



Commodifying vs. commoning self-care? The work of a *Fat Body Liberation Coach*

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Abstract

Self-care has become a buzzword within recent years – not least since the COVID-19 pandemic has started and we are more than ever forced to look out for our own wellbeing and mental health. Reading Instagram posts on self-care daily, I am observing an appropriation of the term within neoliberal consumer-oriented discourse: Bubble baths and expensive meditation courses seem to be the main focus. Nevertheless, the concept has been around before, brought forward especially by Black feminists, famously by Audre Lorde. Keeping these conflicting notions of self-care in mind, this paper asks: How does the work of a *Fat Body Liberation Coach* activate self-care as a feminist intervention? In confronting Silvia Federici's understanding of the commons with feminist notions of (self)care this essay explores commodification, resistance, intersections of oppression and community. To approach the discourses around self-care this paper is drawing from an interview with *Fat Body Liberation Coach* Tabitha, who emphasises self-care practises in her work.

Keywords

self-care;
commons;
community;
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Introduction

Self-care has become a buzzword on social media within recent years – critiques of neoliberalism have pointed out how a (once) radical concept has been appropriated by the promises of lifestyle companies, floating our Instagram for-you pages with targeted ads that tell us to buy a new bubble bath or sign up for an expensive meditation course. But who has the means to access these recommendations? And is this what self-care is about? Black feminists and feminists of Colour have conceptualized self-care as a political resistance against different forms of oppression. Looking after oneself and listening to what one's body needs can teach a lot about setting boundaries and resisting capitalist ideals of always needing to be productive, reachable, and functioning. Brought forward most famously by Audre Lorde in 'A burst of light': "*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare*" (Lorde 2017, p. 130, italics in original). Keeping these conflicting notions of self-care in mind, this paper asks: How does the work of a *Fat Body Liberation Coach* activate self-care as a feminist intervention?

To approach the discourses around self-care I conducted an interview with Tabitha who emphasises self-care practices in her work as a coach. Tabitha relates to herself as a “fat body liberation coach”. As well as offering online coaching courses, she also hosts a podcast featuring monthly guests and conversations on harmful diet culture, racialisation of fatness and motherhood. I found it specifically relevant for my research to interview Tabitha, as she is addressing the tension of different understandings of self-care between a capitalist consumer-oriented notion and a feminist intervention. Tabitha’s understanding of self-care relates to what I have been describing, she also sees an adaptation of self-care narratives in lifestyle discourses, however: “self-care is also taking your medication, self-care is also like drinking a glass of water, self-care is also like actually paying the bill in spite of the fact that you can't get out of bed” (Tabitha 2021). This paper argues that self-care can disrupt neoliberal individualized notions of caring and put emphasis on community, networks of support and resistance. Laying out the different notions of self-care and following Sara Ahmed’s take on “Selfcare as Warfare” (2014) this paper shows that self-care is a means of survival for systemically oppressed groups.

To make this case, this paper is structured into five main sections: First, I will give an overview of the relevant literature and clarify the concepts I am using. Second, I will explain my methodology, the cornerstone of this essay. Following the description of the interview, I will analyse the most important themes that came up during the conversation: commodification, resistance, intersections of oppression, and community. In the last section, I will come to a conclusion in relation to my research question and offer an outlook on potential further research.

Self-care as feminist common or capitalist reproduction?

The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other’s vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care. (Hedva 2016, p. 13)

In their manifesto ‘Sick woman theory’ Johanna Hedva depicts care as a resistant practice, as something located outside or even against capitalist logics of production. Where can we position self-care within this understanding of care? Following Hedva (2016) and Lorde (2017), I argue that self-care as a communal endeavour is not only nourishing but also necessary to make feminist resistance against oppressive systems such as racialised capitalism possible. Hedva (2016) as well as Karla Scott (2016) are looking at self-care embedded in their specific positionality, speaking from a disability rights and Black feminist perspective: “I realized that choosing self-care is also an embodiment of black feminism that humanizes black women” (Scott 2016, p. 129). Scott draws on a tradition of Black feminists arguing that especially caring for others historically came to mean different things in different feminist approaches: White feminists have pointed to the oppressive character of naturalising care work as inherently feminine and rallied against being locked up in the household further claiming recognition of care work as work (Oksala 2016; Weeks 2007). In Black feminist tradition, care is understood as resistance against the

