

Self-care as resistance: Lorde, Foucault, and playfulness

Feminist Theory

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/14647001251398021

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Abstract

Self-care has emerged as a critical practice of resistance in the current era of far-right resurgence. Building particularly on Audre Lorde's insights, scholars, activists, and cultural workers conceptualize self-care as an act of political defiance and a strategy of collective survival. This article brings three different views of self-care into conversation. Beginning with Lorde's vision and contrasting it with Michel Foucault's ethics of the self, I show that both thinkers illuminate political dimensions of care that have long resonated in queer and feminist thought. Lorde emphasizes self-care as survival and solidarity; Foucault foregrounds non-domination and the cultivation of freedom. Both confront the paradoxical relationship between withdrawal and engagement, solitude and community, availability and self-knowledge – not as problems to be solved but as constitutive ambiguities of radical politics. Building on these insights, I propose a third approach: self-care as playfulness. This approach foregrounds moments of forgetting oneself – of 'being no one' temporarily – while sustaining mutual recognition and responsibility for justice. Together, these three approaches reveal how the political significance of self-care crystallizes not in clarity or resolution but in the capacity to affirm and inhabit ambiguity as part of a reflective, engaged way of being in the world.

Keywords

ambiguity, ethics, feminism, Foucault, Lorde, prefiguration, queer theory, self-care

Introduction

Feminist scholars, activists and cultural critics have reclaimed self-care as a form of political resistance (Ward, 2015; Wyatt and Ampadu, 2022). Audre Lorde's (2017: 130) assertion that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that

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is an act of political warfare' resonates amid intensifying far-right mobilization and patterns of violence against marginalized communities. This renewed interest in Lorde – and in thinkers like Michel Foucault (1997) – reflects a broader desire to locate practices of care within struggles for survival, ethics and liberation (Caldera, 2020; Holdo, 2025a; Nicol and Yee, 2017; Rosenbaum and Talmor, 2022).

At the same time, self-care has also drawn scholarly attention as a cultural and commercial phenomenon (Martínez-Jiménez, 2023; Michaeli, 2017; Wyatt and Ampadu, 2022; Zuckerwise, 2024). It has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, marketed through corporate campaigns and pop-feminist influencer culture as relaxation or lifestyle branding. In this commercial form, self-care is often stripped of its political content and recast as an individual responsibility. Feminist scholars have critiqued this shift for reinforcing neoliberal consumerism and hyper-individualism (Ahmed, 2016; Martínez-Jiménez, 2023; Riccitelli, 2025). The emphasis on rest, retreat and boundary setting is particularly contentious at a time when collective action and solidarity are urgently needed. In response, many have been inclined to dismiss contemporary discourses of self-care as merely neoliberal appropriations of feminist practices. Yet alongside these critiques, a parallel current has emerged that seeks to reclaim self-care as a radical political concept – something, as Schulz et al. (2023) put it, 'beyond bubble baths and chocolate pralines'.

I aim to contribute to that effort. I will use the term 'self-care' to refer to *practices of sustaining oneself ethically and politically in relation to structures of domination and resistance* (see Ahmed, 2016; Lorde, 2017). It is not privatized self-improvement, but a practice of resistance, survival and interdependence. As both Lorde and Foucault argue, care of the self is not a retreat from the world but a political act of resistance and transformation.

Arguments for self-care raise enduring questions, however: How much can individuals give to collective projects without erasing themselves? How much can collectives ask of individuals and still remain liberatory? Recent feminist and queer interventions have reframed self-care as communal – emphasizing mutual support, shared nourishment and the labour of sustaining political engagement (Nicol and Yee, 2017; Ward, 2015; Zuckerwise, 2024). Yet within such frameworks, self-care risks becoming seen as valuable only insofar as it serves a collective purpose. The right to withdraw, to change oneself or to play – without needing to justify those acts as politically useful – appears suspect as the tension between solitude and solidarity is resolved in favour of the latter.

This article does not aim to resolve such tensions between personal or individual needs and public or collective struggles but to hold space for them. I argue that the radical potential of self-care lies precisely in its affirmation of ambiguity. Feminist and queer theorists have long insisted on the generative power of paradox – its ability to resist normativity and open space for alternative visions (e.g. Butler and Connolly, 2000; De Beauvoir, 1962; Rand, 2014). Following that tradition, I propose that self-care operates as a dynamic negotiation between solitude and solidarity, self-knowledge and social availability and finally, seriousness and play.

The last of these three conceptual pairs is a dimension of self-care that neither Lorde nor Foucault treated as such. Self-care as playfulness foregrounds pleasure, humour and creative release – not as distractions from political life but as practices of survival,

imagination and freedom. Play offers the possibility of becoming no one – or *anyone* – for a moment, while remaining accountable to others. It makes visible a further tension between the self and the collective: between the freedom to laugh and forget oneself and one's place in the world, on the one hand, and the necessity of recognition and responsibility – in other words, *seriousness* – on the other. Suggesting playfulness as a dimension of self-care thus brings forth an additional ambiguity.

