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“YOU CAN’T POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP”: SELF-CARE AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM  
IN QUEEN AFUA’S *SACRED WOMAN*

by

BRANDI PETTIJOHN

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani, PhD

ABSTRACT

Queen Afua created the *Sacred Woman* as a text and program that seeks to heal women of common disorders that particularly affect the African American community. This thesis project is a conversation about the self-care methods embedded within the text that moves away from the ideology of the strongblackwoman. I position both theories and methods of self-care by using a womanist theoretical framework, as well as textual analysis and interviews as methods that examine the womanist concept of spiritual activism, which expands what is thought of as radical and liberatory activist actions.

Index Words: Womanism, Spiritual Activism, Self-Care, Black Women,  
Strongblackwoman

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IN QUEEN AFUA'S SACRED WOMAN

by

BRANDI PETTIJOHN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

“YOU CAN’T POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP”: SELF-CARE AND SPIRITUAL  
ACTIVISM IN QUEEN AFUA’S SACRED WOMAN

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

To my mother Clarrissa, thank you for encouraging me to continue on and try despite my own doubts. To my brother Brian, who also encourages me to believe in myself, and to “find some chill.” To my sisters, Khalilah and Nyesha, for their unwavering love, laughter, and support (#triad). To all my scholarly and Ph.D. friends who have listened to my ideas, read proofs, and answered my questions. To all of my family (blood and chosen) for their support and kind words during this process.

I also dedicate this to my ancestors, especially my father Peter Pettijohn, for praying for me and my being my guardian angels.

My goal is to be obedient to the path that is correct for me, ask for help when I need it (and accept it when it’s offered), and to know that I deserve to have the best life possible.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As a child, I remember women in my family joking about mental healthcare as something that white women did. Black women did not have the time to have breakdowns, and acts of self-care amounted to getting your hair and nails done. Visiting a medical doctor was something that one did only out of necessity, not for screenings and checkups. Going to a therapist was unheard of unless it was a super serious issue. If you had too much stress in your life you could talk to your girlfriends, and if it was really bad, you had better take it to church and pray that Jesus would “fix it.” These ideas have not changed much over time. Academics and thought leaders, too, have largely neglected self-care, choosing instead to focus on different pathologies that exist in the Black community, such as diabetes, cancer and AIDS; as well as ways that the institution of slavery and Jim Crow have informed our lives. Nevertheless, strategies and self-healing methods have been implemented by Black women, often in informal ways, to address some of the health and wellness issues that are rooted in being an enslaved and colonized people.

In 1991, Queen Afua published *Heal Thyself for Health and Longevity* in Brooklyn, New York. The book begins with Queen Afua, born Helen Robinson, telling her story about her challenges early in life with asthma, eczema and PMS, and how she eventually was able to heal herself using diet and by connecting herself back to her spiritual center. The book focuses on healthy lifestyle practices, diet and links them to ancient Egypt or Kemet. Queen’s Afua’s popularity is birthed out of a hip-hop/soul cultural scene that erupted during the mid-nineties.

Queen Afua and her then husband had a cultural and wellness center called Smai Tawi, in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn. The wellness center taught principles of Khamitics which surmounts to righteous living and relationships, in addition to health and wellness programs, like

food preparation classes, colon hydrotherapy, and yoga. Khamitics is a practice that essentially acknowledges and celebrates Blacks (or Africans) as original beings as well as gods and goddesses. Studying Khamitics has some undertones of Black Nationalism – in other words – if one took Black Nationalists acknowledgment of African Kings and Queens one step further it will take you to Khamitics.

Khamitics, or Egyptology, is a type of Africanized spiritual meditative practice and an Afrocentric/Black nationalistic (or cultural nationalist) aesthetic that would eventually influence people of a burgeoning Brooklyn arts and cultural scene that would include rappers, Common and Mos Def, poets Jessica Care Moore and Asha Bandele and singer Erykah Badu, among others. Erykah Badu was one of the most vocal and popular advocates of both Khamitics practice and Queen Afua in the mid-1990s. Badu almost always performed dressed in African print fabric and wore large handcrafted jewelry with Kemetic symbols. She is how I became acquainted with Khamitics and Queen Afua.

As Queen Afua's popularity grew, she focused more on womb health because by her own accounts it was the most frequent set of issues that women would speak of in her group sessions, she would eventually place emphasis Black women and the effects fibroid tumors. She used similar themes as those found in *Heal Thyself* in that she focused on diet, and a healthy lifestyle, however, in her next book, *Sacred Woman*, Afua would develop a plan for women to follow with specific strategies for women who wanted to heal their minds, bodies, and spirits. Because of Queen Afua's influence in the field of self-care, she will be a focus of this thesis. In *Sacred Woman* (2000), Queen Afua writes, “you will heal in countless dimensions by way of prayer, healing affirmations, visualizations, sacred dance, purification rites, fasting, eating live foods, altar work, storytelling, holistic nutrition, and nature cures with Mother Wit” (p. 5). Queen Afua

continues to write books and participates in speaking engagements during retreats and workshops that focus on healthy living, womb health and wellness, especially for Black women. She continues to influence many in my generation, as well as future practitioners of the self-care movement, to take our health and wellness seriously.

Queen Afua emerges from hip-hop/Black popular culture during the mid-nineties where hip-hop is nearing the end of its acknowledgment of cultural nationalism. She has used and popularized Africanized spiritual practices through her work. Her connection to those popular in soul music and hip-hop, as well as her kitchen table conversational approach<sup>1</sup> with her readers and followers, makes her relatable and believable. The focus on Queen Afua in my research serves to illuminate how she exemplifies the womanist idea that everyday women can create knowledge and incite change.

I gained inspiration for this research project from Audre Lorde's (1988) quote, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation (and that is an act of political warfare)" (p. 131). I am interested in exploring how healing practices and strategies can be a remedy to existing problems that Black women face, and I will illuminate how these practices can be seen as a liberatory option. Though Queen Afua discusses health issues she faced early in life, her work does not continue to return to the place of illness, depression or pathology. *Sacred Woman* acts as a counterbalance to the seemingly constant chatter regarding the medical pathologies that exist among Black women, and I investigate strategies of self-care in the text and how they relate to womanism's spiritual activism. I situate this thesis as a movement away from the construct

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<sup>1</sup> Kitchen table is a metaphor that means common place. The Combahee Collective Founders Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde founded the Kitchen Table Press in 1980 to address publishing writings from women of color. Barbara Smith stated, "We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table grass roots operation..."(Smith 1989 p.11).

“strongblackwoman” which is a term that describes Black women who have fallen into the habit of trying to do everything except take the time to care for self (Morgan 1999)<sup>2</sup>.

Self-care can be viewed as acts akin to simply taking baths and lighting candles, however, this study investigates how these practices along with other methods have transformative properties that impact various areas of the lives of the women who partake in them. The use of womanism as my theoretical framework explores how the principals and practices of self-care, via the *Sacred Woman* book/program, instruct and evoke a sociopolitical change. I position both theories and methods of self-care as a womanist concept of “spiritual activism,” which expands what is thought of as radical and liberatory. I discuss the spiritual foundations of Afua’s directives of self-care and how Afua’s position as a self-care advocate aids in a counter-narrative to communal aversions to care. I consider the physical locations where self-care takes place, i.e. homes or health food stores and how they create unique opportunities for resistance for those who have ascribed to the myth of the strongblackwoman, and become spaces where attributes that contribute to the strongblackwoman persona are not privileged.

In *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (2014), Jennifer Nash writes about the need for Black feminists to move beyond the preoccupation with injury, explaining that “foregrounding the Black female body’s woundedness comes at the expense of capturing the possibilities of Black women’s pleasure” (p. 31). My research expands on existing research about the healing activities that take place among Black women and makes healing and self-care central concepts of inquiry versus the traditional slave/rape/AIDS continuum that currently exists in feminist scholarship. Even though pleasure is not a focused point of conversation in Afua’s *Sacred Woman*, I posit that self-care is the necessary component to having a pleasurable inner life –

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<sup>2</sup> See more on the strongblackwoman in the literature review.

which ultimately has the potential for being anti-capitalist and therefore activist. Because the stereotypes of the stressed, angry and diseased Black woman are normalized and proliferated through pop culture, examples and strategies of how women circumvent layers of oppression and daily microaggressions become equally important as they create counter images and narratives of healing and strategies of pleasure.

The primary goal of this study is to investigate *Sacred Woman* as an example of spiritual activism. Spiritual activism is a concept that accepts the need for revolution can co-exist and even be elevated with spiritual practices. Luisa Teish explains in her interview with Gloria Anzaldúa, “we use our spiritual power now to understand that this man does not have the right to overpower me, and because I know that this is right, I’m calling on that force to stand up to him” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, p.224). I examine gateways (which exist as chapters in Afua’s book) that function to focus on various aspects of the reader’s life in *Sacred Woman*. The gateways are ritual-based self-care practices that ask women to move beyond the physical aspects of normative behavior, such as how the reader engages with language, movement, food, and even their homes, to consider mental and spiritual attributes in order to have more of comprehensive healing. Additionally, I look into the usage of cultural interpretations and religious cosmologies in *Sacred Woman* and how they encourage a transformation by disrupting systems of oppression that have infiltrated the ways in which Black women have constructed the performance of their lives in our society, as in the example of the strongblackwoman. I also connect existing scholarly discussions on liberation through to the topics that the gateways that represent mastery of food, movement, beauty; as well as locate the womb as a physical site for spiritual activism in response to the medical industrial complex.

## 1.1 Literature Review

Conversations about the liberation of the Black woman's body and actualizing our humanness inform my research. The sections of this literature review will investigate scholarly examinations of the strongblackwoman, the concepts of self-care/self-help, and spiritual activism. Scholars have discussed ways contemporary Black women have unwittingly continued a cycle of devalued humanness; however, the literature on the strongblackwoman has also been consistent in calling for self-care practices as a remedy and a step towards liberation. There is a gap in this research, however. While there is research on self-care and self-help, much of it is categorized as medical care and sometimes mental health care. The conversation around self-care and self-help creates a limited historical background on both yet does provide a starting place for further exploration of self-care practices and possible outcomes – especially as it relates to activism. The final section of the literature review will focus on the idea of spiritual activism which is rooted in womanism, and can lay the groundwork to reimagine self-care as a political and revolutionary act.

