



My Body Is Not Your Battlefield: The Bodily Aesthetics of Black Women as Sites for Self-Preservation, Resistance, and Radical Self-Care

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Abstract

Discourses surrounding the bodily aesthetics of Black women often converge on the colonized production of our bodies and hair. Yet, across global Africa, we resist and navigate these narratives—sometimes with grace and mimicry, other times with frustration, pain, and rebellion. This paper employs a Black feminist transdisciplinary lens and an autoethnographic and performative approach to illustrate the revolutionary re-creation of the Black female body, arguing that it is sacred and not a battlefield. As a Yoruba woman and scholar-activist, I trace these paths of resistance and self-care through three interlocking practices rooted in my lineage: aesthetic reclamation of the body as an oppositional girlhood politics against patriarchal violence; the spiritual cultivation and adornment of natural hair with

Owo Eyó (cowrie shells); and epistolary traditions as a vital lifeline, bridging *rhetorical space* essential for healing. Finally, I demonstrate how transnational praxis synthesizes these tools of material culture into collective action through dance rituals and the implementation of the Self-Care for Black Women in Leadership (SCBWL) Program in Nigeria. Ultimately, this work asserts that the daily, embodied commitment to radical self-care and the reclamation of ancestral practices and modes of joy, are a vital continuation of the revolutionary African woman.

Keywords

Autoethnography, othermothering, Africana feminisms, healing justice, transnational solidarity

Introduction

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper.

~ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*

I have been mulling over how to write, shape, and frame this article for *Siyabonana's* special issue, "The Continuation of the Revolutionary African Woman." To honor this work, and the call from my dear sister, Olaocha, to join in this revolutionary act, is no small feat. I want to do justice to this call with my story and the stories of the lineages that came before me. I especially want to consider how we use our voices and bodies as Black women to interrogate spaces, exert our power, find joy, resist, survive, and thrive, in essence, living Empire's greatest fear: our humanity. So, here I am, putting my "shit on paper" as Gloria Anzaldúa urges us to do.

One of the primary rituals I performed in preparation for this call was to read chapters from the book, *African Women Writing Resistance* (Browdy de Hernandez et

al., 2010). In Diana Adesola Mafe's (2010) chapter, "Knowing Your Place", she begins with a quote from Anzaldúa's letter, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers" (Anzaldúa, 2009b). I revisited that letter, and in it, I found the courage and discipline to start this journey with you. I do this so that you can know me and build solidarity¹ with me as we continue this journey of self-preservation to resist and transcend Empire's oppressive hold on our bodies, our stories, our lineages, and our shared history (Krawec, 2022). I also write to "record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, [and] about you" (Anzaldúa, 2009b, p. 30). Thus, my contribution here allows me to fuse my personal experience and worldview with the social reality I inhabit, with my inner life, my history, and my vision for our collective flourishing (Anzaldúa, 2009b).

In this spirit, this paper will unfold by first situating the story of my lineage as a Yoruba woman, guided by the epistemology of Oya—the orisha of lightning, storms, winds, and *radical transformation*, whose power of *liminality* as a fierce protector of the living and the dead is boundless. Grounded in the theoretical traditions of Africana feminisms, this paper brings to fore how radical self-care practices function as strategies for survival and resistance to patriarchal violence. I will explore these themes through the oppositional body politics of my lived experiences, using dance, hair aesthetics, and discursive practices as diasporic languages of resistance² and relationality. Through these aesthetic practices, I will show how I foster meaningful engagement with African and African-Diaspora communities and foster intra-Black dialogues to identify our collective struggles, build cross-cultural understanding, and increase our agency and bodily autonomy. Ultimately, I will discuss how these

¹ In this work, I am speaking of Black-intra racial solidarity that centers and values all aspects of our lives. It means we show up for each other and fight on behalf of each other against oppressive systems and tactics that are designed to divide and conquer. It means we are discerning in our engagement, and that we resource each other. The article written by Kahlia Phillips (2020) for the Black Feminist Collective titled, "Who is Solidarity For: Intra-Racial Solidarity for True Black Liberation" is an excellent resource on this perspective on what solidarity means in this context.

² Personal narratives build bridges between and amongst women across geographies; this process is how I make sense of my position in academia and in activist-practice spaces. The wisdom from reading the words of Gloria Anzaldúa and Patricia McFadden strengthens this resolve given that "the power of personal narration and its centrality as a uniquely feminist feature of women's writing to and for resistance" (McFadden, 2018, p. 430) is nurturing and liberating. It is also through sharing our stories that we heal our wounds and co-create life-affirming spaces, resources, and opportunities for each other (hooks, 2015).

practices and philosophies of care and healing are interwoven, demonstrating how these practices continue the work of revolutionary African women.

The Maternal Helix(es): Blood-mothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks

African and African- American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood.

~ Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Women and Motherhood”



Figure 1. The Author's mother (Abòşèdè) carrying her on the day of her naming ceremony.
Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 2. The author's grandma (Phebe Afọlášadé Dada-Obíniwà)
Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 3. The author Deborah (Ọmọwùmí) at three years old
Photo courtesy of the author.

I come from a lineage of dancers, community builders, and healers, women determined to improve the social conditions of families and communities. This is best understood through the tradition of “othermothering” that Patricia Hill Collins describes as the communal practices of non-biological mothers/parents assisting in the caring of children. My maternal grandmother, Phebe Afọlášadé Dada-Obíniwà—whose name translates to “parents are character” (obí means “parents,” ni means “are,” and wà is rooted in Ìwà, and means “character”)—became an orphan when her mother died during childbirth. Though her childhood was not rosy, she was raised by othermothers who cared for her. In turn, she became a mother not only to her biological children but also to children in the community who had lost their parents. This maternal helix of care spun into my own life. When my mother, Abóşèdè Kófówórólá Dàdà, was pregnant with me in the 1980s, her circumstances made it difficult to care for me as she wished. She had to make sacrifices to ensure our survival. As a result, the tradition continued: my grandmother raised me in our village in Ogga, Kogi State, from infancy until I was three years old. This act of othermothering gave my mother the space to get her life back together in Lagos with her new partner, my dad, Alfred Foster. My earliest memories are situated within these incredible women-centered households, grounded in collective care.