Together, these three views – self-care as survival, as ethical transformation and as play – highlight the friction at the heart of care. Rather than undermining political clarity, I argue that these tensions are central to self-care's prefigurative potential. If care is to enact – even provisionally – the worlds that feminist scholars and activists hope to build, then it must make room for us not to choose but to claim and explore ways to care for the self and for the world equally and somehow at the same time. This is not a liberal claim about individual self-expression but an insistence that ambiguity – the coexistence of solitude and solidarity, self-knowledge and interdependence – is itself political.

In exploring these ideas, I draw not only on conventional theory but also on feminist and queer poetry and fiction. Just as substantial parts of feminist thought have emerged from artistic spheres (Collins, 2022), so too has the practice of self-care (which Lorde illustrates well, being both scholar and poet, as well as activist).¹ In what follows, I develop this argument in two parts. The second section introduces ambiguity as a prefigurative political framework. The third to fifth sections explore the three concepts of self-care, focusing on the ways that ambiguity serves as the basic condition for each. I end with a concluding discussion, where I stress the prefigurative understanding of self-care that informs all three concepts of self-care.

Ambiguity and the debates on self-care

Feminist theorists have long given ambiguity a central place in their work. Simone De Beauvoir (1962), for instance, argued that accepting ambiguity is the necessary starting point for ethical reflection – since ethical decisions are rarely made in conditions of moral certainty. More recent feminist work has continued this tradition, emphasizing situated knowledge and judgement in the face of complexity (e.g. Tronto, 1993), while queer and radical feminist thinkers have critiqued modern society's demand for clarity, order and decisiveness (Engel, 2006; Halberstam, 1999: 154; Honkasalo, 2016). Ambiguity is especially important in feminist theory for two reasons: it reveals our interdependence, and it affirms the right to resist or transcend normative expectations (De Vuyst, 2022; Karlyn, 2011).

I use ambiguity as an analytical framework to explore the shared structure of self-care in Lorde and Foucault. Rather than a stable or unified concept, self-care emerges as fundamentally ambiguous – resisting neat distinctions between individual and collective, resistance and compliance, solitude and solidarity. This refusal to be either/or is not a flaw: ambiguity reveals self-care's radical potential by holding space for contradiction and complexity. It allows us to move beyond the impulse to resolve tensions that are, in fact, generative.

We can explore this view of self-care, as a refusal to resolve tensions between collectivity and solitude, further. Judith Butler's engagement with Hannah Arendt provides a compelling starting point. Butler (2012: 150) argues that because people do not choose with whom they cohabit the earth, they are obligated to care for lives they may neither know nor love (see also Honkasalo, 2016). This underscores two key points: people are (a) interdependent, and (b) entangled with others who may be unruly or non-conforming. This applies, moreover, to whole societies as well as smaller social contexts, including communities of care and resistance. Thus, there will always be a tension between the desire to belong to a collective and the desire to be left alone. Acting together without coercion – that is, without imposing any one person's or group's will on others – requires recognition and acceptance of our differences. Butler writes: 'no one part of the population [...] can claim the earth for itself' and thus deny its interdependence with others whom it needs to recognize as equally entitled (Butler, 2012: 145).

Ambiguity also functions as an ethos in post-structuralist thought, particularly in critiques of both liberalism and Marxism. Liberalism, while formally tolerant of difference, often treats complexity and unruliness as problems to be managed – so long as others' freedom remains untouched. A politics grounded in ambiguity, by contrast, embraces difference as constitutive and affirms the need for mutual recognition in shaping public life (Connolly, 1983). Meanwhile, traditional leftist thought has often centred economic redistribution without fully engaging the question of recognition or the complexity of lived identity (Butler, 2012; Cohen, 1994). Several Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers have engaged productively with this question (see Berman, 1983; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014), and the challenge that Marxism has in common with liberalism, to, as William Connolly (1983: 340) puts it, speak 'sensitively to the wish of citizens to participate in the common life while maintaining a degree of freedom from thorough entanglement in the forces of community and order'.

Embracing ambiguity means resisting both becoming absorbed into a collective and the individualist stance of taking responsibility only for oneself. The common phrase 'there is no I in team' implies that individual needs must be sacrificed for collective strength. By contrast, embracing ambiguity means that neither the individual nor the collective should be treated as inherently primary. A collective that erases individual needs and desires will reproduce domination. But individualism, if it ignores interdependence, can do the same. Tensions between the self and others are therefore not obstacles to overcome – they are the conditions of ethical and political life. Holding space for ambiguity is an act of seizing responsibility.²

I suggest considering ambiguity as what makes self-care radical and prefigurative.³ It offers a radical vision of community based on the recognition of each person's needs and a path towards it. With ambiguity, activists can visualize the need to act in solidarity with others while also finding the time and space to withdraw to centre ourselves.

Embracing ambiguity thereby challenges both the individualistic argument for self-care and the tendency in feminist discourse to subordinate care of the self to collective struggle. The first of these arguments – self-care as individualist or neoliberal – has been extensively critiqued (Holdo, 2023, 2025b; Hernández Cárdenas and Tello Méndez, 2017; Martínez-Jiménez, 2023; Michaeli, 2017; Ward, 2015). These critiques

emphasize how consumerist and neoliberal appropriations of self-care depoliticize it, reducing it to privatized self-improvement or lifestyle branding. Bringing these critiques into the discussion highlights the stakes of reclaiming Lorde and Foucault's approaches as alternatives. But the second, in activist circles more widespread view – that justifies self-care as necessary to carry on – also warrants scrutiny. It appears in three main versions.

