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The Pedagogy of Renewal: Black Women, Reclaiming Joy, and Self-Care as Praxis

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Keywords: self-care, renewal, embodied praxis, culturally relevant pedagogy, critical autoethnography, Black women, higher education

Abstract: The 2020 quote defining the pandemic era was "The New Normal," which, for Black women, implies a need for structural and personal transformation. In this essay, we incorporate the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy (Bell & Jackson, 2021) and critical autoethnography (Boylorn, 2020; Boylorn & Orbe, 2021) to amplify a Black feminist ethos of self-care as an embodied praxis. Reflecting on the embodied experiences of two Black women professors, we advance a crucial notion of self-care as a pedagogy of renewal to reclaim joy through generative and transformative modes, methods, and meanings.

Introduction

Racial battle exhaustion, ZOOM fatigue, and the COVID-19 pandemic created a new type of emotional trauma (Corbin et al., 2018; W. A. Smith, 2014). This is an emotional trauma layered with the material realities that continue to ravage Black communities, "disproportionately killing 97.9 out of every 100,000 African Americans" (Reyes, 2020, p. 300). Maritza Vasquez Reyes (2020) stresses this disproportionate impact on Black people as she reports that the "mortality rate is [a] third higher than that for Latinos (64.7 per 100,000), and more than double than that for whites (46.6 per 100,000) and Asians (40.4 per 100,000)" (p. 300). The 2020 quote defining the pandemic era was "The New Normal," which implies a need for transformation. Given the ontological crisis facing Black people prior to the pandemic, a new normal—in an antiblack world—means more of the same old same old. We must reclaim, renew, and transform our minds, bodies, and spirits to combat existing and compounded emotional, mental, and physical trauma, stress, and anxiety.

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Due to the structural nature and role of state-sponsored violence, trauma, and stress in our everyday lives amid a global pandemic, Black women and children remain vulnerable due, in part, to a lack of health insurance, quality health care access, and culturally competent health care professional care. "For Black women, in particular, a long-standing history of systemic racism and marginalization has increased vulnerability and susceptibility to certain adverse health outcomes" (Chandler et al., 2021, p. 80). The structural precarity Black women experience at the intersections of class, sexuality, ability, and nationality in the real-world streets is amplified and intensified by the devastating effects of COVID-19 on Black communities in the U.S. Pre-pandemic, Black women faculty experienced exhaustion, overextension, racial fatigue, and other issues negatively affecting our mental and physical health as well as our careers and productivity; the pandemic exacerbates existing issues of systemic inequity (Gray & Brooks, 2021; Mickey et al., 2020).

Black women academics have documented the unique struggles we face in our classrooms, during committee and department meetings, and just generally existing in academic institutional time and place (Baker-Bell, 2017; Davis, 2008; Houston & Davis, 2001; Perlow et al., 2018). The ongoing nature of antiblack violence speaks to the multidimensional forms of trauma Black women scholars are forced to navigate in relative silence with inconsistent institutional support. These conditions impact our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. "Black women say the pandemic has most negatively impacted their emotional well-being (64%) and mental health (63%), with 43% saying it has also negatively impacted their physical health" (Essence Magazine, 2020). The violent and toxic conditions shaping our daily lives require Black women faculty to unapologetically prioritize our wellness and healing so that we can embrace a more effective pedagogical practice. We argue that public discourse concerning higher education and pedagogy in the COVID-19 era often misses opportunities to apply intersectional lenses that account for the role of antiblack violence in Black women faculty's lives. Critical communication pedagogy holds space particularly for Black women scholars to reimagine what care, support, and healing can look like for us amid and beyond structural precarity.