racist, capitalist system that has historically denied care for Black people (hooks 1999; Lorde 2017; Scott 2016). Coming from a Marxist perspective, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) similarly argues that “spaces of social reproduction offer the possibility of resisting the forces of global capitalism” (2018, p. 53) even though they are embedded in it. Reproduction is not only happening as means of reproducing the workforce for a capitalist system but “the labour of remaking human beings against the battering of racial capitalism takes place for the far more usual reasons of love, care, community, survival” (2018, p. 44).

Following this argument, I want to point out that caring and self-caring are not always clearly distinguishable; especially for oppressed groups, self-care “is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered” (Ahmed 2014). Ahmed further argues: “Some have to look after themselves because they are not looked after: their being is not cared for, supported, protected.” This means that we must look at the specific situatedness of self-care before accusing caring practices of neoliberalism all too quickly. Neoliberal self-care tells you that you as an individual are responsible for your mental health, for your wellbeing; lifestyle ads promise: You can buy your way to happiness (if you have the necessary material resources). If you fail to fix yourself, this is a *you* problem. Neoliberal discourses therefore individualise self-care, promoting it as a tool for “upward mobility for some women, those who accept [these] responsibilities” (Ahmed 2014) and those who are able to adhere to the dominant norms of society. In neoliberal appropriation of self-care, systemic factors of oppression are obscured and ignored. Radical queer, anti-racist, anti-capitalist self-caring on the other hand emphasises community work and survival in oppressive systems.

Does this make self-care a feminist intervention? Or is self-care closer to the notion of commoning? According to Federici (2016), commons can be “land, water, air commons, digital commons; our acquired entitlements (e.g., social security pensions) [...] languages, libraries, and the collective products of past cultures” (2016, p. 380). However, she asks, are they all equally fuelled with emancipatory potential? She proposes to look at the commons from a feminist perspective. *Commons* must spell *community* on behalf of (transnational) feminist solidarity: As long as our production and reproduction rely on the exploitation of others, as long as we detach ourselves from feminist and working class struggles in the Global South “[n]o common is possible” (Federici 2016, p. 386). Therefore, Federici’s approach to the concept of commons is a call for “quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and a responsibility to each other and to the earth” (2016, p. 386). Federici points to feminist interventions that correspond to this idea; she mentions the “*ollas communes*” (2016, p. 385), communal cooking pots women in Chile organised in times of economic crisis and limited food access for the poor, a feminist practice that was revived recently due to impoverishment of many during the pandemic.¹ Federici’s (2016) focus on community as necessary for the commons is crucial for my analysis including reciprocal relationships, interdependency and a positive understanding of being accountable for our actions vs. an individualized understanding of self-care. Yet, I wonder are feminist commons necessarily the opposite of capitalist production? The idea of the commons has increasingly gained traction since the 1990s – not only within (radical) leftist discourses but as well in the appropriation and privatization by global capitalist institutions such as

¹ <https://chiletoday.cl/chiles-olla-comun-through-history/>, accessed on 20.02.2021

the World Bank (Federici 2016, p. 383). Arguing from a feminist Marxist background, Federici contends that in the face of globalised neoliberalism it is specifically important for leftists to activate the concept of the commons to build an “alternative to both state and private property, the state and the market, enabling us to reject the fiction that they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of our political possibilities” (2016, p. 380).

I started the research for this paper with a similar assumption about self-care being a concept that has been increasingly used by neoliberal lifestyle consumer promises, asking myself: How does self-care in a neoliberal economy work? Can we build self-caring communities and who has access to them? As pointed out above, self-care is not the same for everyone. Rather than giving a rigid definition for what self-care entails, I want to point to what self-care does in a political context. This means that I start from the assumption that self-care becomes a feminist intervention when it is a communal practice, understood as a moment of resistance within a capitalist framework. However, acknowledging the different meanings of self-care according to different experiences of oppression and marginalisation, individual self-care also becomes part of this communal practice. As Ahmed puts it: “To care for oneself: how to live for, to be for, one’s body when you are under attack.” (Ahmed 2014). I will come back to these themes for my analysis of the material collected in the interview with Tabitha.

