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"I Matter": Analyzing Self-Care, Racial Performativity, and Podcasting*

Molly Shilo

Fordham University, mshilo@fordham.edu

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"I Matter": Analyzing Self-Care, Racial Performativity, and Podcasting*

Cover Page Footnote

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The term “self-care” has recently entered pop culture through women’s magazines, feminist blogs, social media and other digital spaces. While the rhetoric has largely been about white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class women, many Black feminists have politicized self-care and self-love as a form of resistance against a world that continuously negates their existence and humanity. The contemporary self-care movement has its roots in the Black feminist thought’s love-politics and scholar-activists Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Continuing in this Black feminist tradition, Heben Nigatu and Tracy Clayton create a digital auditory enclave with their podcast *Another Round* where they openly discuss their struggles with mental health issues and the importance of self-care for women of color in the face of a matrix of oppression. Through their celebration of all types of blackness, Heben and Tracy provide a community of black sociality, but more importantly, they do political work by the very nature of their commitment to survival.

Black Feminist Love-Politics

Spearheaded by leaders like Sojourner Truth, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and bell hooks, Black feminism has a long history of activism and theory. While often relegated to the sidelines, their contributions are significant and have forever changed the way contemporary feminists theorize oppression, race, and gender. In Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins locates Black feminist standpoint and elaborates on its differences from that of a White man, and even a White woman. In her chapter, “Black Feminist Epistemology”, Collins discusses the importance of care ethics, wisdom, communal dialogue, and experience for determining meaning and establishing a Black feminist epistemology. Collins states, “Rather than emphasizing how a Black women’s standpoint and its accompanying epistemology differ from those of White women, Black men, and other collectivities, Black women’s experiences serve as one specific social location for examining points of connection among multiple epistemologies” (p. 270). Instead of offering comparisons to White men and women, Collins is instead choosing to elaborate on the Black women’s standpoint as an entity on its own.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) introduction of intersectionality, in particular, provided feminists with a new framework for analyzing the ways in which systems of power and oppression overlap and

synthesize to affect certain minority groups differently. Crenshaw understood the oppression of Black women as a “double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (p. 149). Crenshaw’s contribution was to locate specifically where Black women are in the matrix of oppression; as both gendered and racialized, Black women become a double minority and thus are doubly stigmatized.

While intersectionality was mainly posited as a means for better understanding the Black woman’s existence, it can also aid in determining how Black feminism does political work. In her publication *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Alice Walker includes two pages on the distinctly political approach of womanism, which “emerges from an imagined black woman’s standpoint, from the collective and particular experience of black women’s gendered and racialized oppression” (Nash, 2013, p. 8). Walker’s subject is filled with self-love, a love that requires significant labor to transcend its limitations and engage in political work. Self-love then “forms the basis of political communities rooted in a radical ethic of care” (Nash, 2013, p. 14). Intricately bound up in the nature of self-love is self-care and it becomes politicized when we see the potential of transformative love revolutionizing how people view themselves and one another.

Black feminist theory has a tradition in love-politics, which follows the popular slogan of “the personal is the political.” Love-politics arose mainly around the time of second-wave feminism and has permeated subsequent theory and praxis. With love-politics, Black feminist leaders like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks argue for turning personal, one-to-one love into a “theory of justice” (Nash, 2013, p. 2). Collins (1990) argues that, “Loving Black people...in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act” (p. 250). While love-politics focuses on all forms of love, Gwendolyn Pough (2003) specifically argues for Black feminism to promote a “message of self-love” (p. 241). Thus, “black feminism’s insistence on love, particularly self-love, might be read as a practice of self-valuation” (Nash, 2013, p. 3).

The tradition of love-politics and self-love celebrated blackness and the Black woman’s experience in a way that often was disregarded. As a double minority, Black women face an incredible

amount of discrimination, but love-politics offered a way of rejoicing in their love for themselves, their community, and their race. In doing so, love-politics reminded others that while facing and resisting oppression are a large part of the Black woman's existence that does not determine her entire life. As contemporary intellectual Gene Demby (2015) recently wrote for NPR, "Sometimes it's important to remind ourselves that blackness isn't just a parade of calamities and disadvantage" (para. 11). Thus, self-love becomes about celebrating blackness as part of one's identity work and one's activism.