Historically the physical body of the Black woman in the United States has been a site of political activism. The canon of Black feminist thought has concerned itself with the institution of slavery and impact that has had on the lives of African Americans, however, these conversations, specifically those in the second wave, seldom focused on the pleasurable or healing activities of Black women. The crux of the discourse often centers on the physicality of the Black female body and how it has functioned in society. Angela Davis writes about Black women during slavery in her book *Women, Race, Class* (1981), arguing that “rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers” (p. 7). In *Ain't I a Woman* (1982), bell hooks writes about the

lives of enslaved women, and the continued devaluation of Black womanhood, as well as how the cult of true womanhood run in opposition to the reality of Black women's existence. *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2002) addresses the societal effects of stereotypes of Black women and how controlling images are used to devalue Black women in popular culture and in society at large (p.69).

Control of the Black female body, including Black women's labor, also has led to discussions of resistance and activist strategies. Some overt resistance strategies have been informal such as running away, poisoning food, participating in revolts, suicide and feticide during slavery. More formal activist work would begin pre-emancipation and post-emancipation as in the case of suffrage work in the Club Women's Movement to women's involvement in SNCC and the Black Panther Party (Davis 1981, Giddings 1984, Collier-Thomas & Franklin 2001). Feminist and womanist scholars like Joan Morgan, Stephanie Camp, Brittany Cooper, and Kevin Quashie are picking up where Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldua left off, creating discourses that focus on Black women's engagement with pleasure as resistance and how it can function as a disruptive strategy in an oppressive/repressive society.

### ***1.1.1 Strongblackwoman***

Because of its dominant role precluding Black women from pursuing self-care as an everyday activity, I begin with a brief examination the historical epistemologies of the strongblackwoman. The strongblackwoman is a complex self-construction, a role that many Black women have taken up as a badge of honor. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) examines the strongblackwoman "as a constructive role model because Black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles...African American women do



not define themselves as Jezebels, Mammies, or Sapphires...” (p. 184). The strongblackwoman is, on the one hand, a self-construction that has been utilized to create distance from other controlling images; on the other hand, it can contribute to the feeling of being a prison of self-denial.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes about controlling images of Black women, explaining how the mammy, sapphire, and jezebel stereotypes are used to justify sexual and economic exploitation, and arguing that these stereotypes have functioned as a binary opposite to white women’s cult of true womanhood. The mammy stereotype, created by the image of the domestic working Black woman, eventually morphed into the matriarch, which in turn eventually came to be known as the strongblackwoman (p.72). While the strongblackwoman, much like mammy is revered without examination, it has become a persona that does little to create a pleasurable existence in the lives of Black women. Because we are in a moment in pop culture that is normalizing the stylish but angry, the successful but destructive, and, always lonely Black woman, it is important that we deconstruct these controlling images and the impact they have on the lives of Black women and the expectations that they fact on a daily basis in society.

The myth of the strongblackwoman is a partial truth. The continued survival of Black people is a testament to resilience; however, the ideas of strength and Black women actually have a historic and economic foundation that traces back to the enslavement of Africans on this continent.

During the American slavocracy, Black women were routinely depicted as being unusually strong, possessing physical hardiness that far exceeded that of women of other races and even rivaled that of men. In contrast to the ‘delicate’ White woman, Black women were seen as capable of performing heavy physical labor in the plantation fields

and household. They could work through sickness and needed little recovery time after childbirth. And they were able to endure separation from their children and families (Walker-Barnes, 2014, p.19).

While strength is often seen as an attribute, it shows up in the lives of Black women as a gauge of acceptable behavior. The way the strongblackwoman has been used as a badge of honor in some ways creates a psychic tie to an oppressed, overworked and self-deprecating past.

I position strongblackwoman as an entry point for healing. Scholars who have investigated the strongblackwoman often begin with a call to healing through recognition of Black women's humanness. While seemingly simple, humanness, especially the limitations of being human, is perhaps one of the last characteristics with which the strongblackwoman identifies. Acknowledging the Black woman as human first undermines common societal themes that have been put in place or taken on as a result of the compounding oppressive ideologies that have been present in society since the transatlantic slave trade. Beaufoeuf-Lafontant (2009) explains, "when Black women tend to their bodies and minds as much as they guard those of others in their care, we take active steps away from a plantation society structured on racialized gender, and move towards practicing democracy as our real legacy" (p. 154). Again, scholars propose self-care as a political act; however, the practitioners, participants, and practices of those who engage in self-care work are rarely discussed.

### ***1.1.2 Why Self-Care***

Queen Afua produces a type of knowledge that seeks to be transformative and liberatory. Self-care, as it is deployed by Queen Afua, is a series of methods and strategies, often rooted in African American culture and spirituality, which seek to disrupt and change both the self-

perception of those who participate in the methods, as well as their relationship to their community. When the stronghold of societal norms is fractured, people can eventually change the way they interact with institutions that enact oppression. Many of Queen Afua's interventions center on circumventing intuitions, specifically the medical industrial complex. Her methods of self-care and usage of Khametic religion has similarities to Foucault's discussion of care of self as it relates to Greek philosophy<sup>3</sup>.

Michel Foucault's work focuses on the ethics of self-care as a modality of political resistance and liberation but also how the medical industrial complex intervenes with the ways in which people advocate and interact with their own self-care. In the *History of Sexuality Volume III: The Care of the Self* (1984) Foucault discusses the Greek philosophers' ideas of care of self. For the purposes of this research project, I will discuss what he found to be foundational or traditional aspects of self-care and eventual transformation of the ethic. The text speaks to how Foucault identifies the traditional foundations of the care of self to be social, active and something that could take place at any point in one's life.

Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfactions of needs. There are meditations, the reading, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one has heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one's own life (p. 51).

He examines institutions such as marriage and medicine as disruptors of the care of the self-ethic that eventually would transform into superiority over the self, shifting the power dynamic. He further explains that self-care does not require the domination of anything. In an

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Asa Hilliard (1992) argues that ancient Kemet (Khametic) culture and religion pre-dates, and is the inspiration for Greek philosophy (p. 10)

interview regarding his last book, Foucault states, “dominating others and exercising over them a tyrannical power only comes from the fact that one did not care for one’s self ... But if you care for yourself correctly...if you know what is suitable to hope for and what are the things on the contrary which should be completely indifferent to you if you know, finally that you should not fear death, well, then, you cannot abuse your power over others” (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1984, p. 119). Foucault’s work primarily focuses on early Greek philosophical ideas; however it is very interesting that the importance of these same ideas and activities has emerged in contemporary Black culture. It also speaks to the way the medical establishment has been viewed as a barrier to performing self-care and receiving its benefits.

Mistrust of the medical-industrial complex by Black people has an unfortunate and long history. A study published by the National Opinion Research Center showed that Black women exhibit the least confidence in the institutions of science and medicine than white men and women, and Black men (Corra et. al., 2008). The cases of Saartjie Baartman “The Hottentot Venus” (Collins, 2000, p.141), the Tuskegee Experiment and forced sterilization of Black women are arguably the most (Washington, 2006, p.192) popular stories that circulate to create and reinforce ideas of mistrust of the institution of medicine, which inevitably leads to the possible reliance that Black women have on communal epistemological knowledge that the medical establishment does not function as a site of healing for African American people. The stain of unjust medicalization of the African American community creates a barrier to receiving any type of healthcare from practitioners. Self-care provides a unique opportunity for women who may need medical intervention or treatment to remove the stigma of receiving care from practitioners.

Traditionally, self-help texts confront specific issues, for example, topics range from help for breast cancer survivors to women dealing with children with medical issues or provide money or relationship advice. One of feminism's moments with self-help ideology, had a specific focus on women's reproductive healthcare and the disruption of power of the medical establishment (Brody and Logan, 1982, p.14). The feminist self-help movement began in the late sixties and involved women who had access to medical care as well as women who did not. Both of these groups of women, while residing on differing ends of a racial and socio-economic spectrum, faced the related problem of lack of contraceptive options. In response to these conditions, Michelle Murphy (2004) conceives of women organizing and teaching groups of other women about anatomy and reproductive options as an epistemological principle. In other words, she contends that they devised new ways of knowing about reproductive health, which erupted out of the self-help movement.

Experience was once the material analyzed in consciousness raising (the experience of being a woman) and an encounter with one's body produced through practices such as vaginal self-examination (the experience of looking at oneself as a woman). At work in statements such as 'I saw this,' 'I was there,' 'I felt that' uttered at self-help meetings was the assertion of an epistemic privilege gained from the immediacy of speaking about one's self (p. 117).

Although this particular aspect of the feminist self-help movement was short-lived, the feminist self-help movement did address the necessities of receiving care among marginalized populations and continues in various other applications. Similarities could be drawn to contemporary self-care ideology in that it is a DIY assertion from practitioners that eventually would trickle down to participants, and those participants would or could eventually become

practitioners/educators themselves. Women trusted other women's knowledge, practitioners' usage of testimony or example, and events always took place in a setting that was neutral and it was not medicalized. These two reference points, practitioner testimony and knowledge, non-medicalized (or institutionalized) settings prove to be essential when contemplating the efficiency of self-care work as it operates through communities.

Healing as a modality of liberation is present in academic texts for people of color, especially Black people. Chanequa Walker-Barnes writes extensively about healing the strongblackwoman in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (2014). Walker-Barnes's book explores womanist theology in pastoral care as a tool in interrupting the burdensome behaviors of attempting to "be seen as an exceptional Black person" (p. 141). For Walker-Barnes, figuring out strategies within the physical location of the Black Christian church is essential for healing. Because of this, her work has focused on how others can help destabilize the characteristics of the strongblackwoman but not from a place of self-care – as she posits the church as a main location of activity and herself as a potential conduit of care. In *Sisters of the Yam: Black women and self-recovery* (1993), bell hooks acknowledges that healing is imperative for actualization and liberation. Most of the book, however, is situated in the subtleties of how oppression affects Black women. She situates her argument by explaining, "since society rewards us most, indicates that we are valuable, when we are willing to push ourselves to the limit and beyond, we need a life-affirming practice, a counter-system of valuation in order to resist this agenda" (p. 41). She discusses some healing activities such as looking at yourself naked in the mirror and being kind to yourself, but offers no prescriptions, or programs, and most of the ideas she presents come from other practitioners and are not situated within her own authority. While the intent and theme of *Sisters of the Yam* is to explore healing

and some of its practices, its theoretical center still derives from a socio-historical context of racism, sexism, AIDS, and substance abuse.

