹³¹

129. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 1.

130. Ibid

131. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 12.

Cullors begins *12 Steps to Changing Yourself And the World An Abolitionist Handbook* by stating, “Abolition centers on getting rid of prisons, jails, police, courts and surveillance. Period. How it affects us is so much more than that. Abolition is a social justice movement.”¹³² I would argue that Abolition as a social justice movement is a form of self-care. The way in which Cullors describes abolition as a practice, I would argue is a verb. Abolition is a call for action. Abolition is a response to the inhumane, anti- Black society, in which we live. Cullors provides 12 steps that abolitionist can utilize however for the purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on steps 1. Courageous Conversations, Step 4. Say Yes to Imagination, Step 10. Build Community and Step 12 Fight the U.S State Rather Than Make It Stronger.

Cullors writes about the importance of having courageous conversations that serve as a catalyst for change. Scholars have written about the importance of using one’s voice. Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* argues, “African American women have certainly expressed our individual voices. U.S Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in Black civil rights society.”¹³³ Cullors’ notion that one must have courageous conversation I would argue is a part of the Black tradition. As Cullors and Collins assert, communication serves as the catalyst for change. Abolitionist self-care begins by having courageous conversations regarding the conditions of our world. The articulation of those conditions impacts the steps in which change occurs. Cullors argues, “In order to have a truly courageous conversation, one must break down what the word “courage.”

132. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 6.

133. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99.

Courage according to Merriam-Webster, is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. The word derives from the Middle English word *courage* and from the French *courage*, all the way back to *cor*, the Latin word for heart and also root word for *core*. It makes perfect sense that the word “courage” essentially means heart and core because that’s where courageous conversations come from- straight from the place where we feel our strongest emotions.”¹³⁴ When I think of courageous conversations and abolitionist self-care, I think of the writings of Cullors, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and numerous others. Cullors is writing in the same manner of abolitionist who came before her. Cullor’s text is the North Star for today’s generation and will serve as a handbook for those to come. Courageous conversations question laws, and cultural practices that allow and maintain systemic racist policies that directly affect oppressed communities.

Abolitionist self-care requires that one examines the problems, policies, and laws that affect marginalized communities and calls for policies to be enacted to dismantle any system that deliberately oppresses and silences the voices of Black people, Queer people, and the disabled.

Cullors’s tweet, Black Lives Matter, gave voice to the anger that many felt after the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Cullors played an integral role in the building of an abolitionist community. It was after the widely used tweet that a new coalition of activists and abolitionists began to work together to shed light on prevalent injustices found in the criminal justice system, as well as the policies that maintained any system of inequality. Cullors argues, “So much of the work of abolition is building a container in which to practice abolitionist culture. The way to build that culture is to build a team. To build a community. This isn’t

134. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 21.

necessarily based on geography or even on proximity. There are abolitionist teams who work internationally who never meet face-to-face.”¹³⁵ Cullors’ tweet I would argue was a unifying method that amplified the voices of Black people from not only in the United States but around the world. Cullors served as the director for the Black Lives Matter Movement Global Network Foundation during this time she worked to bring attention to the injustices that plagued the communities of Black people from around the world.

Cullors believes that “We must do ALL that we can to secure an abolitionist future for our families and our communities. Our survival depends on it.”¹³⁶ The importance of building community is an essential component of abolitionist self-care; this is one of the reasons why Cullor’s work is important when one thinks of the concept of abolitionist self-care.

The ways in which the United States government has operated since its conception has been problematic for Black women. Collins argues “Race is far from being the only significant marker of group difference- class, gender, sexuality, religion, and citizenship status all matters greatly in the United States (Andersen and Collins 1998). Yet for African American women, the effects of institutionalized racism remain visible and palpable. Moreover, the institutionalized racism that African American women encounter relies heavily on racial segregation and accompanying discriminatory practices designed to deny U.S. Blacks equitable treatment. Despite important strides to desegregate U.S. society since 1970, racial segregation remains deeply entrenched in housing, schooling, and employment. For many African American women, racism is not something that exists in the distance. We encounter racism in everyday situations in

135. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 217.