This essay focuses on our experiences as Black women professors at different Midwestern institutions in the U.S. to reflect on how our personal journeys inform our pedagogical practices as a self-care praxis. Black women's communicative lives provide us opportunities to reimagine "The New Normal" in ways that account for the ongoing structural inequities impacting our embodied experiences and pedagogical philosophies, politics, and practices. Employing Black feminist theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical autoethnography, we reflect on the trauma faced by two self-identified Black women from two different institutions that inform our self-care praxis as integral to pedagogies of renewal. As communication scholars, we often discuss the importance of context, power, and positionality, which is necessary to understand self-care as a collective enterprise and personal politics. We situate an understanding of self-care within Black feminist traditions as a self-reflexive process and resistive practice that supports the "holistic needs of Black communities" (Houseworth, 2021; Reetz, 2021).

Black feminist activists, intellectuals, and artists like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Stephanie Evans, Denise Taliaferro Baszille, Karla Scott, Salamishah Tillet, Lani Jones, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, to name a few, inform our conceptualization of pedagogy as self-care praxis. For example, as a Black lesbian mother, warrior, and poet Audre Lorde (1988) proclaims, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p 125). In committing ourselves to take care of our minds, bodies, and spirits amid the persistence of antiblack violence, self-preservation remains intimately linked and "foundational to community building" (Burroughs as cited in Houseworth, 2021,

para. 10). The embodied and spiritual ethos of self-care involves a commitment to Black liberation through health and wellness, *healing as community-oriented*, and storytelling as a source of our agentive power. In other words, "there is no self-care without community care" (Eromosele, 2020). The rich cultural heritage cultivated by Black feminist women concerning self-care as embodied, collaborative practice radically informs our investment in Black women's liberatory pedagogies as self-care praxis.

During the initial 2 years of the pandemic, faculty scrambled to convert their face-to-face courses to online mediums and modalities while simultaneously strategizing how to best support students' wellness and engagement. According to a survey conducted by a task force of the American Psychological Association (2022), one third of teachers reported having experienced at least one incident of verbal harassment or threat of violence from students during the pandemic, while 50% wanted to quit their jobs. Despite this reality, many institutional and public conversations concerning COVID-19 (and its impact on higher education) focused exclusively on students, leaving many educators unemployed, exhausted, and silenced. A social media Facebook (now Meta) page, Pandemic Pedagogy, was created in March 2020 for educators to share challenges, inquire about resources, and ask for advice and support. The discourse surrounding pandemic pedagogy, advanced primarily by white scholars on this page, remained hyper-focused on students with little to no regard for underrepresented faculty, particularly for BIPOC faculty at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities.

Social media public discussions frequently devolved into debates wherein those venting frustrations, particularly about students, ran the risk of being accused (in one way or another) of not caring about students' well-being if they enforced boundaries considered contextually "taboo." Of course, not all the threads were draining; some were informative and uplifting. Some focused on raising awareness regarding issues of accessibility, mental health, and wellness. However, good-intended dialogues often became toxic with one single post. Many conversations we saw turned into criticizing faculty for expressing their frustrations concerning student conduct and communication. Given our "new normal," the chastisement of faculty experiences and feelings during the pandemic reproduces more of what "pandemic pedagogies" presumably "worked" to transform. The problem is that these public discussions consistently failed to account for the ways underrepresented communities were navigating prior to the pandemic. "Pandemic pedagogy," as we understand it, remains rooted in white disciplinary regimes and registers of civility that produce more of the same old same old under the guise of equity and care.

BIPOC faculty narratives concerning existing inequities and compounded traumas are generative as they advocate for healthy boundaries between themselves and the institutions we serve and the students we teach. Our pedagogies of renewal pivot away from these discourses to center and prioritize ourselves (our well-being, health, and embodied experiences), amplifying the power of what Boylorn and Orbe (2021) refer to as "personal narrative as method" (p. 2). Black women scholars have addressed the importance of self-love, self-care, and the power of storytelling related to liberatory pedagogies (Davis, 1999; Evans et al., 2019; Perlow et al., 2018). We unapologetically uplift and amplify our voices through narrative/storytelling grounded in and animated through our intersectional lived experiences as Black women in academia. In centering and prioritizing ourselves as a self-care practice that promotes renewal, we afford our students models for learning that hold space for them to draw on their personal lived experiences to help them make sense of course content through embodied narratives.