### *1.1.3 Womanism & Spiritual Activism*

A remedy for the conditions of the strongblackwoman is embedded within the self-care movement. Womanism as a theoretical framework contains several elements that specifically connect with the guiding principles of Queen Afua. Layli Phillips (2006) defines womanism as “a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (p. xx). Womanism has two main aspects that relate to my research; it is connected distinctly to Black women and Black culture (though it is not limited to them), and to spirit/spiritual activism.

I investigate the role that Afrocentric culture plays in connecting Black women to self-care practices. From her name to the way she dresses, the visual performance of Queen Afua is rooted in aspects of Afrocentricity. Ogunyemi (1985) writes, “[b]lack womanism is a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life while giving a balanced presentation of Black womandom.” Because Afrocentricity is visibly displayed, I discuss the role that Afrocentric epistemologies that are birthed in neighborhoods and families play when it comes to how women accept the knowledge of Queen Afua and how they gage her authenticity.

Many methods of self-care have roots in spirituality, which is a foundational aspect of womanism and womanist practice. To understand Black women’s potential engagement with self-care practices I briefly explore the ways Black women negotiate spirituality in the context of

self-care. I will examine what Tracey Hucks (2001) explains as the historical engagement of African Americans with “multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery” (p. 90). This may explain how African American women easily accept self-care healing techniques that might reside outside of their main religious or spiritual practices.

Hucks also explains that Black women have specifically sought out African religions due “to the profound affirmation of their blackness and femaleness. Many African American women have found this affirmation lacking in other religious traditions in which masculine iconography of the sacred is privileged” (p. 95). Queen Afua’s work often discusses the goddess within, and goddess energy. Without the openness and connection to varying ideas of deities and spirit, engagement in self-care practices might have more barriers for Black women. Layli [Phillips] Maparyan explains in *The Womanist Idea* (2011), that “Black women and women of color are generally not afraid of or skeptical about spirituality...[they] also recognize the political implications of this spiritual relationship in ways that few more academically or ideologically inclined perspectives do” (p. xxxix). This hand in hand connection between spiritual and political change led me to want to further examine spiritual activism and its potential connection to self-care.

Gloria Anzaldúa coined the term spiritual activism “to make meaning out of the apparently meaningless events of her life, especially those situations – ‘the deaths and destructions’ - that caused her the most pain. Significantly, this meaning-making endeavor was a difficult, often torturous, struggle” (Keating 2008, p.56). Ana Louise Keating explains that “[s]piritual activism begins at the level of the personal, it is not solipsistic.... Rather, spiritual activism combines self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts



designed to bring about material change” (p. 58). This is consistent with liberation and womanist theological objectives to “empower them to value themselves personally and collectively; and, equip them as change agents for group advancement in the world” (Walker-Barnes, 2014, p. 332). In other words, spiritual activity is not done solely for the sake of the individual, it has implications in communities and beyond.

Maparyan (2011) continues the conversation of inner/outer work in the context of spiritual activism by explaining that “[i]nner work is also supported by purification of one’s immediate environment...the intimate relationship between the environments in which we spend the most time every day...and our bodily, emotional, and mental well-being is so strong that purification of the immediate environment can be considered a ‘bridge’ activity, linking one’s inner world with the more public realm” (p.126). I situate the self-care prescriptions of Queen Afua as an example of spiritual activism, utilizing the theories presented by Anzaldúa and Maparyan.

#### ***1.1.4 Other Examples: Luisah Teish and Iyanla Vanzant***

Queen Afua is not the only woman who has advocated for spiritualized self-care; two other practitioners of note are Luisah Teish and Iyanla Vanzant. Luisah Teish is one of the feminist progenitors of self-care who introduced spiritual rituals as activism. “[t]he feminist ritual seeks to replace the patriarchal traditions not only with an image of the female as divine but also with an image of strength and power that is internalized as part of the self” (Jacobs, 1990, p. 43). Teish emerges in the early eighties and explicitly articulates spiritualized self-care methods as anti-patriarchal and feminist. She penned *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* in 1985, which is a book of spiritual rituals but acts as a

memoir and exploration of African/Africanized spiritual beliefs and the possibilities of confronting systems of oppression.

Teish is a priestess of the Yoruba faith, and her contribution to Women's Studies is one that encompasses discourse regarding women's spiritual power, and how it can address patriarchy and racism. The spiritual deities in the Yoruba faith challenge mainstream Christian ideologies, specifically interrogating who has sacred power in addition to connecting that power to African identity. In *Jambalaya*, rituals and spells give the practitioner a sense of personal power and the book therefore represents a shift in the notion that within the concept of spirituality there is nothing that the collective can do about creating change (Keating, 1992, p. 27).

Iyanla Vanzant, another woman who is a self-care advocate, emerges around the same time as Queen Afua. Vanzant was born Rhonda Harris, but she was renamed Iyanla through her initiation into the Yoruba faith. She is a *New York Times* best-selling author, starting with her first book, *Acts of Faith* (1993), and has been very popular ever since. Vanzant uses personal testimony to connect with people. She engages audiences with relatable wit and humor, speaking about being the daughter born of an adulterous relationship, facing financial troubles, her attempts with suicide and being a single mother –circumstances to which many women can relate.

I was introduced to Iyanla Vanzant through books purchased by my mother and through a friend who attended one of her conferences in New York City. My friend talked about Vanzant's gift of reading people, meaning she can look at you and tell you about you and your life even though you have not said much of anything. When reading is used as a spiritual practice, it is seen as a gift and often used to relate ideas from the spirit realm that people should

avoid or to which they should adhere to enhance their life experience in real time. Vanzant works within her spiritual practice while engaging with the public and on her television show, *Iyanla Fix My Life*. She is known to read people and cut through things that they might try to hide, which has led to her increased popularity since the show came on the air. Her self-care work is rooted in spirituality, so her directives include prayer work, visualization, and affirmations. Critiques of Vanzant are often rooted in her commercialization, and her interactions with others while on television which often channel the mammy stereotype (Magubane, 2008, p. 225).

Although Teish and Vanzant are not included in this study it is important to note their contributions and how they add to Black women's epistemology about spiritual self-care and how it can be related to activism. Their usage of self-care and self-care methods have also been used as remedies for Black women who are not engaged with mainstream medical practitioners, and becomes the balm for various ailments of the mind, body and spirit. Like Afua, Teish and Vanzant have "amassed a wide following among African American women who find resonance with their messages of spiritual healing and rejuvenation, their emphases on female-centered images of divine energy, and their transreligious and noncreedal mode of engagement" (Hucks, 2001, p. 99). Their significance demonstrates how Black women have utilized self-care and spiritualized healing to either circumvent medical interventions or to access power within to address systematic, societal or structural inequities. If those engaged in traditional forms of activism begin to adopt self-care and acknowledge the importance of spiritualized self-care as a modality of activism, it change dramatically change how activists engage with the political process and with each other as they move through these processes.

## 1.2 Methods and Methodology

The purpose of my research is to examine self-care work as transformative; it therefore effectively explores the work that has been produced by Queen Afua and how that work has been received by those who engage with it. While my project is situated within womanism, I acknowledge that my understanding relies on the standpoint theorist approach, understanding “that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (Heckman, 1997, p. 342). I also follow feminist traditions of exploring a mixed method approach to my research, combining semi-structured conversational interviews and womanist textual analysis.

### 1.2.1 Textual Analysis

I use textual analysis to make cultural interpretations located in *Sacred Woman* and make connections that can make sense of why women read and engage with the work of self-care using Queen Afua’s methodology. Because my theoretical framework is womanist, the usage of Brown-Crawford’s (2008) womanist textual analysis serves to describe the merging of womanist critique with textual analysis, which takes into account the socio-historical context and influences of content (p. xiv). The textual analysis will allow me to explore themes of self-care, and to further determine how – if at all – self-care and spiritual activism coincides with other notions of activism, transformation, and liberation. Womanist textual analysis allowed me to identify acts of spiritual activism within *Sacred Woman*. By utilizing Maparyan’s womanism I was able to not only extrapolate instances of spiritual activism, I also examined their potential implications or ripple effects in other areas of a woman’s life – the inner and outer effects.

### 1.2.2 Interview

Queen Afua's book, *Sacred Woman: A Guide to Healing the Feminine Body, Mind, and Spirit*, has an on-going program with the same name, where women get together either by telecast or in groups at a specific location to walk through the gateways of healing. I wanted to understand more about the program from the vantage point of a participant. This is the reason why I selected to study Afua and the *Sacred Woman* over other texts and programs. Interviews create a unique opportunity for me to understand the potential transformative impacts of the self-care work that she prescribes. I identified six women, two women whom I know personally and who are connected to other women who have also participated in the program. However, there was a significant amount of attrition in the participants in this research, which will be discussed in the "Barriers" section of this study. I did interview three women, and I interviewed them separately, examining what led them to do self-care work, and the importance of culture and spirituality in influencing their decision to engage with the *Sacred Woman* program. I also examined how—if at all—the practices have changed their external worlds. I explored concepts of spiritual activism by doing a womanist textual analysis of the *Sacred Woman* text.

I conducted semi-structured interviews over the phone with three women. Two of the women, Akasha, and Roberta participated in the *Sacred Woman* program; the third interviewee was Keran, who attended the Smaj Tawi temple in Brooklyn, New York prior to the formal creation of the *Sacred Woman* program and book. Because Keran had been acquainted with Queen Afua and Smaj Tawi, she provided good insight to why some of the women decide to turn to Afua for assistance, as well as context to the issues that women face on their journey to healing. I used standard open-ended questions, however, the interviews were conducted mostly in a conversational manner. "Creative interviewing involves using a set of techniques to move

past the mere words and sentences exchanged...It includes creating an appropriate climate for informational exchanges and for mutual disclosures” (Berg, 2001, p. 68). This method gave participants the opportunity to answer similar questions but provide enough flexibility where other themes emerged. Not all participants received the same questions because questions evolved from conversation to conversation<sup>4</sup>.