136. Patrisse Cullors, “Artist, Abolitionist, and Writer.,” Patrisse Cullors, 2022, <https://patrissecullors.com/>.

workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction. (St. Jean and Feagin 1998).”¹³⁷

Cullors’ *Abolitionist Handbook*, serves as a model for those who want to work together to change the social, cultural, and political climate in the United States. When Black women gather and have the opportunity to discuss the conditions in which they live one is able to recognize the differences and similarities that one can use to enact abolitionist practices. These practices can be used to challenge the United States’ policies, and laws that have harmed Black people.

Step 4. of Cullors’ *Abolitionist Handbook* focuses on the importance of saying yes to imagination. This imagination is crucial when one thinks of abolitionist self-care. Abolitionist self-care requires that one imagines a future in which all are free. When one thinks of the work of Cullors and Black futurity one must imagine a world in which the work of Cullors and numerous others serves as a blueprint on which a new generation puts into practice the concepts of freedom, liberation, and justice. When one reads the works of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors one is able to envision a future in which impartiality prevails. A part of that imagination that is important to abolitionist self-care is the opportunity for education in which people can be equipped to continue the fight. I would argue that Cullors’ agreeing to establish an MFA program is in a sense a concrete example of her saying yes to imagination.

Cullors was asked to be Director of Social and Environmental Arts Practice MFA Program at Prescott College in November of 2019. Cullors, asserts, "Prescott College asked me to do the MFA program, and it came at the right time. I see art and teaching as part of my future as an organizer and a leader. Taking two of the most powerful tools we have for expression — community organizing and art... this is how we shatter the current political climate," said Cullors.

137. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 23.

“Art is the gateway to our imagination. It forces us to bend the norms. I use art as a tool and as a compass towards greater freedom and liberation. When art is centered through politics, we are able to transform the material conditions for those most impacted by harm and violence. This program is going to lift up artists who are ready to be shapeshifters we so desperately need.”¹³⁸ Cullors felt a sense of responsibility to give back and to empower the next generation of leaders through education, activism, and abolition.

In closing, Patrisse Cullors, understood the importance of looking to those who came before her for inspiration. Cullors builds upon the legacy of the ancestors and uses the strategies to impact a new generation of leaders. The work that Cullors has done with the Black Lives Matter Movement, her books, *When They Call You A Terrorist*, and *12 Steps to Changing Yourself And The World: An Abolitionist Handbook*, and the work that she is currently doing at Prescott College is an example of Abolitionist Self-Care.

138 Patrisse Cullors, “Patrisse Cullors Named Faculty Director of New Social and Environmental Arts Practice MFA Program at Prescott College,” Prescott College, November 21, 2019, <https://www.prescott.edu/news/patrisse-cullors-named-faculty-director-new-social-and-environmental-arts-practice-mfa-program>.

Chapter IV. Conclusion Still We Rise

Abolitionist self-care is crucial to the survival of Black people in the United States. Statistics show that African Americans have the highest incarceration rate, they are more than likely to be killed by the police, they lack access to fair housing, health care, mental health services, and an access to quality education.

There are several root causes of these inequalities, including racism, sexism, and classism. The issues that directly affect the African American community have been in existence for numerous years. One may even argue since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in 1619. There is a long history for the struggle of freedom. Abolitionist such as Maria W. Stewart in 1831 questioned the policies, and culture in the United States when she asked, “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles.” Stewart, I would argue was one of the first African American feminist who questioned the societal norms that relegated African Americans to a subservient position in the United States. Stewart’s unapologetic critique of the cultural norms in the United States I would argue is an example of abolitionist self-care.

Abolitionist self-care is defined as the ways in which those who have been oppressed use their collective voice to challenge systems that place their concerns, plight, experiences, and most importantly their lives in the margins of society. The need to abolish systems of oppression challenges capitalism, neoliberalism, polices, laws, and the structure of policing in the United States.

Abolition begins with the ability to first recognize how racism, sexism, and classism are engrained in the educational system, penal system, government, as well as religious institutions. Abolitionists have the insight to examine these systems of oppression, and then organize,

challenge and create change. These changes occur over time. Abolitionists are courageous, and have a unique ability to use their resources, their voice, and some have dedicated their lives to ensure a better future for the next generation of freedom fighters.

Due to the efforts of well-known abolitionist like Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth they inspired generations of African American women to continue to the fight for justice. The struggle for freedom is cyclical.