Now, we briefly discuss Black feminist radical self-care as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogy and critical autoethnography to reflect on "renewal" as the self-care practices shaping our lives, communication strategies, and pedagogies.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

"Culturally relevant pedagogy" (CRP), a concept coined in the early 1990s by Gloria Ladson-Billings, is based on the idea that students' academic success too often comes at the expense of jettisoning a curriculum that aligns with students' cultural worldviews, which in turn has the potential to impact students' sense of cultural and psychosocial well-being adversely. Ladson-Billings (2021) defines CRP as "a pedagogy that empowers students . . . by using cultural referents to impart knowledge skills, and attitudes" (p. 4). As a result, a pedagogy that acknowledges and values the intersectional experiences of historically underrepresented students is warranted (Bell & Jackson, 2021; Hall, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Therefore, we incorporate the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (Bell & Jackson, 2021; hooks, 1994, 1999; J. Smith, 2020), expanding it to account for Black women faculty's embodied experiences, experiences that influence how we negotiate our pedagogical practices in a pandemic era.

Barkley-Brown (1990) discusses the concept of polyrhythmic realities, in which both teachers and students shape the learning environment. Thus, the harmony between work—life balance and self-care become a critical component of nurturing an environment, and it is essential to acknowledge the interworking of this relationship. Radical self-care requires critical reflexivity to understand self-preservation as community-building practice. Reflexivity, as a process, looks at the self in relationships with others based on position, politics, and culture (Adams & Holman-Jones, 2011; Boylorn, 2020; Johnson, 2013). This process importantly requires us to deconstruct the self and requires us to ask ourselves to challenge questions about the amalgamation of language, movement, and materiality.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method that involves researchers interrogating their personal experiences to analyze and make meaning of cultural experiences and phenomena (Ellis, 2004; Holman-Jones, 2005). We draw from culturally relevant pedagogical scholarship to underscore the importance of embodied experiences as epistemological resources that help us make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Boylorn and Orbe (2021) describe critical autoethnography as a method that "bridges critical social theory and storytelling" to emphasize the "emancipatory potential" of our narrative lived experiences (p. 4).

A primary guiding principle of critical autoethnography that informs our approach focuses on how one's positionalities are situated and shaped by hegemonic power structures. These structures compel us to think critically about our experiences and how our lives inform our pedagogical practices in a pandemic era. Boylorn and Orbe state (2021),

> Our goal with this project was to produce a book that offered a range of personal/cultural experiences and perspectives, paying particular attention to the various intersections of identity that influence our daily lives, our understandings of self, and our relationships. (p. 3)

It is not a matter of simply telling one's story but instead narrating one's lived experience as embodied offerings containing critical meditations on how one might survive and thrive. How do Black women embody a pedagogy that prioritizes our lived experiences and amplifies students' voices? The "teacher, scholar, professor's" voice is surveilled and disciplined and thus discouraged from voicing our honest feelings about how institutional politics impact our health, wellness, and productivity. "Critical autoethnography is concerned with culture and power, and it is also concerned with constructions

and theorizations of cultural identities, intersectionality, and social inequalities" (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021 p. 6). CRP and critical autoethnography, when grounded in a Black feminist ethos of care, offer a unique approach to reflecting on our pedagogies as self-care praxis. While we do not identify explicitly as critical auto-ethnographers, this area of critical interpersonal and intercultural scholarship remains a valuable resource in situating ourselves and our voices in our pedagogical practices.

In the next section of this essay, we offer personal narratives that apply and embody tenets of culturally relevant pedagogies and critical autoethnography to generate space for Black women faculty to center self-care as a transformative pedagogical orientation.