"Self-Care as Warfare": Making the Personal Political

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"

– Audre Lorde (1988)

Following in the tradition of love-politics, the recent self-care movement is predicated on the belief in the importance of self-love. Like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist poet, understood self-love as a political tool. Her collection of essays entitled *A Burst of Light* (1988), from which the above quote is found, contains descriptions of her struggle with cancer in the context of her activism. Lorde realized the similarities in her battle with cancer and her constant fight for survival. For Lorde, her struggle with cancer was "only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph" (p. 49). Lorde writes, "I wasn't supposed to exist anyway, not in any meaningful way in this fucked-up whiteboys' world. I want desperately to live, and I'm ready to fight for that living even if I die shortly" (p. 61). For Lorde, simply being alive acts as a form of resistance against a society that is constantly denying her existence.

Her quote equating self-care to warfare has spawned dozens of responses from the Black feminist community and launched a discussion on how self-care becomes a form of political resistance. The idea of self-care as warfare has become part of the digital feminist world through prominent bloggers and sites responding to Lorde's work. One feminist blogger, Sara Ahmed (2014), elaborates further on this crucial work of survival:

To have some body, to be a member of some group, to be some, can be a death sentence. When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is

a radical action; a refusal not to exist until the very end; a refusal not to exist until you do not exist. (para. 3)

Through the writings of these feminist bloggers like Ahmed, the theoretical history of love-politics and care ethics converges in the public domain. On *Hairpin*, Fariha Roisin and Sara Black McCulloch have launched a column to talk about self-care and depression. Each woman they interview, often a woman of color, defines self-care in their own terms and specific to their unique experiences. In an interview with Janet Mock, Mock defines self-care as “something deliberate, something that I do to take care of myself in a world that tells me I shouldn’t necessarily exist. That my body and my identity don’t necessarily matter—especially in systems that weren’t built for me to necessarily thrive” (Roisin, 2015, para. 6). Self-care thus has the potential to be a source of political activism in the face of systemic oppression and racial injustice.

Entering the Podcast World: Race and/as Technology

The Internet was originally conceived of as a space where race and gender would not exist, where physical bodies and markers would be invisible or hidden. That thought has long been discredited since we see evidence of racial segregation and performativity both within and among spaces (Sharma, 2013). Historically, race has had a biological conception, rooted in anatomical difference, but it soon became a form of signification where the external, visible signifiers signified internal dissimilarity. In the gap between signifier and signified, there arose an “ever-shifting chain of signification” (Chun, 2012, p. 15). Without the physical body, those significations still exist, but they attach to new signifiers. When so much of racial profiling and demarcation has been predicated on phenotypic markers, how do you uncover race in a medium that relies purely on voice? Instead of trying to determine what race is in these spaces, we should be focusing how it is being utilized or performed. “Race as technology shifts the focus from the *what* of race to the *how* of race, from *knowing* race to *doing* by emphasizing the similarities between race and technology” (Chun, 2012, p. 8). A technocultural approach allows us to move beyond merely what race is to what race *does*. By understanding “race as technology” (Chun, 2012), we can see how race works in these digital spaces.

Launched in 2005, podcasts have been quietly growing in popularity throughout the decade with around 39 million American listeners (Marcucci, 2014). While they have not taken off in quite the same way as YouTube or social media, the medium has a uniquely strong user base of “super listeners” who consume more audio than those who listen to radio, streaming music, or any other audio medium (“Why Podcasting,” 2014). Podcasts are “digital audio files delivered via RSS to an Internet-connected computer or portable media player” (Bottomley, 2015, p. 166). Listeners subscribe to the RSS feed and new episodes are automatically sent to their device as soon as they are uploaded.

Podcasts act as a form of “masspersonal” communication and thus lack the self-expression that other digital spaces afford their users. Without avatars, profiles, or really any user interaction, there is no means of gathering visual data. Because podcasts are purely auditory experiences, there is similarly no information on the hosts beyond what they choose to promote. So, how do we see race work in this disembodied, aural space?