Due to the participant drop out that took place in the findings process of writing this thesis it was important for me to remain reflexive as I discussed issues facing African American women. I will exercise what Patricia Hill Collins (1993) calls the “outsider-within” concept, recognizing that “individuals gain or lose identities as ‘outsiders within’ by their placement in these social locations” (p. 5). I situated my own location as a researcher and as a Black woman who has engaged in some of the work that has been proposed by Afua. While I can use some internal knowledge of terminology to ask questions, it was important for me to engage in active listening for the everyday processes of “translation” that are a part of women’s speech (assumptions about what knowledge is)” (DeVault, 1990, p. 99). This also has allowed me to negotiate the dissemination of sacred cultural knowledge within the academy. However, because of my role as researcher, my position as insider/outsider is explored as a possible contributor to attrition that occurred during the course of confirming and moving forward with interviews that had previously been accepted, as it was an unexpected outcome. Ultimately the interview process lead me to ask the questions; for whom is *Sacred Woman* written, and how do we come to trust Queen Afua?

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<sup>4</sup> Names of participants have been changed

## **Significance**

I came to Women's Studies because I was interested in women's empowerment. When I researched Black women, there were icons like Ida B Wells and Shirley Chisholm, but very rarely did we learn about tactics of everyday women and how they effected change in their communities. The lives of everyday Black women were often told through the discourse of a slavery/abuse/AIDS continuum. It can be depressing to constantly read, theorize and write about problems, especially when it's about "your people." I, and people who are engaged in anti-oppression work, know the effects of slavery must be acknowledged and written about, but where are we changing these scripts? Where is healing taking place? How are people challenging these ideas that have burdened us for so long? The significance of my research is to locate the epistemological understanding of how identity is transformed through activities like self-care, and locating the unique, and perhaps overlooked, locations for activism that exist outside of the current understanding of activist practice.





## 2 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SACRED WOMAN

Queen Afua's guiding principles come from her identification with Khamitic/Nubian philosophy otherwise known as the ancient Egyptian way of life. Principles are derived from interpretations of writings on temple/pyramid walls. One such text that is discussed by her is the 42 Laws of Maat (Afua, 2002 p. 13). These laws are much like the 10 commandments where you profess what you will not do, like lie or kill. However, other laws include not wasting food, not polluting the earth and not polluting yourself which focuses on the inner world as well as the outer world. The 42 laws along with aspects of Egyptian cosmology are foundational for Queen Afua's self-care directives and they speak to an ancestral/indigenous knowledge as well as an interior/exterior work that is an aspect of spiritual activism. The placement of the 42 Laws of Maat at the beginning of *Sacred Woman* grounds the text and sets up the expectation that coming into healing, as Afua situates it, will explore the interior and exterior – spiritual and physical areas of the readers' lives.

In *Sacred Woman*, Afua lists Gateways of healing in lieu of chapters or sections; the purpose of each gateway is to focus on healing specific areas of your life, and each gateway represents different aspects of a person's life that are "sacred" such as words, space, and movement. In each gateway, there is a guardian, who is an Egyptian goddess followed by African American ancestors, elders, and contemporaries. Within each gateway of healing Queen Afua asks the participant to look to the women who may or may not be familiar to them, who have mastered a particular area, and learn from them, essentially seeking them as a spiritual resource or reference point. The goddess would be the person you pray to, the elder is the

woman you pay reverence to and the contemporary is the woman who could be your present day reference.

*Sacred Woman* is an illustration of how changes to the inner lives of those who engage with the text, via a range of self-care methods, will have greater effects in other areas of the readers' lives. This focus on working on one's inner life is also present in womanists' assertions of spiritual activism. Afua specifically wants readers who are engaged with *Sacred Woman* to be transformed, through the removal physical elements, such as purging diets of unhealthy foods, or the mental removal of limitations of what can be healed and how. Maparyan (2011) states "there are three basic aspects to inner work: (1) purification of the body; (2) purification of the emotional self; and (3) purification of one's mental realm (thoughts and beliefs). Purification refers to the process of removing elements that are contrary to intended states of being" (p. 126). Within each gateway of *Sacred Woman*, there are various directives that the person should take for a specific amount of time. For example, a gateway takes seven days, there is a prayer, as well as chants and or meditation, aromatherapy, journaling, herbal tonic, teas or recommended foods, and exercises all prescribed to help strengthen or heal attributes that each gateway represents. The intention of each gateway is to spiritually transform the participant by using the aforementioned modalities of self-care, with different intentions. For example, the prayer, foods, tonics, or even the clothing that the woman is directed to wear will be different for each gateway.

I identify the womb of the Black woman as a site of activism, and while there are other opportunities, via the gateways, for transformation and liberation ideologies located in *Sacred Woman*, all will effectively maintain the goal of healing the womb. In the following section, I will explore how Afua views the womb, and womb health, as a cornerstone to ultimate wellness in women.

Throughout the text, Afua routinely focuses on changing common practices, like eating poorly, gossiping, or not resting – as she views these as contributors to illness and stress in the lives of Black women. These practices are connected to colonized habits that have taken root over time, especially for those who aspire to or revel in being a strongblackwoman. The gateways present an opportunity to unlearn oppressive ways of being in order to consider new or rather, old, ancestral and culturally relevant traditions that will help facilitate healing. These new modalities push the idea of healing beyond the physical and aspire to encompass the mental and spiritual as necessary areas to be healed as well.

## 2.1 Identifying the Womb as a Site for Spiritual Activism

As a Sacred Woman;

I strive to follow the Natural Living approach so that I will be able to avoid the use of drugs, surgery, and/or radiation therapy.

Mother/Father Creator has not abandoned me without means, for in nature I can find what I need to Heal Myself.

I claim my womb and all of me and I put my trust in Thee. (Afua, 2000, p. 96)

To become a “sacred woman,” there are things that one must do in order to transform her life. Working through *Sacred Woman* is a physical, emotional and spiritual endeavor. There are three sections of the book and the second section is devoted entirely to the womb. The womb is more than just the physical uterus, it is “the most sacred organ of reproduction.” (p. 47)<sup>5</sup>. Even if the components of the physical womb are not present, it does not mean the “spiritual energy

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<sup>5</sup> Queen Afua is careful to include women who might have already had hysterectomies or any other surgery or condition that has altered their capability to reproduce.

center” attribute does not exist.<sup>6</sup> Queen Afua writes “[i]f a womb is damaged in any way...then a woman’s creativity and inspiration, stability, success in relationships, fertility levels, and joy are potentially impaired” (p. 47). Because Afua sees healing the womb as foundational to healing all other aspects of the body, it is a physical and spiritual site of activism.

The spiritually activist work of Queen Afua is evident in the content and intent of her texts. Layli Maparyan (2011) writes, “[s]piritual activism requires the demystification of the performance of miracles...the conscious and intentional transformation of energy to produce desired and sometimes surprising outcomes – and reconnects everyday people with the possibility of performing or manifesting them” (p. 121). I’ve stated before that women connect to Queen Afua’s *Sacred Woman* text and program because of the womb healing work for which she is best known. Often women are coming to Afua’s work as a last resort, trying to find another way to heal in the face of ancestral and medical evidence that there are no other options; in essence they are looking for a miracle.

How does Afua demystify the miracle? Queen Afua describes her process, “[r]ather than telling [women who come to me] not to schedule [a hysterectomy], I simply ask, ‘How much time is the doctor giving you?’ And then I offer another possibility: ‘Let’s see how much work we can do now’” (Afua, 2000, p. 67). Afua’s construct of womb wellness is described as non-violent and prescriptions that follow involve a steady amount of self-care<sup>7</sup>.

The miracle for the Black woman would be to avoid medical intervention, which for many has been a nightmare. In *Medical Apartheid (2004)*, Washington writes about Fannie Lou

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<sup>6</sup> The importance of the womb or the center reaches across cultures and religions. Yogis see the womb center as Svadisthana or the Sacral Chakra – also known to be responsible for relationships, emotional connection, pleasure and change (Musial 2001, p. 217). Activating and healing the sacral chakra is said to heal the attributes associated with that chakra.

<sup>7</sup> A conversation regarding what self-care is and how it functions in *Sacred Woman* will be taken up in the following chapter.

Hamer's "Mississippi appendectomy," (p. 189) a phrase that refers to the practice of removing the uteri of Black sharecropper women. The relationship between the medical industrial complex's approaches to the reproductive health care of Black women has been one filled with tension and distrust. Forced sterilizations and experimentations lead to Black women's overall health being vulnerable from high levels of hormones in "the pill," inflating hypertension and stroke risk, to IUDs being "unmasked as a killer, [being] associated with deadly infections that hampered or destroyed users' fertility" (p. 201). The womb has been and arguably still is a site of warfare on Black women because researchers, doctors, and scientists have infringed on the reproductive rights of Black women and families.

The eugenics-driven practices of the medical establishment created a paradoxical relationship between Black women and the reproductive liberation they might have been seeking, thus Black women's attitudes regarding reproductive interventions have been "shaped by a broader social context that includes racial injustice as well as gender inequality and religious traditions" (Roberts, 2000, 91). There are times where Black women actually may need preventative care, contraceptive options, or medical intervention, but because the relationship between Black women and the medical industrial complex is so fractured many are either unwilling or unable to engage with it. Black women have steadily opted out of dealing with those involved in the medical industrial complex because of unfair treatment or lack of access to adequate care. A study in 2008 by Becker and Tsui found that Black women were more likely than others to be pressured to adopt a contraceptive method (p. 210). The compounding issues regarding whether Black women can receive adequate care or the quality of service that Black women receive once in the care of medical providers can explain why Black women may seek an option outside of the medical establishment. Queen Afua may represent what Jennifer Nelson

describes as a “long history of [African American women] providing healthcare to their communities...from the first years of slavery into the first decade of the twentieth century” (p. 102). She accomplishes this by being relatable and using testimony to connect to readers and people who come to her for help.

Queen Afua’s own testimony, as well as the testimony of other women who have gone through the program, is utilized as evidence that these miracles are possible. The conversational tone of the book also connects the reader to the work. Queen Afua uses “we” and “our” just as much as she uses “you” in the text, signifying that the reader is not alone in the journey. Afua peppers the text/narrative with some of her own challenges during various times of her life. Commonly, testimony is used in the context of religious practice. When testimony is used, particularly among in African American communities, it is used to show the audience that they are not alone in their struggles. When Afua uses testimony, she locates her story as a success. Her success is rooted in her cosmological understandings, proper nutrition, and body movement as well as other self-care methods. When she relates herself to the reader, the reader is transformed into someone who is not unlike Afua, and if Afua could be healed, then so can the reader. Effectively, the practice of testimony locates power and authority in the recipient of the testimony. This kind of practice demonstrates spiritual activism as discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa, insofar as it “locates authority within each individual” (Keating, 1992, p.58).