Tiffany J. Bell

Before the pandemic and well before we moved online, I often heard: What are you? It was a question I often heard from students. The heart of the question makes me constantly think about the body politics associated with teaching as a Black (Bi-racial) woman who works as a professor at a small Liberal Arts Christian college in the Midwest. The paradox of this question is that we could or would never ask our students "that" question in such a public and insensitive way. However, the nature of these questions highlights the intersectional relationship between body politics and dynamics of power at work in the classroom. I am the object/subject of my student's gaze, yet I need to claim my positional command as a professor. To deflect this "gaze," I do what any good professor was taught, I ground myself in the literature. However, this obsession with grounding myself in the research and saying the "right" thing has led to unhealthy perfectionism. When I "mess up" in the classroom, I feel a bottomless pit in my stomach. I often mull over what I said or should have said in my lecture. I constantly battle fears of not being good enough and being judged for my thoughts.

This unhealthy relationship with perfectionism often results in "writer's block" and intensifies my fears. The pandemic exacerbated this fear and lack of self-care. On April 8, 2021, I received a message on Facebook messenger that would forever change my perspective on life, self-care, and COVID-19. My friend from my first teaching job in Los Angeles died in this hospital from COVID-19. His death heightened my fears because the reality of death hit close to home. I was incessantly thinking about how we could die at any time and would often find myself crying because I felt we were in an apocalypse. Suddenly, my identity, my purpose, and my life were challenged. While negotiating my personal pains, I frequently visited the Pandemic Pedagogy Facebook page in hopes of improving my teaching. However, I found this platform to trigger my unhealthy relationship with perfectionism and demoralization. Many conversations dissed professors' practices, citing educators needing to be *more* lenient with students and technology. Unfortunately, I was never afforded leniency as a teacher grappling with the death of a fellow friend and colleague in the academy.

The first thing I did to break the chains of unhealthy perfectionism was to reclaim the practice of self-care and self-love. Reclaiming your joy is first and foremost about centering your values. Your "values" are at the heart of good choices! So, whenever I start a task, I ask: What are my values? I value reciprocity, spirituality, and equity. Thus, I had to place my health at the center of my life. I wanted to reclaim the joy of embodied learning in ways that prioritize my health through spirituality. So, I had to reinvent myself and ground myself in spirituality. Spirituality is one of my primary values, but somehow it was missing from everyday life; thus, I needed to embrace renewal through "morning pages" and "meditation." This spiritual method as practice facilitated my social and personal transformation. To critically reflect on

my relationship with unhealthy perfectionism, I enrolled in a meditation course and started seeing a therapist. As a result, I have managed and put things into perspective. I no longer let "small issues" or "people comments" infiltrate me deeply. Furthermore, writing this piece is an act of self-care and self-love.

I have learned to embrace the concept of "perfectly imperfect" which has transformed my self-care. These self-care practices have shifted my p erspective and influenced how I s peak of self-care as liberating with my students. I embody self-care as a liberatory pedagogy that offers students alternative models to reflect on the relationship between self and society. One way I embody these values in the classroom is by creating coursework that challenges the academy's grand principles of inequity and meritocracy that leave little to no space for those whose marginalized identities do not fit into dominant narratives. The truth is that I do not need my body, my experience, and my values to fit neatly into these limited boxes. Instead, I bring my authentic self to work and incorporate my self-care values into pedagogy to provide students with space to embrace difference as generative. A question I ask myself is: How do I center myself in ways that organically collaborates with student voices and experiences? It is in bringing my values and an understanding of myself into the classroom that I am best positioned to assist students in identifying their own values. In helping them identify their values in connection to their positionalities, students can learn to think critically and develop new relationships with themselves and others through course material.