In the first, feminist self-care is justified only in contexts of unambiguous suffering. As many scholars note, Lorde wrote her statements on self-care while literally struggling for survival. *A Burst of Light* is a collection of diary entries from the first three years of living with liver cancer. This battle with illness, she writes in the essay's introduction, 'is only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph' (Lorde, 2017: 83). Several scholars have emphasized that Lorde's writing on self-care offers a political understanding of surviving. Sara Ahmed (2016: 237) writes: 'Some of us have to be inventive, Audre Lorde suggests, to survive'. By contrast, she claims, those for whom 'a whole world is organised to promote their] survival, from health to education, to the walls designed to keep [their] residence safe, to the paths that ease [their] travel [...] do not have [to] become so inventive to survive' (Ahmed, 2016: 237).

Emphasizing this reading of Lorde's argument for self-care resolves the tensions between collective needs and personal needs by claiming that attending the latter is necessary to survive. But if self-care were only about survival in hostile conditions, as these authors seem to suggest, then Lorde's famous statement would seem self-evident. As I will discuss in the next section, Lorde's reflection reaches further in important ways.

There is another version of this emphasis on the necessity of self-care for carrying on. Here, self-care is seen as a way of 'recharging' one's capacity to participate. Nicol and Yee (2017), for example, draw on Lorde, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa to argue that self-care is necessary for women of colour in academia to endure oppressive conditions and to continue the political struggle. In this framing, self-care is primarily justified by the way it enables further participation. In their view, Lorde links 'self-care and revolution' and hooks 'maintains that black women who seek personal fulfillment [...] are then better equipped to remain connected to the larger collective struggle for equality and social justice', while Anzaldúa, in 'a similar vein', 'promotes the notion of self-fulfillment as resistance against oppression' (Nicol and Yee, 2017: 134–135). Nicol and Yee treat self-care as justified if it helps one return stronger to the collective struggle.⁴

I think that both the individualistic consumerist view and the collectivist view that treats self-care as a mere instrument in a political struggle miss crucial parts of Lorde's – and Foucault's – arguments. Both thinkers recognized self-care not just as a means but as an end: a practice that affirms the value of the self not merely in service of a cause but as part of imagining another world. Inna Michaeli offers a third and broader perspective in her discussion of self-care among activists. Like Ahmed, she argues that in a world that denies care, self-care can become part of a revolt against systemic inequalities: patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism. She illustrates this by describing a forum where care activities – from bodywork to moments of joy – were offered to activists:

it looked like this: Amazement at how a treatment feels, if it was the first time you ever experienced one; conversations about safe houses and retreats for activists; wanting to talk about stress, pain, and hurt; wanting to talk about and experience joy and pleasure; thanking the practitioner with tears and hugs; moving your body in new ways, discovering rhythms, imagination and force you weren't aware of; sharing love. (Michaeli, 2017: 53)

While Michaeli stresses that the point is not 'being happy and relaxed as the world around us crumbles into pieces' (2017: 54), there is more room, from this perspective, for 'joy and pleasure', 'discovering rhythms', 'imagination' and 'sharing love' – things that may be part of an expanded idea of survival but can also be articulated as moving *beyond* survival. To acknowledge that self-care can be about things that are not, strictly or necessarily, orientated towards a collective struggle is to approach the space of ambiguity. This indicates, at least, that there might be more to the concept of self-care than recovering to make oneself available as part of a social battle.

Lorde: Self-care as survival and solidarity

Audre Lorde's reflections on self-care confront two struggles at once – the systemic violence of a racist and sexist society, and the intimate struggle of living with cancer (Lorde, 2017). Her insistence on self-preservation was not abstract but concrete and situated; her determination to live 'as fully and as sweetly as possible' (Lorde, 2017: 130) was a call not for withdrawing or escaping from politics but for understanding survival and well-being as an essential part of an emancipatory feminist struggle. Lorde's reflections on self-care immediately acknowledge its collective aspects by noting repeatedly how those subject to systemic violence depend on each other for survival. She attributes the extension of her life to both a medical decision and to 'the loving energies of women who supported me in that decision and in the work which gives that life shape' (Lorde, 2017: 130). Lorde's account of self-care is thus rooted in solidarity, in connection, and is based on an intersectional critique of gendered, sexual and racial inequalities of life conditions. She even visualizes her fight with cancer as a struggle against systemic enemies, in which

the cancer at times takes on the face and shape of my most implacable enemies, those I fight and resist most fiercely. Sometimes the wanton cells in my liver become Bull Connor and his police dogs completely smothered, rendered impotent in Birmingham, Alabama, by a mighty avalanche of young, determined Black marchers moving across him toward their future. (Lorde, 2017: 132)

In Lorde's writing, the body becomes a site of political struggle, and caring for it an act of resistance against a racist, patriarchal system that denies women and Black bodies the recognition of interdependence.⁵

Lorde's view thus could not be further from the pop feminist idea of claiming the freedom to self-indulge. Self-care is not an act of withdrawal but an act of engagement. However, her view challenges readers in various other ways, too. First, while self-care

does not mean withdrawing from the collective political struggle, it is an act of recentring oneself.⁶ She acknowledges how solitude and space for personal reflection are not only necessary for her to recharge but also essential for reconnecting with herself, her desires, needs and passion. Her journals describe how she seeks refuge in ‘the loneliest of places’ to examine her life, decisions and the ‘self-destructiveness implanted inside of me by racism and sexism’ (Lorde, 2017: 52). At the same time as she acknowledges that her ‘greatest internal enemies’ are the feelings of ‘despair’ and ‘isolation’ that she encounters when ‘alone’, she stresses the need of ‘protecting my solitude’ (Lorde, 2017: 67).

