

Selfcare as Warfare

Posted on [August 25, 2014](#) by [feministkilljoys](#)

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is warfare.”

This is a revolutionary, extraordinary sentence. It is a much loved, much cited sentence which acquires its sharpness from its own direction. It is from the epilogue of *Light*, a piece of writing so profound, so moving, that it never fails to tear me undone, beside myself. This writing is made up of fragments or notes put together as she learns that she has liver cancer, that her death could only be arrested; as she receives a diagnosis in her bones. The expression “a burst of light” is used for when she acknowledges the fragility of her body’s situation: “that inescapable knowledge, in the bone, the limitation.”

A Burst of Light is an account of how the struggle for survival is a life struggle. Some of us, Audre Lorde notes were never meant to survive. To have some group, to be some, can be a death sentence. When you are not supported where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action; at the very end; a refusal not to exist until you do not exist. We have to work against a system that decides life for some requires the death or removal of others. Our system is to survive a system. We can be inventive, we have to be inventive to survive.

Some of us.

Others: not so much.

When a whole world is organised to promote your survival, from health to security walls designed to keep your residence safe, from the paths that ease your journey, you become so inventive to survive. You do not have to be seen as the recipient

world has promoted your welfare. The benefits you receive are given as er birth rights. Racial capitalism is a health system: a drastically unequal dis vulnerabilities. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes racism thus: “the state-san production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to prema poor, being black, puts your life at risk. Your heath is compromised when external resources to support a life in all of its contingencies. And then of responsible for your own ill-heath, for your own failure to look after yours to structures, to systems, to power relations, to walls, you are assumed to responsible for the situation you have failed to get yourself out of. “You sh the violence and the smugness of this sentence, this sentencing.

We are used to these logics; we are so used to them that we have names post-racialism among others) and we have to keep hearing them.

Throughout *A Burst of Light* Audre Lorde compares her experience of battl willing to use this militaristic language, she is willing to describe this situa experience of battling against anti-black racism. The comparison is effecti can be an attack on the cells of the body, an attack on the body’s immune your own body experiences itself as killing itself, death from the outside il be experienced as your body turning against you. You might be worn down required to take in.

To care for oneself: how to live for, to be for, one’s body when you are unc

Let’s return to our quote. Lorde says self-care is *not* self-indulgence but have to look after themselves because their are not looked after: their bei supported, protected. I have in my own work been thinking of social privi compulsory heterosexuality, for instance, is an elaborate support system. are nurtured and valued, becoming a means of organising not just one’s ov sharing time and significance: how a we has something; how a we loses s well as what you lose can even become a confirmation of the worth of wh

I think of one of the saddest scenes I have seen is from the first of the th *these Walls Could Talk 2*. We start with the quiet intimacy of two women, lesbians, life-long partners. Abbie falls. Things happen; shit happens. And

waiting room. Edith is waiting. Another woman arrives, upset, and says: “tll in, he had a heart attack.” Edith comforts her. The comfort is not returned she is there – “my friend fell off a tree, we think she had a stroke” – the husband still alive?” When Edith replies, “I never had a husband”, the woman because you won’t have the heart break of losing one.” This is how heterosexuality as a support system, how some broken hearts matter; how some do not. When you are recognised you are left alone with your grief. No wonder so many of our histories.

Privilege is a buffer zone, how much you have to fall back on when you lose it does not mean we are invulnerable: things happen, shit happens. Privilege can limit vulnerability, so if things break down, if you break down, you are more likely to have support is a question of access you have a support system.

I think in this statement that self-care is not self-indulgence we can hear ourselves defending self-care. What from? From who? From, one might suspect, the self-indulgence. Self-indulgence tends to mean: being soft on one’s self, but also on one’s inclinations.”

Now recently I have heard much feminist work be dismissed (this is my fault, I have no intention or wish to cite these dismissals, you will just have to take your sort of terms. Feminism: being too soft, too safe, too focused on individualism, feminism be dismissed as a form of self-indulgence.

I want to suggest something before I am ready to firm up a strong argument like: some critiques of neoliberalism have allowed a dismissal of feminism

Of course, feminists have offered some of the sharpest and strongest critical rationalities. And we have also had some very important feminist critiques. For example, Catherine Rottenburg persuasively shows how some feminist self-care (as seen in a book like Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean in*) is “simultaneously neoliberal and feminist” in that it disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality and instead accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is in effect crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. Not all feminists do identify as feminists (Sandberg’s first chapter is entitled “intro-

but in such a way that feminism is repackaged as being about upward mobility for those who accept responsibilities for their “own well-being and self-care,” distance themselves from others. I have no doubt that we need to engage with neoliberalism and accept that feminism can become co-opted as a white fantasy.