Ashley R. Hall

As a Black queer woman at a predominately white (PWI) public institution located in central Illinois, adapting, and adjusting to a professional career in academia has been rife with institutional, social, and personal challenges. During graduate school, I watched my white counterparts receive opportunities to work with white professors. In contrast, I received email communication containing website links to the university's counseling center to work on what was perceived as an "attitude." As a student, I witnessed firsthand how institutional violence ravages Black students, faculty, and staff with little to no consideration or recourse. Institutional and departmental politics often require us to sacrifice parts of ourselves to "play the game." The game is rigged because I am damned if I do, damned if I don't. Damned if I pop off and clap back, damned if I stay still and keep quiet. At some point in my program, I felt like the only way I was going to reach the finish line was if I left my own body, numbing myself to my pain. Post-PhD, I continued to struggle with the residual effects of graduate school as I navigated life as an assistant professor. Unsure about how to develop coping mechanisms to confront my anxiety, stress, and mental/emotional/spiritual trauma, feelings of inadequacy began to intensify which led to my fear that I could and would never "measure up." From there, the name of the game became avoidance. As my self-care strategy—a strategy designed to reserve the hurt rather than confront the harm—avoidance allowed me to remain in denial about the trauma graduate school amplified. For a time, the strategy seemed to work. However, this reality was shattered in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When classes moved online, campus communities (faculty, students, and staff) scrambled to determine how best to stay afloat amid panic, confusion, fear, and exhaustion from the pandemic. However, there was little to no discourse about the ongoing racial unrest impacting Black members of the campus community. The resounding institutional silence on antiblack racism, while Black Lives Matter uprisings took place all over the country, left me breathless, enraged, and overwhelmed. I thought to myself, "COVID-19 impacted everyone but antiblack violence does not?" As I processed my feelings and emotions (rage, grief, and sadness), student interactions left me constantly feeling like I was never doing

enough. Interactions and conversations with white colleagues made me resentful because there was little consideration of Black trauma, the focus instead seemed to focus on what we presumably all shared regarding the pandemic. As if antiblack violence only impacts Black people. So, when I heard the repeated phrase, "we are all going through a rough time," I did not feel like there was a substantive accounting of the exhaustion and compounded trauma BIPOC faculty were experiencing. It never felt as if there was genuine public space for underrepresented faculty to vent our frustrations in earnest, understanding we were negotiating these same feelings prior to the pandemic. In online forums, I witnessed many folks ridiculed and shamed for being honest about their feelings and accused of not being sympathetic to students' plight as if we were not already navigating our own.

Feeling frustrated and fed the fuck up, I began to push back against the idea that my pedagogy must center on students, choosing instead to prioritize and preserve myself first and foremost. My insistence on questioning, pushing back, and clapping back reminded me of the generative practice of feeling as an embodied pedagogical process. For me, a pedagogy of renewal entails honoring my feelings when student interactions and institutional politics deplete and trigger me. A pedagogy of renewal, a self-care praxis, encourages me to sit in and sort through the uncomfortable truths about how institutional violence impacts my life to reimagine possibilities beyond harm and trauma. A pedagogy of renewal, in antiblackness, requires me to be critically reflexive about how relations of power inform my pedagogical purview. The self-care praxis of feeling guides me, fills me, and empowers me as an advocate, a researcher, and a teacher. Self-care is not running from your feelings but rather confronting and harnessing them as conduits for healing and growth.

My feelings are a powerful resource integral to my survival and ability to thrive amid institutional violence and trauma. By incorporating therapy, art, and meditation into my daily life, I am learning what it feels like to establish mental and emotional boundaries that assist me in nurturing my feelings and preserving my spirit amidst the chaos. In committing myself to self-care (self-preservation over self-destruction) it has shifted how I approach the classroom as a site for personal transformation. As a pedagogical praxis, self-care frameworks provide students, particularly those belonging to underrepresented groups, space to prioritize their feelings as sites of embodied knowledge; feelings, as resources, can help them think critically about course content and themselves in relation to others in an antiblack world. I strive to foster brave spaces for students to sit in their discomfort to process their feelings and the material realities that inform them rather than allowing them to avoid (fear) challenging moments altogether. In working with students to unlearn feelings as counterproductive and avoidance as politically correct, students can begin to develop their own embodied liberatory practices grounded in an ethics of care.