In the section of the book called “My Womb Mirror Adventure,” Afua details her first experience of using a hand mirror to look at her vagina. Her account of her feelings of trepidation during the experience acts as an example of the feelings that the readers of the book may be feeling. As she concludes her accounting of the experience she assures the audience that the experience was pleasant through her own testimony. This goes back to the kitchen table

experience, “a woman-centered space where all are welcome and all can participate,” (Phillips, 2006, p.19) in which Afua places herself, as authority, in the reader’s position, and then invites the reader to share or have a similar experience as the authority.

After the reader is instructed to look at her own vagina and write about the experience, Afua then details the reproductive organs, venereal diseases, menstrual issues, pregnancy health and menopause in common language utilizing brief descriptions. She is careful not to take too much time discussing the problems but nevertheless does so as an acknowledgment of the issues that women who are reading the book may face. Towards the end of the section, there is a womb wellness profile that you can fill out over the course of four menstrual cycles to track any potential progress of your health. If there is progress, meaning shorter, less painful menses, or a better mood, then in essence she is showing you that the work that you are putting in is working, and therein lies the miracle.

Womb health is a central focus of Afua’s *Sacred Woman* book and program, as she views the womb as “the gateway of all human life.” Part of her activism, through her books and programs, is to illuminate how doctors are removing Black women’s wombs and to assert that Black women have the ability to heal themselves. In *Heal Thyself* (1992) Afua has several proclamations like, “Chant daily and pray for women who have buried their wombs. Women, Heal Ourselves! Save Our Uterus!” and “No more hysterectomies. No more drugs. No more surgery.” Queen Afua is not advocating for a better health system, she’s advocating for Black women to subvert the need for medical intervention altogether.

Afua engages women and encourages them through the use of self-care regimes and prescriptions, which will affect their interior lives and ultimately their exterior lives – which connects the mental and physical to a spiritual practice. The self-care aspect of Afua’s *Sacred*

*Woman* is the “inner work” that contributes to the idea of spiritual activism, especially as it relates to the womb. Control of Black women’s reproductive possibilities, whether it was birthing many children for the purposes of having a larger labor force during the transatlantic slave trade, or sterilizations after reconstruction, has been and remains a political issue. Afua centralizes the womb as not only physically important for healing, but she also connects that culturally and spiritually to the lives of Black women.

## 2.2 Gateways to Liberation

While healing the womb is central in *Sacred Woman*, there are other areas on which Afua concentrates. These areas are represented in remaining sections of the book, and they are significant in that each gateway combines physical, mental and spiritual paradigms.

Additionally, the gateways function to continually heal the whole self. Effectively, if a woman uses her words against someone in anger<sup>8</sup>, if she does not move her body, if she does not have a healthy conception of her own beauty, then more than likely other aspects of her health will suffer; and if we recall the discussion earlier about the 42 Laws of Maat, then the woman is clearly in violation of those laws. Mental and spiritual consciousness is connected and tantamount to physical healing.

Topics such as food, beauty and space that often are only thought of as physical attributes are considered both culturally and spiritually; and because these topics are considered physical, there are both inner and outer aspects of the work that still contribute to the ideas of spiritual activism, specifically how spiritual and cultural shifts occur when physical alterations are made. The self-care rituals are suggested to begin at 4 am or as early as possible – when solitude is

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<sup>8</sup> It could be argued that Afua is using the term anger as rageful, as in a daily practice of being angered by life, and not anger at injustice or oppression.



more assured (although not guaranteed) -- in small spaces like bathrooms and kitchens, where the opportunity for alone time may be possible. Afua asks the participants to transform these interior spaces to sacred spaces. The following are some of the gateways Queen Afua explores that contribute to spiritual activism.

### **2.1.1 Sacred Words**

The section on sacred words is devoted to the idea that both the words one speaks to others and the words that a person speaks to him or herself have power. Queen Afua asks, “What about the words you speak to your associates, family, or friends? What are your words doing to them, or what are their words doing to you?” (p. 155) There is a proverb in the bible that states “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Within the 42 Laws of Maat, there are seven laws that explicitly concern the power of words and how they create realities in someone’s life. Geneva Smitherman suggests that language is a “dominant means of socialization and social control, language both determines our consciousness and is determined by it” (Smitherman 1983 p 17). Much of the ideology that Queen Afua discusses is evoking consciousness from a time prior to the transatlantic slave trade. It is a psychic undoing that she is conjuring through the use of Nubian/Khamitic spirituality. “Experience the healing and the high consciousness of our ancestors and their use of words” (Afua, 2002. 155). This is a reminder that collectively African American women have not always been here (physically or psychically). Through the reminder, Afua encourages us to consciously think about how we use language in our lives, and how by changing the way we use language we can effectively transform our lives, at least our relationships with others.

The transformative example of these would be Ana Louise Keating’s (1992) reading of *Zami*. “When women overcome their fear of difference and speak, their words create bonds

uniting them in new ways, making possible further acts of self-revelation” (p. 25). When thinking about both Smitherman’s and Keating’s ideas about language and the creation of self, it is interesting that sacred words is the 2<sup>nd</sup> gateway – the entire book is devoted to recreating yourself and your body, but the use of language specifically speaks to the way we create our world and thus changes what we find acceptable to say but also how the reader/participant deciphers how language used in context of Black women’s lives. Through meditation other consciousness raising activities, Black women engaged in the *Sacred Woman* program are liberating themselves of the centuries of language that has created our world view and thus our realities.

### **2.1.2 Sacred Foods**

One of the primary modalities of healing in *Sacred Woman* is through a vegan/live food diet.<sup>9</sup> Clearly food exists in a physical realm, it’s a tangible commodity, but Afua’s focus on sacred food is an attempt to create a culture of food consciousness. She lists recipes that are meant to be nurturing and healing, and the discussion of the transformative properties oscillates between the mental and the spiritual in the lists of certain foods that she believes have certain physical or metaphysical qualities; for example, “celery: enhances positive thinking,” “cucumbers: enhances forgiveness” or “turnip greens: restores the blood, clears up eczema, boils, pimples, and acne” (p. 172). When considering the inner/outer aspect to spiritual activism, Afua’s discussion of sacred food not only gives the reader possible positive outcomes for the physical body but also positions food as healthy for the mind and spirit as well.

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<sup>9</sup> Live food is also known as raw food, meaning fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds prepared with no heat.

Afua also advocates for family or communal eating and “prayer offerings and thanksgiving before and after each meal” (p. 173). Within the Black community, several religious groups connect diet to improving health as a nationalistic stance as well as a spiritual consciousness raising. Two popular religions, Nation of Islam and Rastafarian communities, are “both liberation theological movements that empower Blacks by providing them with positive self-identity” (Barnett 2006). Rastafarians are known to adhere to a strict vegetarian diet, and The Honorable Elijah Mohammad wrote *How to Eat to Live* as a guide to improve life about 30 years before *Heal Thyself* was published. Often practitioners of these religious groups are also responsible for restaurants that promote healthy eating in Black neighborhoods; in fact, they may be the only healthy food option within these communities where food justice is an issue. In Atlanta, the African American Hebrew Israelite community owns and operates a chain of restaurants called Soul Vegetarian<sup>10</sup>; it is the common communal knowledge that Muslims run Yasin’s Seafood, which is known for being “clean.”

These groups have contributed their ideas about diet within the African American community, thus a legitimacy exists within the community that a certain type of diet is connected to spiritual righteousness or more God-like living, regardless of whether one decides to adhere to that diet. While these examples are not explicitly womanist, there is a value of hospitality in these environments that invite community members in to partake in foods that seek to raise collective consciousness. Most importantly, Afua draws upon an existing cultural knowledge regarding the spiritual and healing properties of food and contextualizes them into the construct of her *Sacred Woman* program.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Soul Vegetarian’s website they are the largest chain of vegan restaurants in the world.

### **2.1.3 Sacred Movement**

The significance of Sacred Movement can lend itself to different outcomes. Movement of the body keeps it supple, can aid in maintaining healthy weight, and keeps the blood circulating. On a spiritual level, movement like yoga can take on a meditative quality, helping the practitioner to evolve spiritually through movement. The aspect of Sacred Movement that I am interested in is movement as a pleasurable experience. In this section Afua suggests, “dance together as a family at least once a week, or as often as possible” (p. 221). I imagine that she is asking for the members of a family to let their hair down, and have some fun, move around together. Stephanie Camp explores this idea of pleasure in dance in her book, *Closer to Freedom* (2004), “enslaved women and men ran to abandoned outbuildings, woods, or swamps where they enjoyed music, dancing in the company of others and a shared secret. Enslaved partygoers had a common commitment to delight in their bodies, to display their physical skill, to master their bodies through competition with others, and to express creativity” (p.61). That time was their own, where no one owns the movement of your body, it is a small piece of freedom that you can express: no matter if you shake a little something in a club or in your bedroom. Sacred movement is embodying joy at the moment, and you can do it without any preparation – which is also freeing.

### **2.1.4 Sacred Beauty**

They say America is a melting pot. I have heard this most of my life. I was always concerned about that concept because I kept wondering whose pot we’re all being melted down into. How willingly we jump into this pot headfirst and take on all the ingredients

of the mix, which is predominantly from European cultures. So what happens to us Afrakans? What happens to our particular gifts as a race (Afua, p. 226)?

Clothes and hairstyles have long been important for Black women to validate our beauty. Afua's argument is that we have abandoned or forgotten what would be our so-called indigenous standards of beauty, which is where she utilizes Khamitics or ancient Egyptology, and Afrocentric styles as a standard. However, this is also short hand for being "natural." Meaning wearing little to no make-up, hair in unrelaxed hairstyles, and clothing that is not too tight to the body. Her program, therefore, bolsters African aesthetics along with some idealized heteronormative styles of dress that include fabric wrapped into skirts or lappas, headdresses, and waist beads. Some of these practices are also kin to respectability politics that plays a role in the Black community that distinguishes the so-called good from the bad, and the righteous from the sinful. The cosmology of Khamitics plays an interesting role in the *Sacred Woman* - from the goddesses that are named and used to Afua and her physical display of her style which positions her as an authority on how to embody regality, which also is represented to the reader in the use of her name, *Queen Afua*. Naming oneself has long been a strategy of some African-Americans, specifically Black nationalists who decide to shed surnames given to Blacks during the transatlantic slave trade, thus being stripped of matrilineal or patrilineal ties that connect African-Americans to their homeland and heritage. All of these practices that Afua presents is tied to a nationalistic idea that Black people are descendants of kings and queens and in the least greater than what has been bestowed to upon in during and after enslavement.