While this lineage gifted me a foundation of communal care, it also instilled in me a rebellious streak. I have always felt what Patricia McFadden (2018) describes as the instinct “to be free...[an impulse that comes from drawing on] childhood refusals to be engineered into a conforming female” (p. 419). The women in my family survived by navigating and often defying patriarchal systems. For example, my mother made the difficult decision to run away with me and hide from my biological father and his associates to avoid being forced to live in, and raise me in, a polygamous household. Her resilience was not passive; it was an active, and at times, an oppositional practice to what is considered “womanly” and “motherly.” Unlearning the patriarchal ideas that we are socialized into is a “difficult and daunting task” (McFadden, 2018, p. 420), but it is this very struggle that infuses a “feminist political consciousness...[with a necessary] rebelliousness” (McFadden, 2018, p. 419). This body memory from my grandmother is the source of my own oppositional body politics. Unfortunately, my grandmother died of breast cancer shortly after I migrated to the U.S. in 2001. Her death, compounded by the violence

and kidnappings that made travel to our village unsafe, raised a painful question: how does one practice grief and bereavement while honoring the legacies of ancestors when the physical spaces for these spiritual connections are violated or inaccessible? The answer lies in understanding what Gloria Anzaldúa describes in her article, “Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness” (2009a) as the union of the imagined and the material within the body and via dream space. She explains that the body itself mediates these two realities, making no distinction between them:

The body does not discern between different kinds of stimuli... What happens in the imagination and what happens in the material world.... We, the body, are the union... What happens in the imagination is not fiction. (p. 108)

Anzaldúa’s wisdom provides the framework for how connection persists beyond physical presence. It is through the dream world, through memory, and through divination that my relationship with my grandmother continues. These are not fictions; as Anzaldúa argues, they are real, embodied experiences. In this liminal space, I also connect with my spiritual lineage through the Orisha. I call upon Oya, the Yoruba Orisha of winds, storms, and the guardian of the cemetery, who represents radical transformation and the connection between the living and the dead. Through these spiritual technologies, the bonds between my ancestral othermothers, your ancestors, remain intersected and unbroken.

Ultimately, my understanding of self is rooted in this lineage. The “self” in my practice of self-care is not a singular, isolated entity, but exists within the “context of family and community” (Collins, 2022, p. 148). Following in the footsteps of Black women intellectuals and activists who merge scholarship with lived experience, my work is an attempt to make sense of our collective journey toward liberation and healing. This foundation, built by my bloodmothers and othermothers, is the source of my healing and creativity. It is the reason the diaspora became a site of refuge for my creativity, allowing me to use dance, writing, and storytelling to contest spaces, and change the narrative, of what it means to reclaim a Black female body, not as a battlefield, but as a sacred site of power, resistance, and social change.

Oppositional Body Politics: Forging Self-Care and Consciousness in Girlhood

Body and hair aesthetics as forms of self-expression, identity, resistance, and contention in African and African diaspora communities are widely discussed in academic and non-academic spaces, especially around conversations on the colonized production of the Black female body. Black women have learned to navigate the socio-cultural, ethnoreligious, and political implications of these narratives, doing so consciously and subconsciously with grace, mimicry, and at times, with frustration, pain, and rebellion (Adichie, 2014; Ali, 2019; Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019; L. R. Gordon, 2018; Oladipo, 2019; Tate, 2007; Thompson, 2009).

For example, in Senegal, Hudita Nura Mustafa's "Eros, Beauty, and Crisis" (2015) notes that the practice of self-care is situated within "increasing economic hardship [which] reinforces the sense that for many younger women, their body and physical presentation remain their only currency" (p. 30). This reality is pronounced when "institutional and economic structures of heteronormative domesticity collapse [and it is] women's social networks [that come to the rescue, providing the] multiple social and financial supports" (2015, p. 29) that the state does not provide. This tension raises critical questions within African-heritage communities about what constitutes self-care. In a conversation on "Doing Beauty as African Feminists" (Dosekun et al., 2016), Canadian multidisciplinary artist, Valérie Bah, who is of Haitian and Beninois descent, wonders if "some of the less painful aspects of beauty rituals can be construed as 'self-care,' or if that's a ruse" (p. 81). Fellow Kenyan feminist Aleya Kassam—a storyteller, writer, and performer, asserts that for her, the distinction comes down to choice, whether a ritual is performed to conform or to be in community with other women. For Kassam, "beauty rituals can certainly have an element of self-care" (Dosekun et al., 2016, p. 81) when chosen freely.

Engaging these questions further is Nigerian feminist, writer and scholar, Simidele Dosekun. Drawing on her research into global dynamics of gender, race, and power, Dosekun asks in her editorial, "The Politics of Fashion and Beauty in Africa" (2016): "is beauty pleasure or pain? Is beauty a disciplined practice or a form of self-expression and self-care?... How does one do beauty as an African feminist?" (p. 5). These questions are part of a larger trend seeking to deconstruct the politicization of Black women's aesthetics. They open a window to the autonomy Black women possess to engage in these rituals without judgment, navigating a

complex terrain of survival, pleasure, and politics, and in the process, re-articulating the contemporality of what it means to be a revolutionary African woman. In recent years, scholars such as Ali (2019) and Mustafa (2015) have highlighted how “beauty and beautification” serve as critical strategies for survival, belonging, “self-cultivation and self-presentation” (Mustafa, 2015, p. 29). This raises another question about how the caring for the self is in essence an act of self-preservation and a necessity for the caring for the collective to resist state violence. Mustafa shares that the “aesthetics cultivation of the body” (2015, p. 31) is how Senegalese women negotiate their status under patriarchy and build networks of love, independence, and support. Similarly, Ali (2019) argues that beauty practices in Sudan can serve a “Radiant/Glamorous” (Nairat) purpose while also being fertile grounds for “Revolutionary” (Thairat) collective action to achieve social transformation and gender equality. This scholarship reveals how personal aesthetics can fuel political mobilization, countering hegemonic narratives through collective action.