Methodology

Haraway (1988) advocates for a “[f]eminist objectivity” (1988, p. 581) as an epistemology that does not strive to universalize but rather looks for a partial objectivity, deeply dependent on the positionality of the researchers. Feminist research in this sense means to be held accountable for and to be aware of how the research becomes part of the culture and the space it interacts with. I consider this important in the context of my own research, which steps into an ongoing political debate. Following Sultana (2007), reflecting on one’s own positionality is not “to self-indulge but to reflect on how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production” (2007, p. 376). This essay is revolving around my interview with Tabitha², therefore I decided to describe my positionality in this research in relation to hers: Tabitha and I share certain characteristics that were helpful in “building trust” (Thwaites 2017, p. 2): We are both feminists, we are both queer, we are both hosting a podcast and we are both critical of the current capitalist economy. However, there were also significant differences between the two of us that influence our experience and perception of what self-care means. Tabitha is a Black, fat woman in a racist and fatphobic world, whereas I am White, and my body fulfils normative standards of being thin. Tabitha tells me about her experiences as a parent involving aspects of care work that are not part of my daily life. I want to point to this context of our conversation including these different positionalities to make clear that this essay does not want to paint a generalized picture of what self-care must look like but rather use a situated understanding as a gateway to think about feminist interventions.

²For anonymity’s sake I changed Tabitha’s first name. However, she told me, it was not necessary to further anonymise her, thus I kept the original name of her website, podcast, etc. without including the hyperlinks.

I will briefly explain how I gathered data for this essay. “Is self-care political? candles & meditation or communal support? Looking for a queer (feminist) activist who is willing to talk to me about self-care as a political act. Hit me up!” This is the content of the ‘want ad’ I posted on the queer dating and social app “Lex”³. I used Lex to recruit an interviewee for two reasons: First, by being a specifically queer online space Lex provides a pre-selected pool of people. As I wanted to specifically talk to queers/feminists for my research this seemed convenient. Hennink et al (2020) call this “purposefully selecting participants with certain characteristics important to the study” (2020, pp. 92f.). Second, I felt a certain discomfort in approaching possible interviewees directly because I would have felt like imposing my relatively small research on someone who is already doing lots of educational political work. Further, I wanted to pay attention to the “‘affective atmospheres’ of conducting any kind of social research in a pandemic” (Lupton 2020, p. 20) given the special circumstances including overwhelming screen time and considering that it is emotional (and physical) effort to talk about issues of caring for oneself in yet another video call. By posting the ad I could make sure I would only talk to people who reacted to my ad and therefore actively contacted me. So did Tabitha: she texted me saying she would be “up to chat about the politicality of self-care”. After I told her that I was looking for an interviewee for a research paper for this course she agreed to meeting in a Zoom call.

In preparation for the interview, I gathered some more information about Tabitha: She calls herself “fat body liberation coach” who “guide[s] people feminine-of-center⁴ to reconnect with their bodies through pragmatic self-care practices so we all can come to see that there is nothing wrong with living in a fat body”⁵. She is from the US but lives in a small village in the South of France. She also lived in a small German town for ten years which ended up being a good entry point for our conversation, both of us reminiscing about German bakeries. Next to her online coaching business Tabitha also hosts a podcast called “The Live Your Best Fat Life Podcast”. I wanted to give the interview a conversational character (Hennink et al 2020, p. 116) and leave space for experiences I had not heard about, therefore I decided on a semi-structured, explorative format. I developed an interview guide with a small introduction explaining to my interviewee the topic of the talk and how I will be using the collected data. Hennink et al. (2020, p. 120) give an example of a possible interview guide that was helpful: I started with an opening question, followed by a set of key questions to dive further into the topic (some of them prepared, some of them came up during the conversation) and concluded with a closing question to “‘fade out’ from the interview” (2020, p. 120). The interview was conducted in English and has been audio and video recorded via the Zoom recording tool. I had already asked for Tabitha’s consent to be recorded during our email conversation beforehand. I then asked her consent again at the beginning of the call, which she gave. During the call, I wrote down a handful of bullet points