Many sections of *Sacred Woman* are devoted to lifestyle changes that seek to change the physical, mental or spiritual state of women who engage with the program. Sacred Beauty is the

section that evokes some unlearning and a reclamation of a distant past that precedes our arrival on this continent. Thinking and advocating for beauty in the context of transformation can be revolutionary. bell hooks (1992) writes, “loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim Black life” (p. 20). It is curious to view beauty as transformative or liberatory, however, a mechanism of domination has been to invalidate the beauty of Black women; rendering the Black body inferior, deviant or invisible.

Changing the consciousness of what beauty is has physical implications that affect our health and mental impacts on our overall wellness as well as how and perhaps why we experience pleasure. Camp (2004) stated that aesthetic beauty has long been sought after for Black women. Camp discusses that “[w]omen’s style allowed them to take pleasure in their bodies, to deny that they were only (or mainly) worth the prices their owners placed on them” (p. 83). With that being said there are subtle shifts occurring in popular culture that are gaining popularity in the mainstream with blogs like LeCoil, musician and curator of cool Solange Knowles, artists Wangchi Mutu and actress Lupita Nyong’o and even the resurgence of Grace Jones have all in their own ways expanded beauty and conscious efforts to push the bounds of what traditional beauty looks like.

It could be said that a resurgence in a natural hair and a natural aesthetic trend reemerged with Erykah Badu and the created musical genre of neo-soul. Locs, headwraps and clothing made out of African fabrics became and continue to be popular. We are in a moment that the popularity of natural hairstyles is increasing among Black women, but these conversations have created conversations about everything from chemical burn damage that relaxers can cause, whether or not they are connected to fibroids, to how it is easier for women to exercise because

they are not worried about sweating out their perms<sup>11</sup> and ruining their hair – all things connected with inner and outer beauty - physical and mental wellbeing. Black women are affected by social invisibility and rhetoric that states that Black women are less than desirable. The ability to feel and be seen as beautiful, desirable and feminine has ramifications that can literally change the way Black women live their lives, spend their money and time.

The Sacred Beauty gateway is in some ways a paradigm shift in how Black women see and treat themselves and could be a specific stepping stone away from the strongblackwoman. Directives in the Sacred Beauty section ask women to tend to their bodies in ways that are both common and uncommonly considered as a standard beauty regime. For the strongblackwoman, the Sacred Beauty section functions as both prescription and permission to engage in activities that for many feel frivolous and egocentric.

### ***2.1.5 Sacred Space***

Most of the self-care work Queen Afua requests readers to take part in happens in the home, and she positions the section as a preparation of creating a home that is a sacred space. Queen Afua's treatment of the home as a sacred space acts as a refuge for those of us who enter and exit hostile work and school environments. For women who might not feel like they have space within their own home, Queen Afua speaks about making the kitchen into a "healing laboratory" or the bathroom into the "hydrotherapy room." She believes that the transformation of the home into a temple space will create opportunities for the home to do things like "balance

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<sup>11</sup>Among Black women a perm is actually a relaxer (a chemical straightener). Generally if a woman's hair gets wet by any means, even sweat, their hair could kink back up and lose the straightness and thus the hairstyle. Hence the term "sweat out a perm."

emotions,” ....” be a place of inspiration and motivation,”...”create peaceful, relaxed children,” and “provide spiritual uplift and peace” (p. 252). Again we see where Afua blends the physical, mental and spiritual attributes of this gateway.

Interestingly, the sacred space section of the book is only a couple of pages, as perhaps Afua sees the home as a vessel where healing takes place but this isn't the only reason why the creation of sacred space is important. Black women face constant hostility in work and school environments, the media is constantly pummeling Black women with images of negative and hostile Black women on television shows, the feeling of sanctity does not follow our daily walk in differing environments. As an aspect of womanism, the creation of sacred space for Black women acts as the separatist environment for health as in Alice Walker's assertion in her definition of womanism (Phillips, 2006, p.19). It is the location where women can create the environment to self-actualize and express themselves; the home space is where they can have artifacts that are important to them and their heritage.

Afua states that one of the items that one should have is a cinnamon broom. She connects the importance of the cinnamon broom to seeing women in Ghana sweeping away dirt from their floors. She then connects sweeping to a metaphysical act of sweeping out negative vibrations from the home (p. 254). Brooms carry cultural relevance for African Americans. Many continue to jump the broom even though our marriages are validated by the state. Sweeping out negative energy is an age-old anecdote that often gets repeated around New Year's Day, when someone purchases a new home, or when someone or something bad has happened in your home. It is a way that African Americans spiritually have sought to control the energy in their home. Afua, again, is reconnecting attributes that the reader may only consider as physical but transforms their relevance so they may associate them with a larger spiritual purpose. That



purpose leads to healing that can be an aid to our collective pleasure that we experience once we are removed from the confines of the larger society.

There are several other gateways, but all have the similar purpose of connecting (re-acquainting) the reader to cultural and spiritual attributes of various areas of their lives. The gateways are meant to allow the reader to take some space, through meditation and action to dismantle the ways our subconscious has been affected by our exposure to systems of oppression and domination. It is important to note that Afua is assuming that home environment is free from physical and mental abuse, however, because Afua idolizes heteronormative relationships, she does not address the pressure and stress that traditional gender roles can have on members of a household. Once taken into account, even the most surface reading of the gateways could begin to disrupt how Black women see themselves and eventually interact with society.

### 3 VALIDITY & AUDIENCE

#### 3.1 Attrition and Barriers to the Research

I would be remiss not to mention some unanticipated yet significant barriers to this research study. The inclusion of these barriers is not to undermine the importance of the healing work of Queen Afua or self-care practices in general but rather speak to the conditions that possibly lead to women taking her program. Several women that I was supposed to interview had been to my home for a cookout and I told them about my project and asked if they would be interested in being interviewed. All of them gave me an enthusiastic yes and told me to let them know when. It was my assumption that I would get passionate responses regarding how they've been helped by reading or taking part in the *Sacred Woman* program as well as the spiritual transformations that potentially had taken place in their lives. In my initial stages of contact, it seemed like I would have no problem with getting good interviews; however, once it was time to actually schedule the interviews, the women with whom I made contact became less and less responsive. After several attempts to solidify times, I changed the format of how participants could respond to interview questions and I created a questionnaire to make it easier for people to respond at their own pace; it became apparent that many of the affirmative participants had dropped out of the study, including Queen Afua.

Admittedly this was frustrating and I talked about it with a friend of mine, Keran, who simply stated "sick people ain't good decision makers." Keran had not gone through the *Sacred Woman* program but is very acquainted with Queen Afua's self-care programs and guidance. She was an active member of the Smaj Twai Temple in Bedford Stuyvesant with her husband

and children. After her divorce, she moved to Atlanta and ended up working as an assistant to an affiliate of Queen Afua.

When I asked Keran why the women who I initially contacted wouldn't just say no, or tell me they didn't have the time or didn't want to participate, her response was very illuminating. "What I discovered from the women in the program, which was true for me, is that we go that route to deal with disease or hurt so rarely are those sistas in a space to be much [help] for another woman." She went on further to say, "I committed to a lot, and disappointed people left and right. I wasn't lying I just overestimated my ability." Keran's response also put me back in a space of empathy and out of the space of disappointment and frustration for the women who I felt had left me hanging. It could speak to a larger issue of women taking on more than they can mentally or emotionally take on. Perhaps they felt an obligation to respond to questions because it was an extension to a process of their healing or allegiance to Queen Afua. Nevertheless, Keran's statement reminds me of the strongblackwoman construct that was discussed in the literature review, and how the pressure of living up to a new set of standards can equally be overwhelming for some, especially when one may feel unqualified to speak to a program that they are actively participating.

As I recalled some of the unfortunate events that ranged from hostile interactions to broken appointments, with women who were friends, gatekeepers or assistants as well as participants in the Sacred Woman training, Keran explained to me, "most if not all the women there [in supports groups at Smai Twai] were diseased or dealing with some raggedy dude, lost a child, spouse or both and they were seeking help." Reflecting on Keran's statement, it makes me think that perhaps the women who first committed to and subsequently backed out of the study

were currently or recently completed the program, were not in the position to say yes, or perhaps my position as a researcher in the academy was looked at with suspicion.

Because I'm engaged in this study, my role shifted. While I approached the topic from an insider perspective, as someone who is a Black woman seeking to heal and participating in some ways with self-care and Queen Afua's ideas and rituals, my role changed to reflect that of an outsider. As a researcher, I had the distance of someone who seeks to understand the role, effects and potentiality of self-care to be a form of activism. When speaking about my research, as I stated before, women were excited to participate. It was always my intent to produce scholarship that valued the epistemologies of Black women's wellness that help us face oppressions and I saw my role as a researcher as one who would use my outsider-within<sup>12</sup> status to bring in voices from the community to provide a unique vision to that end. However, once the formality of the IRB consent forms were introduced, and the actual process of the interview was introduced, I began to see the erosion of participants starting to occur.

Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) examine the role of traditional research on researchers who are within Indigenous communities, stating that "standard interviews, however, are not necessarily useful tools for insiders collecting data within their own communities" (p.167). They go on to explain that "to ask questions is to be nosy, which means the individual asking questions is either 'shut out' from all further conversations or given false or misleading information to keep them at bay" (p.167). As I reflect on potential participants and working within the guidelines of doing research in accordance with the academy's IRB guidelines, I question whether my membership in the academy and the formality of seeing and signing the informed

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Hill Collins (1986b) states, "the outsider-within position of Black women academics encourages us to draw on the traditions of both our discipline of training and our experiences as Black women but to participate fully in neither.

consent form was a factor, especially when taking into consideration that all communication with Queen Afua's assistant ceased once I sent her the informed consent form. Ultimately, there is no real way to know exactly why the women became despondent after they had enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed. As I continue on the path of an academic researcher, I will have to take this study into account both in terms of how I approach women in my own community when doing research, either as ethnographer or interviewer, as well as how I negotiate the rules of the academy.