These scholarly conversations, from the economic realities shaping bodily currency in Senegal, to the revolutionary potential of beauty practices in Sudan, provide the critical framework for understanding my own journey of how I care for myself, the practices I adopt and adapt, and how I interrogate these practices to avoid falling into the neoliberal trap of complacency, when it comes to the prioritization of our wellbeing as Black women. Moreso, while these feminists debate whether beauty is pain or pleasure, self-care or a ruse, I respond by centering the bodily aesthetics of self-preservation (hooks, 2015; Lorde, 2009) and resistance (Browdy de Hernandez et al., 2010; Chioneso et al., 2020; Drake-Burnette et al., 2016; Simpson, 2017) that I first learned to practice as a high school student, dancer, and activist. This essay now turns to my own formative experiences, beginning in a high school classroom, where these theoretical concepts became lived realities and set the stage for a lifelong practice of reclaiming my body, not as a battlefield, but as a space of cultural memory, resistance, love, and relationality.

My transition from childhood to adolescence in Nigeria fundamentally shaped my understanding of my body. I entered puberty at eleven, a time of significant change made more acute because my parents and siblings had already immigrated to the United States, leaving me in the care of othermothers from the maternal side of our extended family. Beyond the feelings of abandonment and loneliness, I yearned for the protection of my parents and the advice of my mother on how to

navigate my growing body. Before this separation, my sense of self had been consistently affirmed: my mother ensured we had delicious, nutritious meals and the best tailor-made clothes, while my father always reminded me of my intellect, dance skills, and beauty.

Living with extended family, however, this ritualized validation of Black girlhood ceased (Evans-Winters, 2019). Though we were biologically related, our cultural and community values differed. While my material needs were met through remittances from my parents abroad, the emotional validation ceased; my facial features and my cheekbones were often teased. The joy I felt from dancing was also weaponized. I was often chastised for dancing whenever I heard music and called *ashewo*³ (prostitute). The hyper-sexualization of my body by older men in the community necessitated devising strategies to avoid errands that would bring me in close proximity to them, to ensure my safety.

As a result, I grew intensely self-conscious and began developing what I can only describe as oppositional politics to protect my body from the constant gaze of older men. I understood, even then, the societal conditioning that frames girls' bodies as commodities. I also learned that survival required different strategies. When I spoke out against men who violated my body, often fighting back physically, I was the one who was punished, blamed for enticing the violation in the first place (Gqola, 2021; McFadden, 2003). This experience was a brutal lesson in what feminist scholar Patricia McFadden identifies as a key patriarchal tool: "One of the most effective mechanisms that patriarchy deploys against femaleness is the claim that our creativity, imagination, and sensibilities of freedom and pleasure are taboo and must be suppressed" (McFadden, 2018, p. 419). These essentialist values I grew up with provide the ideological basis for such violence, reinforcing rigid stereotypes that normalize the control over women's and girls' bodies. From this, I learned a crucial lesson: my body held a certain currency, and I would need creative strategies of survival and resistance to reach adulthood. Now, as an adult, the work of healing

³Ashewo is used colloquially to describe a sex worker and any woman who operates outside patriarchal or conservative norms in Nigeria. While the rapid globalization of Afrobeats is beginning to shift cultural perceptions, dancing—particularly for young girls and women in Nigeria—is often denied the status of a noble hobby or profession. This policing is not surprising; dance is a profound expression of bodily autonomy, and in a deeply patriarchal society, a woman or girl who visibly exercises this autonomy is often punished. For further context on the broader economic and developmental landscape of the arts in Africa, see Patrick Kabanda's (2018) *The Creative Wealth of Nations: Can the Arts Advance Development?*

from these violations is my primary goal. My journey of undoing this trauma is rooted in the Black feminist and womanist traditions of self-care that support my psychosocial wellbeing and allow me to show up as my authentic self. It is this foundational experience in Nigeria that informs my understanding of the body as a site of protest, and ultimately, as a sanctuary to be reclaimed.

The Classroom and Black Educators as Sanctuaries for Cultivating Cultural Memory Through Radical Love, Relationality, and Critical Pedagogy

The consciousness that my body could be a site of self-preservation and resistance, rather than a battlefield, was awakened in my 10th grade World History class, taught by an African American teacher named Mrs. Nealy. At the time, my relationship with my own body was complicated. While dance became an important bridge for connecting with peers, my hair remained a point of tension. It was mostly worn in braids, but intertwined with them was the straightened, permed hair my mother insisted upon, a process that left my scalp burnt from the chemicals.

In this context, my teacher, Mrs. Nealey, was a revelation. She wore her hair in locs, had a nose piercing, and dressed androgynously. As a recent immigrant from Nigeria, seeing a Black woman in a position of authority present herself with such unapologetic representation of her Blackness, sparked something inside of me that I could not yet articulate. Her very presence was a lesson in how Black women enact our agency, bodily autonomy, and an Afrocentric essence to defy and resist racial, gender, and sexual oppression. Her cultural aesthetics and her politics of Afrocentric relationality were amplified by her conscientizing and relational teaching style, which emphasized the use of personal narratives and her students' lived experiences, to elucidate historically complex relationships. For example, she consistently validated our diverse backgrounds. As a recent immigrant from Nigeria, she would often call on me during lectures to share my lived experiences, sometimes using class performances, to help my classmates connect with the curriculum in tangible ways. For the first time in an academic classroom, I felt seen and heard.