³ Lex is a lo-fi, text-based dating & social app for lesbian, bisexual, asexual, & queer people. For womxn & trans, genderqueer, intersex, two spirit, & non-binary people. For people of marginalized genders, inspired by old school newspaper personal ads” About us, Lex app, accessed on 03.03.2021

⁴ I asked her about the choice for this term in the interview. She explained: “[T]here is a specific experience you are having as a fat person when you are read as feminine or woman because people are going to treat you a specific way and this is the experience I'm talking to so even if you are you know somewhere in the amorphous space between male and female you can relate to being feminized and treated a certain type of way because of that feminization.” (Tabitha 2021)

⁵ Quotes from Tabitha’s personal website. For the sake of keeping Tabitha anonymous I decided to not put the link to her website in my essay.

- however, to avoid losing track of the conversation, I tried to focus mainly on listening. After we had talked for almost two hours, I started transcribing the interview. While reading through the transcript, four main themes occurred that I could reconnect to my theoretical framework: Resistance, Intersection of Oppression, Community, and Commodification. Some aspects surprised me, while others were described similarly to what I had expected. Instead of using a rigid coding method, I focussed on the quotes and aspects that were most relevant for this study, therefore combining an inductive method with a theory-based deductive approach.

Resistance, community, or commodification?

As outlined above, (self-)caring within a capitalist economy can be seen as a practice of **resistance** (Hedva 2016; Scott 2016). My interviewee Tabitha also made this observation in relation to her work:

The foundation of capitalism is that you must be productive in order to be worthy, in order to be valuable, in order to be welcome. And if you are unproductive for whatever reason or unable to be productive then we don't care about you [...]. In these kinds of societies for people who are not productive, for example if you're someone who has a chronic illness, if you're someone who has a mental illness, if you're someone who has a disability, if you're old if you're young: It's important to try to stay alive and keep taking care of yourself; in spite of the messages that you're receiving that you are not valuable. (Tabitha 2021)

This entails that self-care is not about self-improvement or reproduction for the capitalist economy but rather a necessary practice and a tool for survival within but also against the system; this can also mean "find[ing] joy regardless of how much you oppress me or ignore me or devalue me" (Tabitha 2021). As briefly mentioned above, caring for oneself can mean listening to bodily needs and how to resist capitalist ideals of always needing to be productive, reachable, and functioning. This aligns with Hedva's statement: "Because to stay alive, capitalism cannot be responsible for our care - its logic of exploitation requires that some of us die" (Hedva 2016, p. 12). Thus, for some, survival can be resistance. Part of this can be to set boundaries. Scott (2016) phrases it very accurately when she writes: "It was so hard to admit that I needed to stay home and heal" (2016, p. 129). However, Tabitha argues that there is more to resistance than caring about oneself: "I also participate with grassroot organizations that are helping to make change policy because that's also necessary. Yes, change hearts and minds but we also need to change policy and think critically about how we build our society" (Tabitha 2021). Although I agree with Tabitha, I find it nevertheless important to add that there is a certain danger of placing the main responsibility of *changing* policy on already marginalised people. This runs the risk of enhancing the heavy load they already have to carry in everyday political struggles and survival. Instead, it is important to build alliances and organise in solidarity with each other. Building alliances with other organizations resonates with Federici's idea of feminist solidarity and joint forces putting an end to the separation of "activism and the reproduction of everyday life" (Federici 2016, p. 388).

Making a point about self-care as resistance also means making a point about the **intersection of different oppressions** and experiences of marginalisation. Talking to Tabitha reminded me once again that this world is more hostile towards certain bodies than it is to others. She tells me a story about chairs; she used to tour with her Body Liberation workshops in the US and remembers how hard it was to find a place that had adequate seating for bigger sized bodies: “As a fat person or as a marginalised person whatever kind of marginalization you have you’re constantly doing these sorts of negotiations; because when you live in a non-normative body you have to constantly be doing this” (Tabitha 2021). Being multiply marginalised means spending a lot of time and energy on making the surroundings liveable for yourself. All this extra energy needs to be generated before other goals, such as for example being politically engaged, can actively be pursued. I have already touched upon self-care having different meanings depending on one’s positionality. Hedva (2016) notes: “wellness as it is talked about in America today, is a white and wealthy idea” (2016, p. 3). An important lesson that Tabitha passes on to the people she works with is to take up space because “the more marginalization that you have you are actively talked and reinforced to take up less and less space. You become small and eventually disappear” (Tabitha 2021). She also recalls fatphobia frequently being left out of discourses about oppression in leftist spaces. Deriving her work and activism from her own experience, Tabitha acknowledges: “I have come to realize that it’s not just about self-love or about confidence it’s really also a problem of access and civil rights and justice and equity.”