Feminism in neoliberal hands becomes just another form of career progression, not by not recognising ceilings (and walls) but by assuming these ceilings can be broken through individual persistence. And race equality also has neoliberal mode film *Bend it like Beckham*, when Jess moves “up” by putting the experience of racism behind you: you will not be affected by racism when you are good enough (for further success).

And note: this rhetoric is similar to that used by anti-feminists and racists: about sexism and racism as a way of not being responsible for the places you live. It says our investment in these very terms is how we excluded ourselves by it. Those who say we should just “get on with it” rather than “going on about it” are those who say we should just “get on with it” rather than “going on about it”.

When race and gender equality become neoliberal techniques they can be used to conceal inequalities.

Audre Lorde, who is with us today through the words she left for us, gave us a critique of liberalism, even if she did not use that term. Her work is full of insight into how inequalities are deflected by being made the responsibility of individuals (the capacity to overcome structures are assumed to fail when they do not). She explores how self-care can become a technique of governance: the duty to care for oneself often written as a duty to care for one’s own happiness, flourishing, well-being.

Indeed, in *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde offers a powerful critique of the liberal narrative of self-care. Faced with medical discourse that attributes cancer survival or coping to being happy or optimistic she suggests: “looking on the bright side is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of death threatening to the status quo” (1997: 76). To obscure or to take cover by looking on the bright side to avoid what might threaten the world as it is. Lorde moves from this observation to a critique of the liberal narrative of self-care.

of happiness as an obscurant: “Let us seek ‘joy’ rather than real food and on a liveable earth! As if happiness alone can protect us from the results of” Audre Lorde suggests that the very idea that our first responsibility is for our own happiness is resisted by political struggle, which means resisting the idea that our own happiness is responsible for happiness: “Was I really fighting the spread of radiation, racial chemical invasion and our food, pollution of our environment, and the abuse of your young, merely to avoid dealing with my first and greatest responsibility?” I think Audre Lorde has given us the answer to her question. And she offers a question: to assume your primary responsibility is to your own happiness means fighting against injustice.

We have something to work out here.

Audre Lorde writes persuasively about how self-care can become an obsession. If self-care can lead you away from engaging in certain kinds of political struggle. In *Light*, she defends self-care as not about self-indulgence, but self-preservation in a world of warfare. This kind of self-care is not about one’s own happiness. It is about a world that is diminishing.

Already: we have been given some tools to sharpen our understanding of power. Power is used as a tool. There are differences that matter, differences that matter in the struggle for power.

Neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of a larger system. When feminist, queer and anti-racist work that involves sharing our feelings and recognising that power gets right to the bone, is called neo-liberalism, we are not being heard. When feminism involves recognising the suffering of say, an indigenous person of colour at the hands of a sexist, heterosexist, and racist system that is indifferent to their causes and that is called neoliberalism, you would be repeating rather than challenging structural indifference. And you also negate other “other histories” that are important for her suffering to matter. Those who do not have to struggle for their own survival and rather quickly dismiss those who have to struggle for survival as “individual” when feminism teaches us: talking about personal feelings is not necessarily abstract from structures. If anything, I would argue the opposite: not addressing collective suffering, hurt, histories that get to the bone, how we are affected by what we come

deflecting attention from structures (as if our concern with our own pain is about certain things from just “going away”). Not the only way, but one way.

If you have got a model that says an individual woman who is trying to survive by focusing on her own wellbeing and safety, by trying to work out ways and means by which she can participate in something without having to experience more trigger warnings in a classroom, for instance) is participating in the same model as someone concerned with getting up “the ladder” in a company then I think there is no alternative model.

Sometimes, “coping with” or “getting by” or “making do” might appear as a response to structural inequalities, as benefiting from a system by adapting to it, even if it is a flawed system, even if you are damaged by that system. Perhaps we need to find ways to have resources not to have to become resourceful? When you have less resources you have to become more resourceful. Of course: the requirement to become more resourceful is a result of the injustice of a system that distributes resources unequally. Of course: becoming more resourceful is a way of surviving a system changing even if it can be life changing (although maybe, just maybe, a system that does not exist can be system changing). But to assume people’s ordinary way of coping implies some sort of failure on their part – or even an identification with the system of injustice they have to cope with. The more resources you have the easier it is to cope with those whose response to injustice is to become more resourceful. You have to look up, to project yourself forward; you might simply be trying not to be brought down by your own histories. Wearing, worn down.