Mrs. Nealey extended this radical care to all of us. She invited prominent Black female rappers to perform for Black History Month and facilitated diorama doll-making workshops to help us create the world we wanted to see in ourselves. For one of our diorama projects, I built a doll depicting my grandmother in our village

of Ogga, Kogi State. I adorned her with Ankara wraps, cowrie shells, and a headwrap, the same aesthetic elements of self-preservation and cultural memory that I now reclaim through my artistic expressions in my hair, body art, costumes, and dance. In the diorama scene, my grandmother sat majestically on a chair in her compound surrounded by the village children (represented by stones glued to a leather mat) as they awaited her moonlight storytelling. This project was more than an assignment; it was a profound act of remembering.

The diorama represented the cultural aesthetics and spirituality of the epistemic process I grew up with, oral traditions transmitted by my grandmother and other elders as living repositories of knowledge (Baburaj & Pannicott, 2025; Juma, 2022). It depicted how knowledge in many African cultures is acquired and validated through spiritual means and grounded in “principles of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, and epistemic communalism” (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 23). Mrs. Nealey’s classroom became an intellectual and spiritual sanctuary that nurtured my spirit of self-determination and radical love. Reflecting now, I understand what she was doing: her political clarity (de Royston et al., 2021) expressed through a pedagogy of radical care, was a form of protection. As an educator, she understood the “complicated connections between interpersonal and structural forms of racism that limit the opportunities for Black children to survive and thrive educationally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically” (de Royston et al., 2021, p. 7). She provided a space where our bodies, our stories, and our histories were not a battlefield, but a source of power to transform our lives and re-imagine radical futures that are life affirming.

An Epistolary Lifeline:

Letters, Lineage, and the Dissolving of Borders

Epistolary work, creative writing, letters, journals, and diaries, is an essential fabric of African societies and a vital tool for political sense-making, healing, and resistance for African-heritage women globally (Browdy de Hernandez et al., 2010; Elia, 2001; Mandela & Kathrada, 2014). While not always explicitly classified as “health-promoting,” the context, intentionality, and self-awareness inherent in these writing projects, make them a radical form of self-care. The writing process itself provides opportunities for reflection and dialogue that bends time and space. As Desirée R. Melonas (2021) argues, the asynchronous nature of letter-writing forces us to pause.

In a globalized world that demands speed, choosing to be patient is a radical act that creates a “rhetorical space of community...[and rejects] a neoliberal imperative that prioritizes speed and acceleration over ease and taking one’s time” (Melonas, 2021, p. 39).

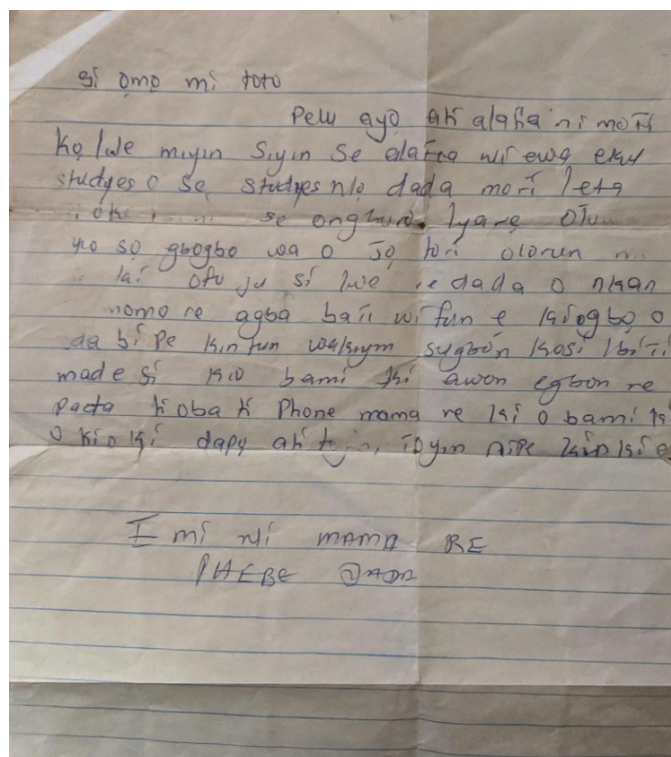


Figure 4. Letter from Grandma Phebe Afoláṣadé Dada-Obíniwà
Photo courtesy of the author.⁴

This practice of writing as a tool for community and truth-telling is a cornerstone of Black feminist thought. In the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015), Gloria Anzaldúa documents how radical women of color found each other and created spaces through their writing. They saw it as a responsibility to use their “vast source of spiritual/political energies to help heal others... [and build] sources for survival” (p. xxix). This aligns with bell hooks’ call

⁴ Letter from Grandma Phebe Afoláṣadé Dada-Obíniwà (personal communication, 1999). My grandmother dictated the contents of this letter to our relative, Toyin, who lived with her (Toyin’s grandfather and my maternal grandfather are brothers). In it, she reminds me of her profound love for me, confirms receipt of the letter I had sent her, and asks after other family members, including her daughter and my siblings. She also advises me to take my education seriously and to listen to the aunt I was living with at the time.

for critical affirmation and truth-telling in “*Sisters of the Yam*.” For hooks (2015), “it is important that Black people talk to one another...for the telling of our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing” (p. 9). This necessary “talking” happens powerfully in the act of writing, which hooks herself used as a potent form of political resistance and self-care. In other spaces, writing as a form of self-care also serves as a way of forging subaltern coalitions and resistance.

This use of the margin as a site of resistance is evident in post-colonial contexts worldwide. The anthology *African Women Writing Resistance* (Browdy de Hernandez et al., 2010) uses testimony, poetry, and performance to address issues vital to African women, such as domestic violence, migration, motherhood, identity, and inter-generational tensions. Similarly, Elizabeth Swart’s book, *Women’s Voices from the Margins* (2017) examines the diaries of women in Kibera, Kenya, showing how they used writing to narrate their experiences with violence and poverty, finding solace and a path to healing. This practice extends beyond Africa; the autobiographical work of the Sangtin Writers Collective in India, documented in the book, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), explores womanhood and sexuality in the face of poverty and casteism. Whether in Kenya or India, women are building community and holding a metaphorical space for each other through these epistolary processes. The collective work of these women interrogates the impact of globalization, capitalism, and patriarchy on their lives. Thus, writing becomes dangerous because of what it reveals about us; about what we are afraid of; our fears, our anger, and our strengths under multiple forms of oppression (Anzaldúa, 2009b). However, by using truth-telling and critical affirmation, they “break down the barriers separating public and private life” (hooks, 2015, p. 53), and the catharsis they experience is a vital coping strategy.