This dissertation focused on the contributions of Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and Patrisse Cullors. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors who were influenced by their foremothers, their contributions are a part of American History. Their courage, their ability to use words, art, poetry, to shape the culture in a society that had a long history of racism is an example of abolitionist self-care. Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors have inspired a new generation of abolitionist.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's work and the term intersectionality is useful as one examines the multiple oppressions faced by African American women. These oppressions can be found in the work of Lorde, Angelou, and Cullors.

There are many themes found in Lorde's work. She was a critic of those who believed that differences should cause separation. Lorde believed that the differences found within American society should be acknowledged and celebrated. She believed that when women from different backgrounds joined forces there wasn't anything that they couldn't accomplish. She also encouraged women to use their voice. Lorde believed that society also encourages women to be passive, and to adhere to the customs of their day even if these customs further marginalized them. Lorde used her life, her poetry, and her struggle with breast cancer to encourage women to unite. Lorde was outspoken, courageous, and a human rights activist. Lorde's ability to use inequality, racism, homophobia, and classism to start a global movement should be commended.

Lorde's insight to join forces with other likeminded women to start a press during the 60's an era in which the concerns of Black women were often ignored also proves that she was a pioneer. One of the components of Abolitionist self-care is the need for innovative techniques to speak truth to power. Lorde and the founders of the Combahee River Collective, and the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press adamantly and unapologetically used their ability to call attention to sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism in the United States. Their work also influenced women of color throughout the world. Lorde refused to allow identity politics, and gender oppression to silence her work. Lorde was an abolitionist who left her mark and continues to inspire a new generation of activist.

Angelou published numerous books of poetry, several autobiographies, essays, as well as movies, plays, and television programs. Angelou left a blueprint for the next generation to follow. Her advice, her creative delivery, insight, and intellect was highly sought after by celebrities, politicians, educators, as well as those whose names we may never know. She was a bestselling author, and many people listen to her speeches to be inspired throughout their lifetimes.

Angelou, who overcame numerous obstacles, used her experiences as a survivor of sexual abuse, and abandonment to speak out against atrocities in the United States. Angelou was an abolitionist beginning in her youth as San Francisco's first Black streetcar conductor. She was an abolitionist who challenged the belief that Black women couldn't be streetcar conductors. meant that she didn't have the wherewithal to drive streetcars. Angelou challenge the prevalent belief systems of her day and was hired by the San Francisco transit authority. She paved the way and helped abolish the policy that was enacted to discriminate against Black women. She was a trailblazer, and humanitarian. Angelou was courageous and believed that words had power, and

that her experiences as Black woman raised in the rural south, was meaningful and had the ability to touch lives, and shed light on the experiences of those who are often ignored.

After visiting the archives in New York, I was impacted by Angelou's ability to create lifelong friendships with those in her community and outside of her community. It was Lord's friendships that empowered her. She was a member of several organizations, she earned over 50 honorary doctorate degrees, and was well respected. She spoke on behalf of presidents, she educated communities throughout the world, and was dedicated to public service. Angelou was a proud Black feminist who believed that she had an obligation to speak on behalf of those who may not have the opportunities, finances, connections, to address inequality, and racism within the United States and abroad. Angelou's words continue to inspire people from around the world.

Cullors, being influenced by progressive thinkers, activists, and feminists, like Lorde and Angelou continues to pave a new path in the 21st century. Cullors, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter Movement, continues to use her wisdom, insight, and dedication to abolition to create texts, opportunities, and an M.F.A program at Prescott college that inspires a new generation of abolition. Her bestselling books, *When They Call You A Terrorist* and recent publication, *The Abolitionist Handbook*, gives practical steps that one can utilize as they fight for freedom.

What began as a hashtag (#blacklivesmatter) created a global movement that will forever be a part of history. Cullors strong belief in abolition as a practice has influenced the ways in which 21st center activist fight for freedom. Cullor's commitment to fighting for justice, and equality should be commended. Cullor's commitment to equality had caused her to be a highly sought-after speaker on college campuses throughout the United States. She is often called upon to speak to the media during moments of unrest in the United States. Cullors is outspoken and is

unafraid to critique criminal justice system. Her ability to use the media, her art, and her gift as an educator to challenge systems of oppression is an example of abolitionist self-care.

Abolitionist self-care challenges marginalized communities to first look at resources within their communities that can be used to pushback against systemic oppression. Abolitionist self-care encourages communities to work together to challenge those in power to address the needs and concerns of the marginalized. Abolitionist self-care is essential for the survival of marginalized communities.

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