Lorde’s words may in some ways echo Virginia Woolf’s argument for the need to hear one’s own voice and thinking in *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf, 2015) and several novels.⁷ Woolf’s view was that the space of solitude was necessary not just to recharge or survive but also to hear one’s own thoughts. Lorde seems to ask that readers recognize this need in relation to feminist emancipatory projects. For Lorde, this means ‘loving, and doing work in which I believe’, which is ‘a political decision as well as a life-saving one’ (Lorde, 2017: 130). It is about engaging in a political struggle that is necessarily collective yet must preserve each person’s space. ‘Overextending myself’, Lorde (2017: 130) writes, ‘is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference’. One can read this as meaning that the challenge of continuously engaging with and confronting systemic injustices does not always make one stronger; it also requires rest and recovery. However, this is unlikely to be the main point, not only because Lorde did not conceptualize self-care as a pause from engagement but also because she did not reduce it to an act instrumental to returning stronger, and thereby more useful, to the collective struggle. Rather, Lorde refuses to separate collective struggle from personal survival and well-being, thereby challenging the very question of which is primary and which is merely instrumental.

Lorde’s thinking in this regard moves further than many contemporary feminist thinkers. For example, Joan Tronto (2015: 34) has warned against neglecting self-care in the name of caring for others, and Jane Mansbridge (1990: 133) has argued that altruism must be sustained by self-interest ‘to prevent the extinction of either the altruistic motive or the altruist’. Lorde’s commitment to ‘protecting my solitude’ and to ‘doing work in which I believe’ goes further than preventing extinction – it is as much about living a truly authentic life with deep meaning and joy: ‘I am first and last [...] a poet’, she writes. ‘Everything I do, I hope, reflects that view of life’ (Lorde, 2017: 54). Her personal workspace – ‘simple and quiet’, a place for writing, centring and morning visualizations – was not just a retreat but a vital condition for living (Lorde, 2017: 120).

For Lorde, the need for solitude and the need for solidarity are equally valid; neither should be reduced to an instrument for the other. Lorde’s descriptions of collective work are inseparable from an awareness that such work must support – rather than erase – the need for solitude. Moreover, the recurring intersectional critique of collective spaces that excluded or marginalized Black women and lesbians in the collection *Sister Outsider* (Lorde, 2019) reflects this same issue.⁸ In one of the essays, ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’, Lorde not only affirms that women’s self-knowledge – especially through poetry – is foundational both to their survival and to political transformation, she also claims that it is an essential part of the political struggle she identifies with: ‘Poetry is the way we help give

name to the nameless so it can be thought' (Lorde, 2019: 37). Thus, dismantling the master's house collectively requires cultivating spaces of solitude and desire – spaces that must coexist, often ambiguously, with those of gathering together.

Foucault: Self-care as an ethos of non-domination

Michel Foucault's concept of self-care focuses not on solidarity but on non-domination, and the tension is not with solitude as a poetic space, or a space for hearing one's authentic own voice, but with a need for self-knowledge and self-transformation. Like Lorde, however, Foucault confronted an ambiguous relationship between the engagement with the world and withdrawing to attend to one's individual needs and desires. He saw self-care as an ongoing process of ethical self-formation – a 'conscious practice of freedom' that at once was self-focused and affirmed one's responsibility towards others (Foucault, 1997: 284).⁹

Several scholars have critiqued Foucault's emphasis on self-realization for appearing too individualistic or disconnected from political struggle (see Posselt, 2021). While this concern seems valid, it may miss the ethical grounding of Foucault's view. Like contemporary theorists, including bell hooks (2004),¹⁰ Foucault argued that caring for the self is what enables one to respect and protect the freedom of others. In an interview, Foucault (1997: 285) described ancient ethics as organized around the imperative to 'Take care of yourself'. This imperative was not solitary. As he noted, 'The care of the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others' (Foucault, 1997: 285). Foucault viewed this ethos of freedom as reciprocal: one cares for the freedom of others by cultivating it in oneself. Moreover, he insisted that the care for the self is *prior* to one's relationships with others (Foucault, 1997: 287).¹¹

As for Lorde, there are two ways to resolve the tensions between the need for cultivating one's relationship to the self and the responsibility to engage with the world. One would be to argue that this idea of self-care is a form of self-centredness. This has been the main objection to Foucault's view (Infinito, 2003): his concept of self-care appears to justify a focus on the self that might obstruct, or distract from, caring for others. Foucault, however, insisted that this could not be further from his intention. At one point, he even claims that proper self-care renders domination impossible:

the risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires. But if you take proper care of yourself [...] you cannot abuse your power over others. Thus, there is no danger. (Foucault, 1997: 288)