This tradition of using the written and spoken word as a tool for self-preservation is not merely academic for me. It is the practice of my self-definition and the manifestation of what it means to be me, all the goodness and messiness that evolve into this complex self. The “Emi Ni (I Am) Poem” featured below is a direct enactment of this epistolary tradition, a form of creative writing used for self-definition, healing, and connecting with my lineage and spirituality. Just as the women cited here use the pen to reclaim their stories and break silences, my own work uses storytelling, dance, and bodily aesthetics to engage in a similar process.

These are the tools with which I resist the forces that seek to turn the body into a battlefield, transforming it instead into a site of resistance, love, and radical self-care.

Emi Ni (I am) Poem

Line 1: *Èmi, ọmọ bibí inú Abóşèdé Kòfowórólá Dàdà, Ọmọ wọn ní ilú Ogga, ní ìpínlẹ̀ Kogi. Abóşèdé, ọmọ Phebe Afóláşadé-Obínìwà, ìyá ìyá mi. Kafanchan, ní ìpínlẹ̀ Kaduna, ní ilú bàbá tó bí mi lọmọ.*

Line 2: *Èmi ọmọ Sàngó*

Line 3: *Èmi, ọmọ. Oya.*

Line 4: *Èmi eyinju Olódùmarè.*

Line 5: *Èmi l'aya Everett, ọmọ wọn ní ilú Albany, ní ìpínlẹ̀ Georgia.*

Line 6: *Ìyá Adéşolá, ìyá Ifedayò, Ìyá èjìrẹ̀ ará ịsòkún, wínníwínní lójú orógún, èjìwò lójú ìyá rẹ.*

Line 7: *Èmi ni arẹ̀wà ọmọ tí Elédùwà, Ọba àwọn ọba dá, ní àkàndá obìnrin*

Line 8: *Ọmọ Eléégún,*

Line 9: *Ọmọ oníjó bàtá.*

Line 10: *Èmi Ọmọwùmí, eyinju Olódùmarè.*

Translation⁵ (I am Poem)

Line 1: *I am the child born of the womb of Abóşèdé Kòfowórólá Dàdà, their daughter from the village of Ogga in Kogi State. Abóşèdé, the daughter of Phebe Afóláşadé Dada-Obínìwà, my grandmother. Kafanchan, in Kaduna State, is the town of the father who birthed me.*

Line 2: *I am the child of Sàngó*

Line 3: *I am the child of Oya*

Line 4: *I am the precious sight of Olódùmarè*

Line 5: *I am the wife of Everett, from Albany, Georgia*

Line 6: *The mother of Adéşolá, the mother of Ifedayò; mother of the sacred twins—though seen as insignificant in the eyes of rivals, they are crown jewels in the eyes of their mother*

Line 7: *I am God's beautiful child, a woman uniquely created by Elédùwà, the King of Kings.*

Line 8: *I am the child of Elegun (custodians of the ancestral worlds)*

⁵ Translation by the author and her mother.

Line 9: I am the child born into the lineage of Bata dance

Line 10: I am Ọmọwùmí, the cherished sight of Olódùmarè

This epistolary tradition was, in fact, my lifeline. Writing and receiving letters from my parents, siblings, and classmates was profoundly therapeutic during our separation due to the immigration process. Reading their words minimized the vast distance between our worlds and soothed the deep anguish I felt. These letters grounded me, nurtured my spirit, and in many ways, saved me. This lifeline took many forms. My grandmother's last letter to me was written in 1999. In it, she reminded me of her profound love, implored me to take my studies seriously, even as she painfully shared that she could no longer visit. My three younger siblings, ages seven, six, and four, when they emigrated to the U.S., also wrote to me, their love expressed in scribbles and stick figures. These intergenerational letter-writing rituals, from my parents to my grandmother's words of encouragement to my siblings' drawings, became a tangible form of collective self-care that defied physical separation. It was through this practice that I first understood where our strength lies and how we ensure our survival. As Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us, writing is: "our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared" (2009b, p. 33).

Dancing as Liminality: A Portal to Consciousness

To me, dancing is like speaking and writing different dialects of the same language, a universal grammar of the body that can articulate what words cannot. It is also an act of entering a liminal space, a threshold "betwixt and between" (Williams, 1996, p. 76) the structures of ordinary life where new realities can be forged. In this way, dance becomes an "alchemy of liminalities" (Keltner-McNeil & Banfield, 2025, p. 1), transforming space, consciousness, and the very sense of self. The dance floor, whether a formal stage, a street corner, or my living room, becomes a unique world, a space where Black bodies and spirits are celebrated, intentionally. My first profound experience of this was as a teenager at the 2003 NAACP ACT-SO competition in Miami, Florida. Then, as a recent immigrant, I existed in an in-between space, yet within the liminality of the competition, our shared creative, intellectual, and spiritual gifts as teenagers fostered a joyful diasporic, and transnational consciousness.

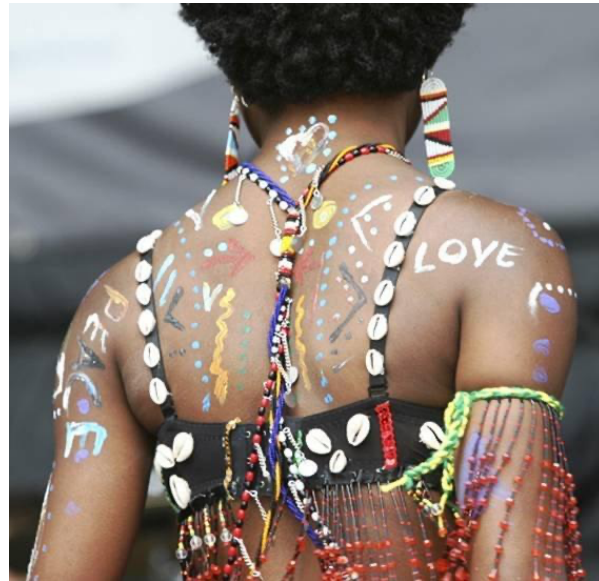


Figure 5. The author at the 2008 UCLA Jazz Reggae Festival with her band, The Pangea Collective. Costume designed by the author and body art and jewelry designed by California-based Kenya artist, Wawi Amasha.
Photo courtesy of the author.