### **3.2 For whom is Sacred Woman Written?**

Overlapping systems of oppression have informed the identity of the strongblackwoman. The strongblackwoman is a construct that often affirms the behaviors in Black women that are related to being hard working, needing little support or care and having an abundance of resilience in the face of injustice. Cultural mythology believes that the strongblackwoman can be a single mother, have a full-time job and work on a graduate degree, all at the same time, and all with little or no support. Unfortunately, these ideas are favorable within African American community, and Black women adopt the traits of the strongblackwoman construct to themselves. The implications of strongblackwomanhood, however, lend themselves to poor spiritual, mental and physical health of Black women. Self-care acts as a remedy to issues associated with performing the role of strongblackwoman, and self-care is embedded with the rituals that Queen Afua lays out in her book.

The overarching theme of *Sacred Women* is for Black women to access and achieve optimal health and wellness through the utilization of cultural and spiritual constructs that are established to facilitate a physical, mental and spiritual transformation. Afua establishes her

intention in the preface to utilize an ancient Afrakan-Nubian religiosity as a spiritual foundation of the healing work. Queen Afua has gained popularity because of her focus on health issues affecting African American women, and many women may engage with the *Sacred Woman* program for that purpose, however, she positions *Sacred Woman* as “a spiritual and cultural journey” (p. 5). The foundational aspects of the text and program *Sacred Woman* are intended for a woman from the African diaspora who at least counts herself as spiritual or open to Africanized spiritual ideologies.

In *Sacred Woman*, Afua’s cultural spirituality is rooted in Nubian/Khamitic tradition. She takes some time in the book to explain the Nubian-Khamitic history and cosmology and to explain how they will lay a foundational groundwork through the chapters or “Gateways” that will be expressed later in the book. It shouldn’t be understated that the Nubian/Khamitic religious construct is essential to all of Queen Afua’s self-care directives. Hilliard (1992) explains, “Ideas about world views (metaphysics), knowledge views (epistemology), and value views (axiology), have been fully developed by African ancestors. They still contact avenues to truths that are worthy guides to mental and spiritual life” (p. 20). The acknowledgment and utilization of Nubian/Khamitic practices serve as a construct that precedes the transatlantic slave trade. The formation of the strongblackwoman, which promotes tenets of resilience in the face of mental and physical abuse and strenuous labor, is linked to the institution of slavery. Because the persona of the strongblackwoman is also bound to Black women’s self-identification, Queen Afua’s usage of Nubian/Khamitics serves as the way we can unlearn behaviors that were formed as coping strategies during the experience of being enslaved.

Khamitics could be a new or unheard of religious and cultural perspective for women who encounter this work because it is outside of the mainstream religions, Christianity, and

Islam, as well as popular western African religions such as Yoruba or Akan. Afua gives context to readers so they may understand the usage of ancestors that she evokes in the book.

Most of these constructs are presented as spiritual, yet there is a bit of oscillation between the usages of cultural and spiritual. Tracy Hucks (2001) suggests, “African Americans historically have engaged in the negotiation of multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery” (p. 90). Even still, while she explains the significance of her utilization of Khamitic society and spiritual practices she uses the first person possessive to state “my ancestors” or “my Khamitic Ancestors.” This creates a potentially needed distanced between her spiritual practices and beliefs and those who are engaging with the practices in the book; thus presenting an opportunity for women who do not or will not ascribe to different spiritual or religious constructs to continue to connect to the self-care work. Nevertheless, the use of Nubian/Khamitic cultural and spiritual references also provide a unique opportunity to introduce female deities who are just as important to the cosmology as the male deities. Some of the most powerful deities, Ast (Great Mother or Afrakan Spirit) and Nut (Grandmother of all gateways), were known to be the givers or healers of life and death (Afua 19, Monges 1993). She uses these deities and other Egyptian gods and goddesses to pray to and to seek guidance and healing.

As she introduces the stages of the *Sacred Woman* training, she discusses the womb as being a spiritual center that needs to be healed; this discussion is meant to draw the reader into the healing work. Afua states that “The Sacred Womb is the Gateway to all Gateways” (28), thus privileging womb wellness above other healing. Many women connect to Queen Afua’s work because of her concentration on womb wellness, and her contextualization of it as a seat of power for women.

The tone in *Sacred Woman* is one that specifically ascribes to the collective *women* versus the woman that is reading the book. When Afua uses the word “you” it is usually in the context of a ritual or practice in which she is encouraging the reader to take part. Otherwise, she writes for the collective, “We must move out and harness all of our power, which has been dormant, locked away in our wombs...As women, we have the power to stop the destruction of the earth” (32). Her words are a rallying cry not only for women to take back their power, but also an assertion that a collective healing could heal the earth. The importance of the way collective healing reads in this text does not set the task of the individual woman who participates in this training to heal the earth but allows the individual woman to contextualize herself as a part of a culture of women who can change the world once they begin the task of healing themselves. It is in this communal context that specifically relates to womanism, which Arisika Razak describes as “Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual” (Razak, 2006).

### **3.3 Why do you Trust Queen Afua?**

One of Queen Afua’s goals is to heal people’s lives by raising vibrations through the use of diet and spiritually cultural rituals, but she also has a line of products that she sells so she often does talks and meetings around the country to sell products while she talks about health and wellness. At this meeting, she asked us to try to commit to a diet that was one step better than where we were. If a person ate meat, she asked them if they could be a pescatarian, if they were vegetarian then perhaps they would try to be vegan or eat only raw foods for 21 days. She also knows that having a support system or people who are like minded and going through a similar process will be of assistance to you when you are going through your cleansing process, therefore she wanted us to commit to each other as a group. We sat in a circle and talked about things that we would like to be healed of or released from our lives. I stated that I would like to



release “anxiety and stagnation,” the man next to me stated that he would like to be healed from toxic relationships, another woman said that she suffers from shingles and she would like to be healed from that. She acknowledges all of our intentions and affirms them with an “ase.”

The thing about that last woman, however, is that she’s already acquainted with Queen Afua, she comes into the meeting slightly after the rest of us, sits next to her and gives her a warm hug. This woman is vegan and raw foodist, and the owner of a vegan raw food restaurant in Atlanta – so her diet is one that some of us aspire to – eating only live foods. Queen Afua says, “ok, so we need to talk about stress because we know that is triggered by stress.” At the end of the meeting, the restaurant owner and Queen Afua step to the side to have a private conversation.

This was a powerful moment for me. As someone who seeks to ascend and vibrate higher in my diet and thus in my mind and spirit, I was reminded that there’s always work to do, and there is no perfection. Not only did the woman willingly testify about the health issue she was dealing with, which of course she did not have to share due to the seemingly intimate relationship that she has with Queen Afua, but she also testified to needing help with dealing with her shingles. This type of testimony affirms, in some ways, we are all in the same boat, we all at some point, regardless of how healthy we eat, who we work for, there is always a need for self-care, even if that self-assessment means asking for help for someone who greater means.

Seeing the raw foodist’s smooth skin and dark hip-length locs admitting that she suffered from shingles didn’t make me feel like being healthy or participating in self-care projects were for naught. Witnessing this actually made me feel more committed to the process of self-care and that it is, in fact, a cultural shift. It made me feel good to see that there is no end game of perfection. It’s easy to not engage in a practice when you feel like it’s for those perfect people

with the willpower of goddesses. At that moment, the distance that perfection created fell away and I saw self-care for what it is, an on-going process that can help you with the challenges that we all deal with, and that these challenges don't magically go away when you eat more veggies than donuts. This is especially true since we still live in a society where institutions of oppression continue to exist.

When I interviewed Akasha, she was very positive about the process. She did not come to Queen Afua's program for wellness advice as it related to a physical health problem. Akasha described herself as "already on the path," and she regards Afua as her "spiritual mother." She did not feel like the concepts that were presented to her were particularly new. She was looking "to reach a higher understanding" of the path she was already on. It wasn't until towards the end of Akasha's interview, however, when I began to wonder how any of us began to accept Queen Afua as an authority on the subject of wellness and self-care. I asked, "How did you come to trust Queen Afua? I mean she's basically a layperson." Akasha paused for a moment and she stated, "I guess it was something about her energy that was confident and honest, I don't know I just connected with her energy." I asked Akasha about this in her interview because she went into detail about how she went on to do additional intensive training in New York with Afua after doing the initial *Sacred Woman* program. I asked Keran why she believed the community accepted the work of Queen Afua; she stated that maybe it was "testimonials and communal acceptance." I began my own interrogation of how I began to trust Afua's knowledge.

By the time I heard of Queen Afua, I had spent years watching my mother suffer and literally almost bleed to death from fibroid tumors. I didn't know what caused fibroids; I just knew that it could really be a problem. I was not aware that fibroid tumors are very common among Black women. Once I became acquainted with and began reading about Queen Afua's

take on what causes fibroids and the remedies for them, her instructions seemed like they could be a viable option, especially when thinking about the testimonies that people within my community would give regarding her methods and outcomes. Admittedly her affiliation with the celebrity of Erykah Badu and Jessica Care Moore added to her validation in my eyes. Once I started reading more about fibroids, I would see stories of women getting their entire wombs (uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes) removed, sending them into early menopause. My mother was irregularly insured, and by the time she had insurance to cover getting help for her fibroids they had grown to the size of grapefruits and she was advised to have a hysterectomy.

In some ways, my mother was lucky, she already had two children and did not want any more. Her doctor only took out parts that were absolutely necessary, which made her transition into early menopause go smoother and she had less of a harsh reaction than other stories I've heard. I do wonder, however, if we heard about Queen Afua early on, would the use of herbs and tonics, and a different type of diet have saved my mother money on maxi pads, trips to the emergency room and a major surgery? More importantly, why weren't dietary changes a part of the conversation early on for not only my mother, but so many other women. Right now if you scan WebMD for options for shrinking or removing or even helping the symptoms of fibroids, you will find no mention of diet.

Queen Afua has connected a shared communal knowledge of the righteous diet, which helps her gain credibility in the community, to physical or emotional challenges that Black women face; which effectively brings her rituals and remedies to an audience that is deeply in need of answers. In *Sacred Woman* Afua lists a myriad of reasons why women may face certain types of health challenges as well as discussing different issues, healing modalities and options that women may participate in. One example is that Queen Afua encourages women to take in

what they can when they can; “let [the information] go through your energy path, and then say ‘Okay, this is what works with my time and my life’” (p. 101). This flexibility allows women in different times and areas of their lives to access the healing information without the judgment that some would see in a spiritual or self-help context.