One aspect that frequently came up in our conversation was the **commodification** of self-care. Being a professional coach, Tabitha offers guided community support sessions called “The Fat Freedom Foundation”. This includes weekly sessions of sharing experiences, communal “healing” according to Tabitha’s “4-Step Framework for Body Liberation”. To participate, Tabitha asks for a monthly “investment”; the participants can choose how much they pay; the minimum being 5\$. The other options are 20\$, 49\$ or 69\$ per month. Asking about these fees and how she positions herself in the debate on commodifying affective labour, Tabitha tells me: “I wrestle with it.” She goes on to explain how she tries to make the sessions most accessible by offering a price range. However, “[p]art of your responsibility of being part of this community is also to give your resources to help support others” (Tabitha 2021). Oksala (2016) problematizes the increasing monetization of affective labour, she displays her ethical concerns on how to classify which affective labours should be commodified (2016, p. 292). Equally, Federici (2016) observes an alarming commercialisation of the commons. Would not remunerating Tabitha for her work account for a more anti-capitalist stance? Does commodifying these communal care efforts lead to losing their potential for resistance? In my conversation with Tabitha, it became clear to me that constructing a binary between good resistance and bad conformism is like taking the easy way out. Living and working within a capitalist system is more complex than that. Bills must be paid; physical and mental health needs to be taken care of in order to make resistance even a possibility. Nevertheless, I do feel a certain discomfort in this point of Tabitha’s and my conversation regarding her emphasis on practicing self-care to be able to go to work and function within a capitalist economy, within *grind culture* that requires us to be active and factors into the notion of people only being valued by their activity. There is a difference of practicing self-care in community as a feminist common in order to be able to resist oppressive systems and recuperation oriented towards wage labour or

capitalist production. And yet, talking to Tabitha shows me that it is not that clear to tell apart the two, and decide which are feminist commons and which are capitalist (re)production. Social reproduction is “the business of life” (Bhattacharyya 2018, p. 40), and that means it is often a messy practice full of ambivalences and for the most part not clearly related to (only) one specific outcome.

As mentioned above, according to Bhattacharyya (2018) social reproduction can also become a place of anti-capitalist resistance which I observe in Tabitha’s communal care approach. It may not be completely outside of the capitalist system, but neither is it completely devoured by it. I want to now turn to the most dominant aspect of my conversation with Tabitha: **community** and interdependence. Community is necessary when talking about self-care because both are mutually constituting each other. Everyone has a finite capacity for doing things, which makes us interdependent in multiple ways. We need support of others to be able to care for ourselves and make space for self-care, Federici (2016) calls this “cooperation, and a responsibility to each other” (2016, p. 386). This relates to Tabitha’s experience of being a mother: “I must have these self-care things happen in order to be able to take care of my baby” (Tabitha 2021). At this point, it seems crucial to ask what community actually entails. Does a small family with two parents and a child, as it is the case for Tabitha, already constitute community? Tabitha calls her family a “very teeny tiny kind of micro community [...] we each take turns doing what the other cannot do”. In calling child rearing a “communal experience” Tabitha also points to indigenous populations where “everyone is taking care of the children”. This non-Western, anti-individualist notion of community entails dismantling capitalist socialisation that has taught us to be independent and not ask for help:

It doesn't benefit us to be individuals, it doesn't benefit us to be rugged survivalist on our own. We survive better as a unit. And so that means that we have to build trust and we have to build care and we have to actually be interested in each other and develop skills in relating and having relationships. (Tabitha 2021)

But how to build this kind of community? Tabitha asks the participants of her communal programs to agree to being radically kind (being compassionate to yourself & to others) and radically consensual, to not give unsolicited advice but rather pay attention to the other person’s needs. She emphasizes the importance of talking and listening to one another with openness. Is this what constitutes community?