However, not all liminal spaces are immediately celebratory; some must be carved out of tension and necessity. When I started high school in 2001, I initially had difficulty connecting with my African American peers. Having melanated skin was not enough to build meaningful relationships. A deeper disconnect lingered, an elephant in the room born from “the danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009) we have been socialized to accept as true via the media and the colonialist education systems from our respective geo-political spaces. This mutual misunderstanding of our histories often resulted in name-calling and avoidance. It was not entirely surprising; I had heard my own relatives use derogatory words to describe African Americans, cautioning us against them without acknowledging that it was their blood, sweat, and tears in the Civil Rights Movement that made our immigration possible. To build new relationships, as the indigenous scholar Patty Krawec (2022) writes, “we need to listen to the histories that we were not told so that we can begin to remember the things buried beneath the histories we were” (2022, p. 17). Furthermore, to sustain these relationships, we must engage in the vigilant internal work that bell hooks (2015) outlines:

To love ourselves, our blackness, we must be constantly vigilant, working to resist white supremacist thinking, and internalized racism...cutting out forms of subliminal socialization shaping how we see the world [and] searching for decolonized black individuals who demonstrate their love for blackness and care for the self. (p. 73)

For us, that listening and vigilant work began not with words, but with movement. The schoolyard during lunch and recess, a liminal space, transformed through diasporic dance battles. As I began to participate, a dialogue naturally followed. We talked about how I learned to Krump and Clown, and I shared with them the parallels in the footwork of Nigeria's Galala dance style, originated by artists like Daddy Showkey. Suddenly, the connections we have become more visible through dialogue. We were speaking different dialects of the same language. These raw, non-conforming dance styles, born on the streets of Lagos and Los Angeles, were oppositional to everything I was conditioned to believe about myself, about teenagerhood. This experience was liberating. It was joyful. It was life-affirming. In those moments, I was a teenager practicing oppositional body politics. While these dialogues did not radically solve all our differences, they opened a window into the intimacy of our lives and our bittersweet diasporic relationship, using our love for street dance as a bridge to understand our commonalities and differences.

This liminality of dance is not only social but deeply spiritual; it is a portal to my ancestors. This is especially true of *Bàtá*, the sacred Yoruba dance I love to perform. *Bàtá* is not just movement; it is a shift in consciousness, a deliberate practice to connect with lineage and the Orisha. As scholar Jacob (2022) notes, "*Bàtá* dance has intimate association with *Ẹ̀sàngó* and *Egungun* because the three are inseparable.... those who dance *Bàtá* try to emulate [*Ẹ̀sàngó's*] personality...and anytime [*Ẹ̀sàngó*] wants to go to war, he liked dancing to rigorous music in preparation for war" (pp. 295–296). To dance *Bàtá* is to embody this history, to enter a dialogue with divinity and prepare the spirit for battle and for life. It is a physical enactment of my identity, as declared in my "Emi Ni" poem: *Ọmọ oníjọ bàtá* (I am a *Bàtá* dancer).

This understanding of dance as ritual was crystallized in a performance I did for "Tales of Longing and Belonging" (S. Gordon, 2014; Peterson, 2014), illustrating the life of African American visual artist Dominique Moody. As the djembe and

dundun drums summoned me to the stage, my body synchronized with each beat. I was no longer just a performer but an oracle, dancing among two gigantic Egungun puppets representing Dominique's ancestors. In that circular motion, paying homage to their divine presence, the stage became a sacred space. My role was to receive the story living in the drums and dance it into being, honoring an elder on whose shoulders I stand. This method of building transnational solidarity through the arts, as a Nigerian immigrant dancing to celebrate an African American woman, has been a continuous endeavor. This is demonstrated through my co-creation of The Pangea Collective music ensemble at UCLA, my collaborations with artists like Samba Mapangala & Orchestra Virunga, and my experience teaching children in Pelourinho, Salvador de Bahia, Brazil to dance to Awilo Logomba's music. Through these practices, dance becomes what Patricia McFadden (2018) calls a "deliberate act of self-nurturing" (p. 421). It is a way of finding and living the "innovative feminist energies and sensibilities... [that define the] politics of this moment in African time" (p. 417). Whether forging diasporic connections in a tense schoolyard, embodying the warrior spirit of Oya, or paying homage to the ancestors of a living elder, the act of dancing and the rituals associated with my costumes and hairdo, is a solemn practice of being fully in oneself, and simultaneously being connected to the ancestors. It is also how my body is transformed into a liminal sanctuary, a sacred space for consciousness building, connection, and creativity.

Omo Oya, Loving (My) Blackness:

The Spirituality and Political Act of Hair-Making

Black hair is inherently political because it has always been a primary target of colonial erasure and control. Our hair is not merely aesthetic; it holds deep spiritual and cultural significance. In African societies, an individual's hair communicates their age, their spiritual practice, marital status, fecundity, fertility, wealth, social standing, and ethnic identity (Ali, 2019; Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019; Mbilishaka, 2018; Omotoso, 2018; Thompson, 2009). The practice of hair-making is communal and encompasses sacred rituals rooted in African ancestral practices and spiritual technologies. Because hair is a connection to the spiritual world and a crucial component of our identity, disconnecting us from this source of power became a key aspect of the colonial project (Ora, 2024), effectively requiring Black women's forced acculturation into Eurocentric beauty standards. My journey to reclaiming my

natural hair is thus a direct engagement with this history, transforming a site of contention into a conscious source of power.