For a thinker famous for stating that 'everything is dangerous', this seems an overly confident assertion. However, it points to a second way to resolve the tensions between the self and the collective: to see self-care as always concerned with one's relationships to others. This seems, after all, to be what Foucault is suggesting when he centres his argument for self-care on its effects on how one relates to others: if you take care of yourself,

‘you cannot abuse your power over others’. Queer thinkers and activists have argued, similarly, that heteronormative violence originates in people’s lack of care for themselves (e.g. Connolly, 1983; Halberstam, 2002; hooks, 2000: 134).¹²

A popular articulation of this idea appears in an interview with the non-binary performer and poet Alok Vaid-Menon. Asked why so many men fail to defend non-binary people against gendered violence, Alok responds: ‘The reason you don’t fight for me is because you’re not fighting for yourself fully’. For Alok, the refusal to fight for others’ freedom stems from an unhealed relationship to one’s own self. ‘Are you ready to heal?’, they ask. ‘I don’t think the majority of people are ready to heal, and that’s why they repress us as trans and gender-variant people, because they’ve done this violence to themselves first’. Alok concludes by reframing the question from the interviewer entirely: ‘Can you help me get free? Not: Can you help me help you?’ (The Man Enough Podcast, 2021).

This idea – that those who do not fight for the freedom of others are themselves not free – also surfaces in Okechukwu Nzelu’s novel *Here Again Now*, where Achike reflects on his father’s inability to be vulnerable. The father, Chibuike, cannot offer acceptance and love to his son because he has never granted it to himself.

What kind of person refused to be vulnerable? What kind of person, being vulnerable, insisted on also being strong?

Chibuike told Achike never to let anyone know what he was. Since he wanted a career as an actor, Chibuike advised, it was best to keep his secrets to himself. And try to change, if he could. That was the father Chibuike had been. (Nzelu, 2023: 76)

Like hooks, Nzelu suggests that domination and emotional suppression are linked – and that freedom requires a practice of self-care. The lack of self-care can reproduce domination.

Both Alok and Nzelu illustrate the tensions and risks of applying Foucault’s thinking as an approach to patriarchal violence. It is one thing to free oneself and a very different thing to actively support others’ freedom (see Halberstam, 2002). The idea that ‘men must heal first’ can, if unexamined, re-center men in feminist struggles – reinforcing a dynamic in which they are imagined as both the victims of patriarchal oppression and of liberation, rather than as participants in a shared, interdependent struggle. These twin dangers – the risk of engaging others without self-work, and the risk of self-care without solidarity – reflect the ambiguity at the heart of Foucault’s project. He insists that care for the self and care for others are both essential, yet offers no clear method for reconciling the tensions between them. The ethical space he envisions is inherently unstable: to cultivate an ethos of non-domination, one must center oneself enough to engage in ethical self-formation, but not so fully as to become absorbed in the self alone.

Foucault was thus wrong in claiming that self-care by itself resolves issues of domination – contrary to his argument, there is danger even with self-care. There are two dangers, in fact: on the one hand, the risk of centering oneself at the expense of engaging in the struggle for a just world, and, on the other hand, the risk of engaging

in such struggles without having worked on, and having gotten to know, oneself. If we accept these risks and take responsibility for handling them with care, Foucault offers a way to ground political engagement in a continuous practice of embodied self-awareness, self-exploration and becoming. In Nzelu's terms, this means a practice of 'being vulnerable' as opposed to 'being strong'. Across his work, Foucault also reminds us that the self is not outside power but produced through it; thus, self-care entails a reflective refusal to reproduce violence, and a bodily assertion of agency and non-domination. Such care must allow space to process the violence inscribed upon the self – not merely as a means to serve collective aims but as an affirmation of the self's right to exist otherwise. Still, this self is never separate from the world. The act of becoming – of claiming the freedom to know and remake oneself – is, ultimately, a practice of engaging the world differently.

Playfulness, seriousness and the politics of joy

Among the many harms that racist, sexist and patriarchal violence do is how they shape subjects' relationship to enjoyment and pleasure. In Bourdieu's (1999) sense, living with such effects is to carry 'the weight of the world' – to be constantly reminded of the norms and their enforcement through various forms of violence. It is, moreover, to long for this weight to be lifted, to experience lightness, even weightlessness, even if only momentarily. Desire needs playfulness, and playfulness needs space – and spaces for playfulness require, just as Lorde's spaces for poetry and Foucault's spaces for self-exploration, practices of care.

Butler (1999: 20) writes in a discussion of the role that desire and pleasure play in queer and feminist thought that because 'a subject is both constituted by power and a nodal point in the rearticulation and transformation of power', so are people's desires and pleasures. They are produced, afflicted and proliferated, Butler contends, through constraint, through pain. Therefore, any understanding and embrace of desire and pleasure must accept 'a certain ineradicable sense of ambivalence' (Butler, 1999: 20). If our desires and pleasures are themselves shaped through relations of power – including through violence – then they cannot aim to recover some imagined, autonomous self. Instead, they must begin within this terrain of formation, where power and resistance are already entangled. Care is not about purifying the self from power's imprint but about inhabiting that ambivalence playfully and reflectively. It is a practice of making room for pleasure and lightness in the midst of power relations by creating spaces where desires can be rearticulated rather than denied. In this sense, care becomes a way of living freedom not as detachment from power but as its playful reworking.