Even if it’s system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present have to be coped with. Your choices are compromised when a world is compromised.

It is not surprising: some recent anti-feminist, anti-queer and anti-intersectional (as code for people of colour) statements from the “white male left” rest on a foundation of individualistic, as indulging ourselves, as being concerned with ourselves as “identities.” I wonder if Audre Lorde might have had to insist that self-care is a political act because she had heard this charge. I wonder.

I have read recently some critiques of feminists for calling out individuals because those critiques neglect (we neglect) structures. Really? Or is that and racism you hear us as talking about individuals? Are you suddenly cor because you do not want to hear how you as an individual might be implic we critique? I noted in my book, *On Being Included* (2012) how there can b like “institutional racism” in a context where individuals have disidentified see themselves as not “in it” at all.

And how interesting: the individual disappears at the very moment he is c probably reappear as the saviour of the left. You can hear, no doubt, my ti not apologise for it. I am tired of it.

Some of the glib dismissals of “call out culture” make my blood boil. I say is easy to call people out, or even that it has become a new social norm. I hard it is to get sexual harassment taken seriously. Individuals get away w away with it because of the system. It is normalised and understood as th women have to speak out, and testify over and over again; and still there system that is working, that stops women from being heard. In a case wh an individual man, she has to work hard to call him out. She often has to keeps doing it. Calling out an individual matters, even when the system is violence directed against you by somebody is a violence that leaves a trac trace is visible or not. And: there is a system which creates him, supports that he has a right to do what he does. To challenge him is to challenge a

I read one anti-feminist article that implied feminists are being individual individual men, because that calling out is what stops us working more cc transformation. Collectivity: can work for some individuals as a means for interest as collective interest. When collectivity requires you to bracket yo it is not a collectivity worth fighting for. And I have watched this happen v women speak out about sexual harassment and sexual violence they are l whole thing: a project, a centre, a revolution. And the individuals they spe the ones who have to suffer the consequences of feminist complaint, the generalised (if “he” is damaged “we” are damaged). When her testimony is possibility of revolting against a system, a system is reproduced.

I will say it again: the individual seems to disappear at the moment he is (the ones who then appear as individuals, who are assumed to be acting as being individualistic, while he disappears into a collective.

From my study of will and willfulness, I learnt how those who challenge power promoting themselves, as putting themselves first, as self-promotional. And does find us somewhere. We might have to promote ourselves when we are our membership of a group. We might have to become assertive just to appear and you are attended to right away. A world is waiting for you to appear quickly disappear when called to account can then quickly re-appear when action that is welcomed or desired.

I think of these differences as how we become assembled over and by talking together at a table, let's say. Sometimes you might have to wave your arm to be noticed. Without a man at the table you tend not to appear. For others, to be seen, *but to be seen to*. You can take up a place at the table when you have a place.

You do not have to become self-willed if your will is accomplished by the general dismissal of feminism as identity politics (and there is a history to become a dismissal) needs to be treated as a form of conservatism: it is power by assuming those who challenge power are just concerned with order.

An individual is one who is not dividable into parts. In *Willful Subjects* (2007) an individual as the one who does not have to divide himself to a patriarchal history. He can be an individual, not divided into parts, because others become his arms, his feet, his hands, limbs that are intended to give support. A secretary becomes his right hand, his right hand is freed. Your labour as support is how the question of support returns us to bodies, to how bodies are supported by those who are unwilling to provide this support. So how quickly those who are judged as being individualistic as well as willful. In refusing to support we have become self-willed; in refusing to care for him, we are judged as this "for" is assumed as only and lonely.

Self-care: that can be an act of political warfare. In directing our care toward redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, [fragile](#) out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. We have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. Work lives matter; queer lives matter; disabled lives matter; trans lives matter; incarcerated, matter.

For those who have to insist they matter to matter:

selfcare is warfare.

Thank you Audre Lorde for your survival.

Always.

References

Lorde, Audre (1988). *A Burst of Light, Essays*. London; Sheba Feminist Publications.

——— (1997). *The Cancer Journals*. Aunt Lute Books: San Francisco.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson (2007). *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opportunity in California*. University of California Press.

Rottenburg, Catherine (2013). "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies* [~rottenbe/The%20rise%20of%20neoliberal%20feminism.pdf](#)