Vernacular, accents, and types of content could all potentially indicate racial performativity. One easily identified racial cue is a broadcaster’s choice to specifically state their race on the air. Because podcasts are largely dominated by White men, any Black podcasters are often in the public eye and known for being such. With so few of them, these shows often also tailor their content for a Black audience. In the podcast discussed below, the show’s cohosts cultivate a Black auditory space through their use of Black vernacular, Black cultural references, and the content they discuss. As two Black women, these podcasters focus on issues of race, gender, and how the two intertwine in their own lives. In particular, these podcasters do work through their frank and candid discussions on racialized self-care and mental health.

Another Round: A Case Study

Another Round premiered in March 2015 as one of BuzzFeed’s first forays into the podcast world. Produced and created by an all-female “pod squad,” the show makes a point of featuring inclusive and diverse perspectives, while still remaining personal. Co-hosted by Heben Nigatu and Tracy Clayton, the show “cover[s] everything from race, gender, and pop culture to squirrels, mangoes, and bad jokes, all

in one boozy show,” says its description. These two women who self-describe themselves as “devastatingly smart, funny, and humble brown girls” create a “happy hour with friends” vibe that provides a seamless, authentic, and effortless mix of the profound, controversial, and silly. Working in a White, male-dominated space, Heben and Tracy have carved out a place for themselves that is uniquely, and unapologetically, Black by constantly calling out people on their white privilege, refusing to explain Black cultural references, and promoting a safe, inclusive environment that celebrates all types of blackness.

While the format of the show usually varies with each weekly episode, there are repeat segments like “This African American Life,” “What Had Happened Was” where Tracy shares a funny story, “Drunken Debates” in which the co-hosts and their guest drunkenly argue over inane and irrelevant topics, and “Pew Pew Pew Pew,” a rapid-fire questionnaire segment. At the end of each episode, Heben and Tracy “buy a round” for whatever person or thing they’ve recently discovered or appreciate. The rounds can range from thanking each other to discussing the merits of Charlie Brown to appreciating some really good ice cream cake. For weeks when the women need a break from the podcast, they produce “Shots,” 10-15-minute mini-episodes that are often based on an audience question about an issue they haven’t yet talked about on the show. Some examples from previous mini-episodes are: The N-word, Feminist vs. Meninist, Anxiety, Beauty, and Thanksgiving.

While much of the show is light-hearted and fun, they do tackle serious issues regarding race, gender, and mental health. From the very first episodes, both women have been incredibly open about their own struggles with anxiety and depression. In Episode 7, entitled “Living in America,” they addressed the specific issue of mental health in the context of racism and the recent visibility of police brutality. When Heben began the episode asking what has been on Tracy’s mind the past few days, Tracy discussed her racial burden and how she copes with such heaviness:

In spite of myself, I cannot help but think about the rash of police murder—it’s not even shootings anymore. It’s almost like they’re finding new ways to kill us in the street, you know? A policeman literally said to a man who was saying, “I can’t breathe. I’m losing my breath” like

“fuck your breath.” Every story is awful, but it just seems like each one gets worse and worse and worse. It used to be that you had to be by a television to get news stories, and it’s kind of worse now because you can turn on your phone and you have a litany of Black bodies in your palm, which sounds awful but it’s also true. I’ve been thinking of how to stay afloat. I try to remind people on Twitter as we get story after story after story to like take a break, disengage, log off, drink some water. Sometimes you really do have to unplug— and not because it’s not important that you watch— this is not saying that there’s no point in you following the story...Absolutely stay informed, but also take care of yourself, too.

Clayton’s words echo Lorde’s sentiment of the Black woman’s experience as a daily battle for survival. Racial injustices become a sort of traumatic event for people of color, and the more frequent the occurrences, the more acute the consequences are (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). In light of the Black Lives Matter movement and the visibility of police brutality, this struggle for survival becomes a shared racial burden. According to Carter & Sant-Barket (2015), racial trauma is a cumulative experience, where every personal or vicarious encounter with racism contributes to a more insidious, chronic stress.