In suggesting that playfulness adds a critical dimension to the understanding of self-care, I do not use the word in a trivial or escapist sense, but to underline important aspects of what makes self-care political and potentially radical. Playfulness, as I use the word, represents a refusal of the binary between serious political struggle and supposedly frivolous joy. It embraces the ambiguity and the ambivalence sensed when acting on a desire for weightlessness, for pure joy, in a violent world. My aim is thus to explore this dimension of self-care and to make visible the tension between the longing for pure enjoyment

in spaces of 'weightlessness', for living out fantasies, on the one hand, and the responsibility that comes with being aware and attentive to the impact of social relations on the realization of that longing – the tension, that is, between allowing oneself to be a weightless 'no one' for a moment and still being accountable to others. Playfulness, I want to show, adds something critical to Lorde's and Foucault's visions of self-care. It adds another realm alongside Lorde's poetic, solidaric space and Foucault's space for knowing/redefining one's self. It also adds another tension by insisting, on the one hand, that laughter, humour and pleasure are not luxuries but essential for survival and struggle; and, at the same time, that their social and political circumstances need to be taken seriously, by being reflected upon them intersectionally. It asks us to consider what joys and pleasures, what forms of play, are available, or not available, to people depending on their social positions, and how can we recognize a person's need to be playful even as we acknowledge their subjectification to structures of domination? This argument for playfulness reveals that a radical politics of self-care must be grounded in a recognition of ambiguity and ambivalence, precisely because it can neither escape the political world nor be reduced to an expression of it.

My entry point for further reflecting on playfulness draws not only on Butler but also on Maria Lugones' (1987) exploration of the complex relationship between privilege, joy and humour in *Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception*. Lugones articulates, in a different but complementary way, some of the same ambivalences and ambiguities that mark the experience of desire and pleasure in constrained social worlds. Her argument appears paradoxical at first: she contends that 'world-travelling' – her term for full immersion into different experiences of the world – is both made possible by privilege and, at the same time, obstructed by it. Those who inhabit positions of privilege, she argues, often lack the kind of playfulness that would allow them to travel to other worlds – to imagine or inhabit different perspectives and ways of being. At the same time, such travelling, especially to worlds in which one can be playful, is enabled by a sense of ease and safety. Playfulness is thus both enabled by comfort and defined by the willingness to *not* simply remain comfortable. It requires, at once, that people act on their desires and curiosity, and that we to subvert structures of privilege.

Thus, playfulness involves being allowed, and allowing oneself, to be no one or anyone, while at the same time being conscious of how such play depends on patterns of collective care and the possibility to subvert patterns of domination. Édouard Louis's (2022) *A Woman's Battles and Transformations* illustrates this point by describing both the causes of rage and sources of pleasure of Louis' mother, Monique. At one point, a young Louis enters the living room and interrupts his mother dancing to her favourite song. He tells her to stop, to which she responds: 'Can I not for one night have fun in this shit life?'. As Louis later reflects as an adult, the point of his intervention was precisely to stop her – to remind her of who she is and what is supposed to be possible for her. He has learned this from his father, who also policed and punished her joy. However, later in life, she finds small ways to reclaim a sense of freedom. 'I went for a stroll in the Luxembourg Garden today', she tells Louis. 'I had coffee on the terrasse at a café near my place' (Louis, 2022: 87). These moments, as described by Louis, are quiet acts of resistance – ways to momentarily step outside the social role imposed on her.

To allow herself to a moment of ease, pleasure, fun, play – even if they are small acts that others take for granted, they allow her to be someone else, or perhaps no one at all, for just a moment.

Sara Ahmed's (2016) feminist 'Killjoy Survival Kit' makes a similar point about the need for ease and fun. Item number 8 in the kit is humour. Feminist killjoys, Ahmed writes, refuse to laugh at jokes that aren't funny – especially when they are sexist or cruel. 'But we do laugh', she insists. 'And feminist laughter can *lighten our loads*' (Ahmed, 2016: 245, emphasis mine). 'In fact,' she writes, 'we laugh often in recognition of the shared absurdity of this world; or just in recognition of this world'.¹³ Laughter thus serves on the one hand to offer a moment of lightness – to 'lighten our loads', in Ahmed's words. Emily Beausoleil (2021) similarly reflects on how humorous and embodied tactics can generate what she calls 'oblique forms of listening' that serve social justice struggles. Both Ahmed and Beausoleil thus suggest that laughter is a reminder of connection and recognition of a shared sense of absurdity and pain.¹⁴

Louis's interruption of his mother's dance can be read as an attempt to pull her back, make her remember her place – her gender and class, in particular – and feel, in Bourdieu's (1999) phrase, the weight of the world. In both Louis's account and Bourdieu's theory (a strong influence on Louis), there is little room for play. Perhaps this is because playfulness is often associated with carelessness, or with a failure to grasp the seriousness of the state of things. But as Louis reminds us in this scene, seriousness, too, can be a form of oppression when imposed on a person who simply allows herself to act outside the confines of her social position for a moment. The person who never leaves their seriousness cannot find relief or enjoyment.