Future Directions

In this essay, we have reflected on the power of Black women's embodied experiences and intersectional lenses as foundational in reimagining pedagogies of renewal as a self-care praxis. In closing, we propose one possible activity, the "Contract" assignment, that incorporates our pedagogies of renewal in our courses. This activity invokes the power of student stories focused on themes of meditation, self-care practices, and narrative healing. This assignment requires students to think critically as they reflect on the relationship between self and culture, power, and critical thinking in an antiblack world. In sharing their experiences through narrative, students are exposed to different realities and perspectives designed to help them deconstruct and reconstruct an understanding of the self as a self-care praxis. Ultimately, pedagogies of renewal, informed by Black women faculty's intersectional experiences, hold space for

students to explore the relationship between course content and its application to their lives, in and outside of the classroom.

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"The Contract" Assignment

Rationale: Racial battle fatigue and COVID-19 have significantly impacted campus communities, particularly in the classroom for teachers and students. The relational dynamic between students and faculty has become even more transactional and less personal amid the pandemic and civil unrest. As written and/or spoken agreements, contracts are fundamentally about relationships communicating a particular set of values or beliefs. The central objective of this assignment is for students to identify and reflect on the relationship between self, society, power, and learning. To complete this assignment, students draft a contract that expresses and embodies their values in relation to the content of the course.

The assignment involves both an oral and written component for students to critically reflect and deconstruct their positionality within the context of the classroom in an antiblack capitalist world. This assignment allows students to place their narrative at the center of learning while cultivating what Barkley-Brown (1990) calls polyrhythmic realities that both teacher and student shape the learning environment.

Preparation

To prepare for the class assignment, the instructor should become acquainted with Gloria Ladson-Billings's (2021) culturally relevant pedagogy, which describes the importance of placing the student at the center of learning. In addition, we suggest reading The *Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977) and *Make it Stick*: *The Science of Successful Learning* (2014) to introduce students to cultural misconceptions about learning as an embodied praxis as it relates to questions of communication, power, and self-reflexivity. This is important because students need to be exposed to diverse perspectives, realities, and experiences to develop their ability to communicate and collaborate across differences.

Day One

Step 1

The instructor reviews the syllabus and the course's learning objectives with students to establish expectations and provide parameters for class discussion. Day One has four objectives.

1. Review the class learning objectives. Discuss how these objectives could align with students' professional and personal goals and values
2. Facilitate an in-class discussion that allows students to think about how these learning objectives align with their personal or professional goals. Students need to offer concrete examples to support their observations.
3. Allow students at least 5–10 minutes to think about these questions and their relationship to this course using prompted questions. Then, ask students to review the syllabus and write a short paragraph answering the sample questions.
   a) Sample Prompts:
      (i) Why are these learning objectives critical to my success?
      (ii) What are my values? Why and how are they important in this contract?
      (iii) What goals do I have for this course?
      (iv) When I feel stressed, what can I do to manage my responsibilities?
      (v) How will I accomplish these learning objectives? (example: through readings or different assignments)
      (vi) How do you apply what you learn in this course to your everyday life?
4. After allowing students to think critically about their contracts/learning objectives, facilitate a conversation that will enable students to apply assigned readings to help students think critically answering the questions using personal narratives. Conclude the class discussion by considering how listening to their classmates' stories improves their ability to develop empathy for themselves, their peers, and their instructor.

Homework (In Preparation for Day Two)

In-Class Written Assignment (1–2 pages). Contracts must address the following:

- Learning Objectives (remember, should align with course objective)
- How will your values impact your objectives?
- How will you accomplish these learning objectives through readings, different assignments, and so forth?
- What is your overall personal/professional goal for the semester?
- How do you work when you are at your best? How can this schedule help accomplish your "best self"?
- Detailed schedule (Outlining study schedule to complete coursework)
- How many hours will you spend on each assignment? Example (reading, watching videos, or writing)

Day Two

Step 2

This class period is designated for students to meet with their instructor to review their contracts.

Day Three

Step 3

The third day extends the discussion by allowing students to reflect on and share their written responses, first in small groups and then in a larger class discussion. During the class discussion, students reflect on the process of creating a contract as a self-care practice (that is, as a way for students to center their lived experiences as a frame to grapple with course content). To conclude Day Three, students should write a final brief reflection that discusses what they have learned from completing this assignment.