The episode also included a segment where they went around the BuzzFeed office to ask other people of color how they are dealing with this racial burden. While Tracy, Heben, and many others referenced disconnecting from social media and real life, one woman mentioned how participating in community activism alleviated her sense of helplessness:

My self-care is disconnecting from the Internet and not watching any more videos of people getting killed. I will attend vigils [and] marches. [A]ll the marches in New York for Eric Garner I attended just because [of] that sense of community and [I felt that]...gathering with people who felt your pain and your anger...was, in a way, the only release I could get. I still wanted to feel like I was doing something. (Nigatu & Clayton, 2015)

While many often think of self-care as being in solitude, this woman’s method was to gain strength and comfort through solidarity (Jernigan, et. al, 2015). Another man interviewed in the podcast episode talked about how he was sitting in a barbershop when the verdict to the Zimmerman trial was delivered. He said,

“To be around a lot of other people who are angry makes you relax and think the world isn’t that crazy, because you have all these other people who feel the same way you do” (Nigatu & Clayton, 2015).

Despite many comments about disengaging, each person nevertheless finds comfort and support in their community and the show itself acts as such by fostering these types of discussions. The show’s format even echoes this idea of self-care by taking the time to discuss these really heavy, profound issues, but also recognizing the need to lighten things up afterwards. That change in pace does not take away from the seriousness of their conversation—they are not discrediting its gravity in any way—rather, they understand the importance on mixing the darkness with some humor and comfort.

In fostering this kind of atmosphere, the podcast acts as a “digital auditory enclave” similar to the historically important churches and barbershops where “Black Americans could gather free from the policing of the white gaze and, as such, functioned as important arenas for Black social, cultural, and political life” (Florini, 2015, p. 214). Florini (2015) draws on political writer Melissa Harris-Lacewell to argue that important identity work occurs in these everyday social interactions and podcasts provide the same atmosphere in a portable, on-demand format. In echoing the conversations and ambiance of a Black social space, “the sound that ‘envelops’ the listeners is that of Black sociality. The podcas[t]...provide[s] listeners with a downloadable, mobile, sonic recreation of these Black social spaces” (Florini, 2015, p. 215). Comments in the iTunes review section of *Another Round* demonstrate the importance of the podcast in people’s lives for providing this uniquely Black space. One reviewer wrote, “This podcast is EVERYTHING for colored girls when the rest of the world was not enough” (JEM09241, 2015). Two other reviewers highlighted the podcast as a source of nourishment or spiritual sustenance, saying that “[t]he sound of carefree black women with their own space to get comfortable is food for my soul” (CinnamonSpiceLatte, 2015), and the show is “chicken soup for my young negro soul” (Aeyogin, 2015).

More importantly, though, a podcast like *Another Round* is doing political work through its emphasis on self-care. Not only are these two women carving out a space for Black sociality, digital or otherwise, in a world that consistently tries to relegate them to the margins, but they are also openly discussing the emotional and mental consequences of being oppressed. In the context of Audre Lorde’s

work, self-care becomes politicized as a form of resistance against a society that dehumanizes and objectifies their existence. Specifically, they have highlighted the need for self-care in the face of police brutality. They are not merely celebrating blackness in the face of systemic racism, but they are promoting self-care as self-preservation in a society that is actively gunning them down. Their focus on self-care amidst police brutality highlights how self-care becomes an act of warfare on the streets where people of color are murdered far too frequently. With the Black Lives Matter movement, self-care turns to self-valuation. It is a way of standing up and saying, “*I matter.*” This refusal to be silenced, to be ignored, and to be physically harmed acts as a constant counterforce against the weight of racism.

Further Thoughts

Overall, there was a surprising lack of research on the technical affordances of podcasts and how those interfaces might yield to racial performativity. I would love to continue this research and expand by listening to other Black podcasts, analyzing the technology behind podcast production and distribution, and learning more about what draws users to specific podcasts. While the theoretical history of black feminism thought, love-politics, and self-care is rich, we are only just beginning to see the self-care movement enter into mainstream culture. For now, it is dominated by White feminist spaces, but as it progresses, it should hopefully yield far more discussion about self-care for people of color in the face of oppression. The historical moment of the Black Lives Matter movement provides an intriguing lens through which to evaluate political work, digital activism, and racism in contemporary society.

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