Lugones offers an alternative. The experience of world-travelling, she writes, is the experience of 'being different in different "worlds" and of having the capacity to remember other "worlds" and ourselves in them' (Lugones, 1987: 11). These other worlds can be worlds we inhabited in moments in life when things seemed possible that later, or elsewhere, appear closed off. Even when one experiences the world as heavy, there can still be moments of refuge – spaces where one feels 'at ease in a "world"' (Lugones, 1987: 12). In such spaces, one can relax, be vulnerable, be playful – because one feels safe, recognized, and at home. To be 'at ease' is feel connection, to be fluent in the language of this world, to be 'with those I love and [know that] they love me too' (Lugones, 1987: 12).

This concept of self-care gestures towards a world in which people are free to travel between seriousness and play, to be someone or no one, without punishment. If one's social identity weighs heavily, playfulness can offer a moment of becoming anonymous, of lightening the load. But, as Lugones reminds us, this kind of forgetfulness is only possible when one is also recognized – as *someone*. Thus, to be allowed to act outside the limits of a social position is also to be recognized as belonging in a space with others. This is the privilege of feeling the sense of safety that allows one to be playful and to experience fully the joy of playing.

As Ahmed reminds us, moreover, this joy is something entirely different from the laughter that comes from the cruel humour of sexist, racist and anti-gender jokes at rallies or in online forums. The laughter of Donald Trump's supporters, or the 'manosphere', is often a

performance of domination that seeks to deprive others of the freedom and safety to be playful, and to impose on them a need to watch out. This is laughter as control, a way of tightening the boundaries of who gets to feel at ease. White supremacy, misogyny and anti-genderism thereby threaten to reduce affected people's practices of self-care to mere survival. Against this, queer joy, love and small acts of transgression become more than personal expressions – they are ways of claiming space, of refusing the world as it is given. They are central to a celebration of life that functions as a form of resistance (Wright and Burkholder, 2025). At the same time, to be subject to these forms of violence is both to not be recognized as someone – a bearer of rights and part of relations of inter-dependence (Butler, 2012) – and to be deprived of the freedom to explore life's possibilities beyond the socially imposed horizon.

Ocean Vuong (2017) tenderly captures this dual desire for anonymity and identity in the poem 'Seventh Circle of Earth,' in which he imagines the final moments of Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, a gay couple killed when someone set their home on fire in Dallas, Texas, in 2011:

'As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself. To forget / we built this house knowing / it won't last'.

This opening suggests an intimate space for playfulness. The touch is an act of affirmation and liberation: to 'erase myself' is to become momentarily weightless, freed from the heavy impositions of social structures and identity, fear and violence:

'Don't laugh. Just tell me the story / again, / of the sparrows who flew from falling Rome / their blazed wings. / How ruin nested inside each thimble throat / & made it sing'.

The lovers create a fragile refuge. Their tenderness is a quiet refusal to let the world dictate the meaning of their final moments. Vuong ends the poem naming the paradox of making space for playfulness amidst violent destruction: 'Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still American'. These final lines, as I read them, suggest that to be 'no one' is to allow oneself and each other, if only for a moment, to be unburdened and unmarked by the scripts that kill, while being 'still American' here signifies the promise of citizenship, of the recognition as bearers of rights that they afford each other even when the violence of the world outside denies it. Thus, they recognize each other as being someone ('still American'), but this seriousness is preceded by the contrasting sweetness of being allowed to be no one ('to erase myself') – a weightlessness and wish for a world that could have been. Like Lorde's poetic space and Foucault's space for self-exploration, playfulness holds space for an ambiguous relationship – that between being recognized and being free to be no one or anyone.

Conclusion

This article has traced three visions of self-care that resist easy resolution: Lorde's ethic of solidarity, Foucault's practice of non-domination and third view, which I call playfulness.

Each engages the tensions at the heart of self-care – between solitude and community, availability and self-knowledge, seriousness and joy – without resolving them. These tensions are not obstacles to radical politics but constitutive of it. In each vision, care is not simply a means of sustaining action; it is itself a form of action, a space where the personal and the political remain entangled and in flux.

What emerges, then, is a shared structure of ambiguity: self-care refuses stable boundaries between self and world, or between private retreat and public commitment. It is not reducible to survival, nor to productivity, nor even to the collective alone. It is a practice that may involve withdrawal, but not in opposition to the world – instead, as part of a continuous, embodied negotiation of how to live, resist and relate. In this sense, ambiguity is not a flaw to be clarified but a condition to inhabit – a space where contradictions are not resolved but are made liveable.

For Lorde, poetry was not a retreat from politics but a form of self-care that deepened her commitment to justice – an act that held solitude and solidarity together. Staying with that tension, and with her sense of what poetry makes possible, I have turned to poets and novelists throughout because their work gives form to the ambiguities of care as felt, embodied practices that defy the binary between inner life and political life.

Attending to the ambiguity at the heart of self-care also opens space for a different kind of inquiry – the kind that approaches empirical and theoretical issues without seeking to resolve their ambiguities but instead understand what forms of political life they make possible.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Svenska Forskningsrådet Formas (grant number 2023-01681).