Figure 6. The author getting her hair braided in Ogun State Nigeria
The name of the hairstyle is Patewo; accessorized with cowrie shells.
Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 7. The author with Shuku hairstyle decorated with cowrie shells
at the Abeokuta train station in Ogun state, Nigeria.
Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 8. The author in Lagos, Nigeria with another iteration of Patewo hairstyle decorated with cowrie shells.
Photo courtesy of the author.

I fully embarked on the process of transitioning from a relaxer (perm) to my natural hair during my first year in junior college in 2004. Before that decisive action, the idea of the ‘big chop’ felt intimidating. I was gripped by the uncertainty of my appearance, though I knew returning to the perm was not an option. My inspiration, and NorthStar, arrived unexpectedly while flipping through a Black magazine⁶ where I discovered the African American model, Tomiko Fraser. Her image, featuring very short, curly hair and a bright smile, stuck with me; she looked dope. Her image exuded radiance, elegance, and self-assuredness. In that moment, seeing her present unapologetically reminded me of the feeling I felt the first time I saw my 10th grade world history teacher; Mrs. Nealy. However, now as an adult, I felt more freedom to explore this aspect of myself confidently. Thus, I felt an immediate connection to Tomiko Fraser; I wanted to become that essence, however, within the confines of my own hair and body.

Furthermore, given that “Black hair is not frequently celebrated in mainstream media, but rather devalued and considered scruffy, in need of being normalized” (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 66), finding Tomiko’s image became the reclamation and positive self-representation I needed. It provided me with a formative step in the process of reclamation (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019), even though my parents and peers didn’t fully support it at the time. Lacking tutorials and traditional

⁶ I do not remember the name of the magazine; however, it was either *Essence* or *Ebony* magazine.

guidance,⁷ I made the radical decision to let my perm grow out. This period of wildness, of allowing my hair to figure itself out, rather than cutting it, sometimes felt lonely and challenging. It demanded sustained personal commitment. Yet the necessity of the struggle forged a profound understanding that self-care for Black women is invariably carved out of historical imperative and survival. This lineage of resilience and resistance dates to the era of Jim Crow, where educators like Maryrose Reeves Allen at Howard University challenged Eurocentric norms. Allen actively empowered her students to see “The Negro Woman as our Standard” (Pellum, 2021, para. 3), affirming that a “woman that is beautiful physically, mentally and spiritually is an asset to her race and her country and she is able to make a more satisfactory adjustment to her immediate environment” (Pellum, 2021, p. 9). This historical context is essential because, as contemporary scholars note, for Black women dealing with systemic stress and racialized violence, self-care is often conceptualized as “the only way out” (Adkins-Jackson et al., 2023, p. 37) and necessary strategy to combat the interlocking impacts of gendered violence on Black women’s bodies. Thus, the decision on how we care for and carry our hair is critical to our psychosocial wellbeing and collective survival.

Today, my hair is fully natural, and I adorn it with Owo Eyó (cowrie shells), confidently expressing my identity through this reclaimed aesthetic freedom and ancestral practice. This conscious choice to wear natural hair is a political act, to see and to be seen wholly—for me this is what practicing radical self-care also looks like. As scholars Kuumba and Ajanaku (2006) note, the reclamation of our hair is deeply connected to our “cultural resistance and collective identity formation” (p. 227). This political act is simultaneously spiritual: as the daughter of Oya (the Yoruba Orisha of winds, storms, lightening, and transformation), my hair is a physical testament to her divine energy. In Yoruba cosmology, cowrie shells serve as an important spiritual technology for divination—a means to communicate with the Orishas and Olódùmarè. Historically, cowrie shells were used as currency and adorning oneself with them signifies wealth. Thus, the deliberate use of cowrie shells to adorn myself is how I reclaim my hair, my body, and my cultural memory; it is a conscious act to remember everything that we have been taught to forget about ourselves (Dillard, 2012). This sacred practice is a living enactment of Patricia McFadden’s call for

⁷ Today, we have a robust network of natural hair enthusiasts and professionals both online and offline with tutorials and guidance on how to care for all our hair types.

“Contemporarity,” ensuring that African feminist life is characterized by agency, reclamation, self-definition, and sufficiency (McFadden, 2018). As Cynthia Dillard asks us in her book, *Learning to Remember the Things We’ve Learned to Forget* (2012): how might our memories, our encounters, and the representations of our memories act as praise songs in the world? My answer is through my hair aesthetics and the spiritual meanings connected to each of these hairstyles. This is another antidote to the interlocking global vulnerabilities we are experiencing as Black women globally, with varying degrees of impact. In essence, the transformation of my hair becomes a spiritual and physical declaration that my body is liberated.

Innovative Feminist Energies: A Praxis for Collective Healing and Resistance

It is important that Black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering and to seek healing.

~ bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*



Figure 9. The author with her co-facilitators/Trainees of the Self-care for Black Women (SCBW) Program in Kaduna state, Nigeria.
Photo courtesy of the author.

The fusion of my academic, personal, and artistic paths, from engaging Black feminist scholarship, to embodying the resistance of Bata dance, ultimately culminated in practical social action. This journey began from a deeply personal imperative: breaking free from a domestic violence situation while protecting my first child. Given that interpersonal violence accounted for 475,000 deaths globally in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020) and that 13.2% of women aged 15-49 years report being subject to intimate partner violence in a 12-month period (United Nations Women, 2018), this is not merely a private family matter but a global public health crisis. In my family, domestic violence is an intergenerational issue, a consequence of precarity and patriarchal factors that we continue to resist and break free from. Fueled by socio-cultural factors that shame and silence survivors, I understood that individual recovery was inextricably linked to collective accountability and systemic change. My resistance, like that of other African/Black women globally, takes strategic forms: choosing protection for my children, making choices about my body and finances, and pursuing intentional healing. My mother, for example, is continuing our lineage's legacy through the Phebe Dada Foundation, fostering women's financial independence to disrupt a core mechanism of patriarchal violence. My own resistance is integrated into my healing journey, rooted in the Black feminist assertion "that the personal is [always] political" (Taylor, 2019, p. 21; The Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 5). The full liberation of the revolutionary African woman requires a life free from violence, and for survivors like me, justice and healing must happen simultaneously. Otherwise, we risk what Fania Davis warns: "if we don't seek both justice and healing, injustice will continue to replicate itself and we will find ourselves intoning the very same social justice demands generation after generation" (Davis, 2019, p. 41).