It's this lovely wheel; it's never broken nor is it like ever too thin because there are enough people and enough care going around. Nobody has to be 100% 100% of the time. This is the thing about caring community. (Tabitha 2021)

However, looking at Tabitha’s “Fat Freedom Foundation” it shows that building community also always means the exclusion of someone. In this specific case different (monetary) factors select who can take part. Participants need to be able to pay at least the lowest tier, they need to have a stable internet connection and a device to use it. Tabitha acknowledges these hurdles in our interview: “These things are actually quite widespread in the Western world or the Global North however you want to call it. But the fact of the matter is that not

everyone has equal access to these things”. It was particularly interesting to me to ask Tabitha about the digital possibilities of a caring community, as she had already embraced online practices before pandemic times. She names two main reasons for that, one being that her main clientele lives in the US; the other is related to her aspiration to give everyone an experience that caters to their individual needs. This way, she can avoid many possible (physical) barriers for her participants as illustrated in the abovementioned example of the chairs. She tells me about her experience of living in small villages, where she would be the only fat person, the only black person, the only (out) queer person and how, in the face of that, the online space is crucial. However, talking about being in a physical space for her workshops she recalls it as a “wonderful experience”, being able to hug each other and sit together.

The way Tabitha understands community and care bring up questions regarding the position of community in Western capitalist society. How can it be avoided that communal care becomes something that just compensates for the lack of care that the state strategically leaves? Does this idea of community step into a vacuum that the increasing neoliberalisation and cutbacks in Western welfare politics have left behind? Federici’s (2016) understanding of the commons refers to “political possibilities” (2016, p. 380) that are detached from states or their institutions and rather put self-organized communities at the centre. This seems to be a radical, even utopian orientation. Nevertheless, in my opinion, Federici’s analysis runs short when it comes to the fact that (Western) states fail to take adequate responsibility for the care of their citizens. Offers such as Tabitha’s “Fat Freedom Foundation” can also be seen as a response to this lack of state accountability.

Conclusion

Thinking back to the conversation with Tabitha, I realise that I could not find the clear answer that I was looking for when I started this research. Self-care, in the understanding that Tabitha uses for her work, is a feminist intervention in the sense that it disrupts neoliberal individualized notions of caring and puts emphasis on community, networks of support, and resistance. Nevertheless, in some aspects, her approach also conforms to capitalist reproduction logics, since ‘caring’ in her account also means to be able to go to work.

This analysis of self-care as a communal practice has some limitations. My sample is small, as it consists of only one participant. Thus, I cannot make general assumptions about self-care as a common or a commodity. However, I believe that talking to Tabitha as someone who is in constant exchange with many people in and outside of her community gave me the opportunity to combine different views on self-care and become aware of the possible tensions that come up while practicing it. I suggest that further research could go into more depth looking at how spaces of community care outside of state control materialise, and how this is influenced by whether accessing them is bound to financial cost or not.

My research showed that self-care means different things for different people and that it can be especially crucial for multiply marginalised people since they suffer from interlocking systems of oppression. Simply existing in this world as a multiply marginalised person costs a lot of energy; emphasising self-care acknowledges this. To my

surprise, the commodification through charging the participants did not seem to diminish the capacity of this community, Tabitha still seems to manage to create an environment of trust, exchange, and resistance. Yet, it puts barriers to the accessibility of this specifically digital space.

This essay explored the notion of self-care beyond being a buzzword on social media. It showed that practicing self-care within a capitalist system means to be confronted with ambivalences. In line with Tabitha, I employed a practice of embracing these ambivalences rather than holding on to rigid binaries of feminist common vs. capitalist reproduction. Following Bhattacharyya (2018), I record that there is a need for social reproduction and self-care as a tool for survival within global racialised capitalism. With Federici (2016), I hold on to the importance of feminist alliances and the potential of transforming self-care into collective care, and subsequently into a common, based on community. This essay showed that this goes beyond self-care, as apparent in Tabitha's work. Self-care is often the first step that can enable us to change systems of oppression that we are confronted with, either as the ones directly affected or as allies.

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