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Notes

1. Jack Halberstam (2011) refers to his use of fiction as ‘silly archives’ – works that may not present themselves as serious theory but which nonetheless articulate critical insights into lived experience. I do not think that the works of fiction and poetry I use in this article are ‘silly’ in all the ways that Halberstam uses the concept, but I share his insistence on respecting artistic expressions that many might not classify as works of theory.
2. De Beauvoir insisted that ethical responsibility begins with recognizing one’s freedom to act, but that freedom will be fake unless based on the recognition of interdependence.
3. Feminist scholars have approached collective care ethics (Sargsyan, 2019) and environmental care (Nicoson, 2024) as prefigurative. Butler’s argument for non-violence is another case

of feminist prefigurative politics, which at one point comes close to an argument for self-care as resistance: a concept of self-preservation, Butler writes, must be linked to preserving the lives of others, because otherwise, ‘who would that “self” be who preserves itself and only those who belong already to the regime of itself?’ (Butler, 2020: 149).

4. Despite this, I think that few of the authors who see self-care as merely instrumental to collective action endorse the liberal distinction between private and public that seems to inform this idea of self-care; that is, a view according to which self-care involves a withdrawal to a private, non-political sphere, which can be legitimate in so far as it enables one to come back stronger to the public, political realm.
5. Lorde also returns to the theme of mutual recognition repeatedly. Mourning the death of a fellow Black poet who died in isolation, she writes: ‘and I think of what it could have meant in terms of sisterhood and survival for each one of us to have known of the other’s existence: for me to have had her words and her wisdom, and for her to have known I needed them! It is so crucial for each one of us to know she is not alone’ (Lorde, 2017: 240).
6. Lorde’s insistence on self-care as political highlights what often remains invisible. bell hooks notes that care work – particularly by women of colour – is routinely devalued, even when essential to collective life (hooks, 2000). Lorde was also highly critical of how neoliberalism privatizes care, turning it into a matter of personal responsibility or emotional self-management. As Ahmed (2016: 237) observes, Lorde saw that ‘self-care can become a technique of governance: the duty to care for one’s self often written as a duty to care for one’s own happiness, flourishing, well-being’. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde (2020) offers a sustained critique of such individualizing logics, especially in relation to illness and health.
7. In *To The Lighthouse* (Woolf, 2006), a young woman struggles to give herself that space without, too overtly, breaking the patriarchal script. For Woolf, the constraints often come from patriarchal scripts (such as the script of a dinner party where women are expected to ask questions, appear impressed and laugh at men’s jokes), whereas for Lorde the struggle is to find space for both one’s self and the commitment to a political struggle.
8. In ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, Lorde anticipates contemporary critiques of so-called ‘safe spaces’ that replicate dominant norms and marginalize others (Bartos, 2021). In ‘Learning from the 60s’, she recalls that ‘as a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody’s comfortable prejudices’, and warns that ‘if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive’ (Lorde, 2019: 137).
9. Foucault was agnostic on questions of freedom in the sense of finding one’s true self (Foucault, 1982, 2011). For him, freedom was not the absence of power but the capacity to engage with it consciously and non-coercively. Foucault’s view of power, freedom and non-domination has often been seen as compatible with republican theories of liberty (see Shapiro, 2009). The republican theory of liberty sees unfreedom not in terms of the interference of someone else but in terms of independence: one is free to the extent that someone else does not have the power to arbitrarily interfere (whether or not that someone actually does interfere; see Skinner, 2017). As Foucault (1997: 283) put it, non-domination required not the elimination of power relations but the possibility that all participants might modify or renegotiate those relations. This mobility is, in his words, is the ‘ontological condition of ethics’.
10. One recurring theme in hooks’s work is the role of men in the feminist struggle. She imagined a world where men could be equal partners in the fight against gender violence but insisted that this would require deep self-examination. ‘Masses of men’, she wrote, ‘have not even begun

to look at the ways that patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving' (hooks, 2004: xvii). Her view suggests that men who dominate others do so, at least in part, because they have never learned how to care for themselves. They have been denied the opportunity to know themselves outside the confines of patriarchal masculinity.

11. Foucault (1997: 287) writes: 'Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior'.
12. In her work on love, hooks also explored the ethical relationship between caring for oneself and caring for others. She critiqued the sexist assumption that women serve others out of natural instinct, insisting instead that 'women make a choice to serve, that they give from the space of free will and not because of biological destiny' (hooks, 2000: 134). To serve, in hooks's view, is to acknowledge interdependence – not as a burden but as a practice of love and solidarity. Feminist men, she argued, would not simply give up dominance; they would gain liberation from masculinity's constricting norms.
13. Laughter becomes a survival strategy, a form of serious joy. 'To laugh at something can be to make something more real, to magnify it, and to reduce something's power or hold over you, simultaneously' (Ahmed, 2016: 246). This laughter, too, is part of caring for the self.
14. Similarly, in his memoir, Edward Said (2000) describes the joy of studying and exploration as a moment of liberation. These moments, too, are privileges not equally available to all, and to experience them, can be a powerful experience of freedom. Like Lugones, Said frames this joy as a kind of world-travelling, and contrasts it to the heavy seriousness that marked his experience of being 'out of place' (Holdo, 2024; Said, 2000). Seriousness here is the experience of social structures; playfulness is the brief reprieve of not needing to act as they dictate.

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