The Self-Care for Black Women in Leadership (SCBWL) Program is my direct response to this call, serving as a powerful demonstration of what "Healing Justice Lineages" (Page & Woodland, 2023) looks like in practice. My decade of activism and research, including oral history interviews with Black women healers in the U.S., and my dissertation on the indigenous healing and caring practices of Nigeria's Bajju women, converged in this model. The SCBWL program was originally developed and facilitated by Black queer and feminist women at CompassPoint, a non-profit capacity-building organization based in Oakland, California. The program is a brainchild of Spring Opara, with additional

collaborators including Jasmine Hall, Tarita Thomas, Dr. Jei Watkins, and Simone Thelemaque—founded on the premise that self-care is a radical, political act central to social justice. The program addresses inter-generational trauma stemming from the afterlives of slavery and colonialism, promoting well-being through creative practices like storytelling, dance, meditation, and critical self-reflection, while “defying the lies of Black inferiority and embracing the truth of Black humanity” (The Community Healing Network, 2025).

As a student (2018-2019) and a trained facilitator (2022, 2024), I adapted the curriculum for my dissertation fieldwork in Nigeria, focusing on psychosocial care workers and their clients with experiences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The tenets of the program were contextualized and implemented in Kaduna State, Nigeria in 2023. This transnational collaboration included Nigerian co-facilitators and trainees: Grace Yohanna Abbin⁸ (SARC Salama Branch), Barrister Jennifer Agbaji⁹ (BVPRI), and Kafayat Quadri, PhD,¹⁰ in partnership with SCBWL U.S. alumna, Kendall Roberts¹¹ (Ancestral Wellness). Program participants in Nigeria and their U.S. counterparts connected powerfully with each other through continued mentorship, training, and partnerships. This decolonial, reciprocal, and intra-Black dialogue between U.S. Black women and Nigerian women was healing. It is what Chimamanda Adichie calls for through the relationships of the characters in her book, *Dream Count* (Adichie, 2025; Edwardes, 2025) and what bell hooks consistently declares in her book, *Sisters of the Yam* (2015), that Black women need circles of love and a healing space. The virtual space that these women shared became a testament to this connection, affirming the universality of our struggles, resistance, and collective power as Black women. This practice of radical self-care continues to expand. CompassPoint has since evolved this vital work into the broader “Self-Care for Black Folks Series,” acknowledging that the fight against anti-Blackness requires an intersectional and collective strategy of care for all Black people in leadership and movement spaces. This evolution centers the political truth that self-care must extend beyond the individual to embrace organizational self-care,

⁸ Mrs. Abbin is the Center Manager of the Sexual Assault and Resource Center (SARC), Kafanchan, Kaduna state, Nigeria.

⁹ Barrister Agbaji is the founder of the Basilea Vulnerable Persons Initiative (BVPRI).

¹⁰ Kafayat Quadri is a Nigerian poet, singer-songwriter, music producer, and a Doctor of Philosophy (Law). She specializes in restorative yoga and acoustic music therapy.

¹¹ Kendall Roberts is the Founder/CEO of Ancestral Wellness, LLC in Sacramento, California.

community care, and mutual aid. The program's methodology utilizes ancestral knowledge, oppositional politics, and creative power, to build life-affirming sanctuaries for our generations. By actively creating these intentional, transnational spaces for truth-telling, self-definition, and rest, we engage in the crucial, revolutionary work of transforming the body from a battlefield of historical and racialized trauma, into a space of/for collective power, joy, and self-preservation.

Conclusion

My intention has been to show that existing in the Black body is a revolutionary act and a foundation for political action. By using an Africana feminist lens coupled with my lived experience as a Yoruba woman and scholar-activist-artist, I sought to counter Empire's hold on my body and recenter the body as a sacred entity. The resistance through which this is articulated operates along three inseparable and interlocking forms. First, through the aesthetic reclamation of the body, the oppositional girlhood politics against patriarchal gaze, and the conscious decision to adorn my hair with Owo Eyó (cowrie shells). These rituals of cultural memory invoke the energy of Oya to embrace the truth of our humanity as Black people. Second, epistolary practice as a form of self-care, and as a lifeline during my most formative years as a teenager, demonstrating how writing, whether in poetry, letters, or via my research is a necessary political tool for self-definition and self-preservation. Writing enables truth-telling and helps break the silence surrounding gendered violence (domestic violence), and creates a discursive space, essential for our collective healing. My transnational praxis synthesizes these personal tools into collective action via dance rituals as a shared creative practice for building intra-Black solidarity. Building trans-national networks to support the psychosocial wellbeing of women through the implementation of the Self-Care for Black Women in Leadership Program in Nigeria is also a form of moving the revolutionary African woman from margins to the center of collective liberation and healing. Co-creating these spaces with a global network of African and African diaspora women is an extension of the maternal helix that nurtured me. The continuation of the revolutionary African woman depends on our ability to honor this ongoing maternal helix of collective care. We achieve this by resisting the urge to compartmentalize ourselves to fit the narrow modes and constructions of societal norms, knowing that as Black women, we do not live single-issue lives (Collins, 2022). As Fania Davis

(2019) also reminds us, justice and healing must happen simultaneously to prevent injustice from replicating itself. Therefore, the most profound act of revolution is the daily commitment to radical self-care, forging innovative feminist energies through our body aesthetics, the art, and the community. This collective work is our ongoing declaration: The body is whole, the spirit is sovereign, and the journey toward collective liberation continues.

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