Roberta had been a member of the Nation of Islam when she first encountered the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s book *How to Eat to Live*, therefore changing her diet was not a new concept to her. However, her experience in organized and patriarchal religion made her wary of joining certain groups that focused on women’s health. She stated in her interview that she had been experiencing some issues and “almost joined another group.” Roberta went on further to explain, “we’d [Black women] always been lumped into one group, so for someone to talk about Black women and their differences, I was ready to listen.” While none of the women that I interviewed described their decision to work within the Sacred Woman program as a matter of life and death, they do trust Afua’s knowledge and the methods that she uses to facilitate healing, even when they are engaged in other (patriarchal) faith traditions. The fact that Black women have accepted these practices speaks to the necessity of the type of knowledge Queen Afua has and shares.

Patricia Hill Collins states, “[w]hether as individuals or as members of organized groups, U.S. Black women’s activism has occurred in two primary dimensions. The first, struggles for group survival, consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures...The second dimension of Black women’s activism consists of struggles for institutional transformation—namely, those efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions” (Collins 2000 p. 204). While I agree that the actions of Queen Afua and

those who interact with her programs are very much for the survival of Black women, Afua's primary goal is to transcend the need for the existence of medical intervention in certain circumstances, thus creating and sustaining new opportunities for healthcare.

In *Sacred Woman* (2000), Afua recounts some of the stories of women who have come to her for help as a last resort: "A sad quiet voice said, 'the gynecologist I just saw tells me that I have to have a hysterectomy, I'm only thirty years old with one daughter'" (p. 1) This type of story is not uncommon among the women I interviewed. Keran stated that "they [doctors] talk down to you, they don't listen to you or answer any of your questions. It's bad, I mean, they tried to talk me into getting my tubes tied when I had [my son], because I was young, but I was still young." (sic) Ultimately, experiences like these that Black women face delegitimize the utility of the medical establishment and, in essence, validate health and wellness advocates like Queen Afua. Because topics of reproductive justice are so intertwined with why Black women have read and participated in the *Sacred Woman* program, I will discuss controversial medical interventions in the chapter that focuses on the womb as a site for activism.

Knowing stories like my mother's signaled to me that doctors have been negligent about the wellness of Black women. It adds another angle to why it is difficult for some in the Black community to trust the medical establishment. On the flip side, women's testimonies of being cured, feeling better and more connected to their bodies add to Afua's validity as a self-care advocate. If she can heal other women of something so common and widespread like fibroids then it makes it easier to listen to her when she speaks about other ailments, conditions or issues that Black women face.

Before researching this subject matter, I attended a meeting where Queen Afua stated that "I didn't want to talk about myself, but they told me you have to, you have to tell your own

story.” It is not just Queen Afua’s story that adds to how thousands of people have connected to her work over the years. Women have started to talk, do youtube channels video blogs and begun their own journeys of being advocates of health and wellness. These discussions are a signal of Black women’s epistemological understanding that there are other way to be cured outside of the medical establishment, and the knowledge of these remedies or cures reside within other women in the African-American community, particularly with older Black women. This is understood regardless of whether women actually to try that other route or not. While this study does not focus on understanding how Black women have been disproportionately affected by diseases from obesity to cancer (Davis, 1991), it is clear that lack of access to and mistrust of the medical establishment has some catastrophic effects among Black women. While Afua’s knowledge is not validated by an academy it does provide some sort of care intervention where none is available or counters a stigma regarding receiving certain types of care.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Queen Afua's self-care rituals and remedies have been positioned as a way to rely less on the medical industrial complex to heal what ails Black women, and the entirety of her methods seek to boost the esteem of the women engaged in them. *Sacred Woman* is a methodology that asks a woman to be her own advocate and encourages women to become more in tune with their bodies and their needs as it relates to their physical, mental and spiritual wellness, all of which runs counter and in fact challenges normative conceptions of Black womanhood. Transforming the internal identity of Black women does more than change how the woman deals with herself -- it also transforms how that woman will eventually act within society.

Michel Foucault suggests that in order to be a good citizen one must be engaged with the care of self. Once transformation takes place, the womanist notions of everyday activism become possible. When considering the barriers to healthcare that Black women face, self-care could foster the mindset that when a Black woman encounters a medical environment, she might be more capable to of advocating for herself and her needs. She will seek out a doctor who will actually care for her or she will be able to discern whether or not the medical provider has her self-interest at heart. These types of actions have the potential to change the medical industrial complex. So while self-care, especially in the way discussed in *Sacred Woman*, focuses on how you can circumvent the medical system, it also puts the woman in a position of practicing empowerment and efficacy over her own life and health, if that becomes something that is necessary.

#### 4.1 Self-care in the Age of Public Death: Future Considerations for Self-Care in Activism

*In the midst of anger and helping those in Ferguson and us who stand with them cast a fully articulable vision of Black freedom, I write this as an invitation to care for yourself and those you love.*

*As I write I am aware of –  
my house which looks askew,  
the to do list that won't quit,  
the home cooked meals that I don't even have time to prepare,  
the sex I need to have,  
the hugs which I would refuse but probably need,  
the book that's giving me fits,  
the bills I need to pay,  
the loneliness that sometimes tugs insistently around the edges of an outwardly appearing orderly overachiever's life*

-Crunk Feminist Collective (9/23/2014)

Violent videos used to be housed on YouTube, as in the case of the murder of Daniel Pearl. The thought of watching a beheading still makes me sick to my stomach, and to this day for my own piece of mind, I have not watched it. In July 2014, a study was published on the “experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks” (Fiske 2014, p. 8788). The significance of the study, which was conducted by Facebook with the help of Information Science team at Cornell University, was to show “that emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness” (p. 8788). Users of Facebook only have control over what they post, but not what shows up in their timeline, therefore it is possible to see discussions and videos even if you are trying to avoid them. Some items pop up to the top of your timeline even if they were posted days earlier, which is unlike Twitter or Tumblr, which scroll in a chronological order unless people repost a particular item. Postings can be as benign as people spoiling the



latest episode of *Scandal* that you haven't had a chance to watch, or it could be as jarring as watching twelve-year-old Tamir Rice getting shot in less than 15 seconds by a police officer.

My first experience with seeing public murders was on Facebook when there was constant circulation of the video of Eric Garner being choked to death by the police. I lived in New York at the time, and I tried to avoid the video, but by week two of seeing the raw cell phone footage popping up in my timeline over and over, I felt like I needed to see it so I could be informed. By the end, I just felt like I couldn't believe I had just watched a man beg for his life and die before my eyes, and before I could blink again we saw footage of Mike Brown's dead body in the street in Ferguson, Missouri.

The psychological study showed that emotions spread based on the dissemination of social media imagery; therefore, it could be sufficient to state that any range of emotions from rage, anger, anxiety and depression can be expressed by many after viewing these videos. Social media has also rendered these deaths public; regardless of whether what we see is the actual shooting as in the case of Walter Scott, in South Carolina, or the lead up to it as in the case of Freddie Gray, or the aftermath in the case of Mike Brown. These images have had a powerful impact on people and have changed how we've been able to react to these acts of violence, and undoubtedly led to the founding of the BlackLivesMatter movement, which has organized people using social media and is becoming a force in the world of activism. In my own social media feed, especially after the uprising in Ferguson, I began to see elders pray for protesters to take care of themselves, viewers asking for people to consider the families of the deceased when reposting death videos, and activists and scholars having serious discussions about self-care; these conversations have begun to infiltrate social media spaces in the form of memes, articles and yes even mixtapes.

In the summer of 2015, Erykah Badu posted a mixtape called *Feel Better World*.<sup>13</sup> The mixtape was released approximately two weeks after the suspicious death of Sandra Bland in a correctional facility in Waller County, Texas<sup>14</sup> and the videotaped murder of Sam Dubose near Cincinnati, Ohio. Badu's contribution was one of many reactions to the deaths, but one that was committed to the healing of the soul in the face of the multitude of public deaths we've witnessed mostly on social media platforms like Facebook and Tumblr since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Even though Queen Afua or her work does not directly come up in these discussions, the people she influenced, like Badu, have created artifacts that act as an invitation for people to consider self-care as a remedy for the anger that we feel when we are consuming injustice via social media.

In October 2015, it was reported by the *Washington Post* that Gloria Darden, mother of Freddie Gray, who died during a so-called rough ride in police custody, had attempted suicide. It had also been noted that the Gray family received a \$6.4 million dollar wrongful death settlement from the City of Baltimore. Even with the settlement, and thousands of people who stand in solidarity with the family, the trauma from the death of her son was still more than she felt like she could handle, and understandably so. I am not suggesting that self-care alone could have helped her; however, the cultural normative ideology of the strongblackwoman needs to be dismantled so women who need help are willing and able to ask for it and accept it. Social media can and has been used to spark anxieties through the dissemination of videos that show blatant violence and injustice at the hands of the state, as well as elicit change, through rapid pressure and action of citizens. As we seek to change our physical experience it is important not

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mixcloud.com/erykah-she-ill-badu/feel-better-world-love-msbadu/>

<sup>14</sup> In July 2015 The Root ([www.theroot.com](http://www.theroot.com)) reported about four other women (Kindra Chapman, Joyce Curnell, Ralkina Jones, and Raynette Turner) who also died in police custody during the same period.

to neglect mental and spiritual wellbeing, which could be a new frontier of activism. Reflecting on Foucault's argument of the necessity of self-care in order to be a productive citizen, self-care strategies should be integrated into models of activism for the health and wellness of activists to continue. As strategies of oppressive regimes continue, change, and evolve, so must the strategies of those who fight those systems, but it is imperative that we have a healthy population to endure and challenge oppressions.

Kevin Quashie states in his book *Sovereignty of Quiet* (2015) that Black people have taken loud resistance, for example, marches and sit-ins, as a part of who we (Black people) intrinsically are. Yet we ignore how the quiet ways we live our lives, the ways we participate in pleasurable activities also goes a long way to disrupting how societal oppression interacts with our lives. I submit that self-care is one of these quiet activities that can quietly dismantle how Black women interact within society, with more awareness about the work we do, how much we take on, what types of food we put into our mouths and what kind of words come out.

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