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YOUR HEALTH; YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

by

Angel Sanders

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2019

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

College of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
August 2022

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

YOUR HEALTH; YOUR
RESPONSIBILITY

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Mass Communications and Media Arts

Approved by:

Sarah Lewison, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale June 29, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Angel Sanders, for the Master of Science degree in Mass Communications and Media Arts, presented on June 29, 2022, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: YOUR HEALTH; YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Sarah Lewison

Many believe racism doesn't exist anymore. In fact, racism is still present, it's evident in the black community when looking at health. Statistics show that black women specifically encounter more health issues than other races. This thesis touches on generational trauma, feminism, and health collectives. This is a tool for a person looking to heal themselves and start a new health journey. This research assures you don't have to do this alone and is a step toward mitigation in the black community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge Erikah Lewis. She helped me apply to the graduate program in 2020 during the pandemic and she helped me stay optimistic. It was later that I read her thesis and found inspiration. Second, I would like to acknowledge Father Joseph Brown. I was a complete mess when i came into his office, he directed me to Sarah Lewison. If it had not been for him, I would've never found her, and I know I couldn't have made this far. I would then like to thank Sarah Lewison. I also went to see her, with no idea of a strong topic. She listened to my ideas, and gave me the space to say what I was passionate about, then helped me develop a strong thesis from my passion. It was Sarah Lewison who introduced me to the collectives, the amazing work they were doing. I feel so blessed to have come in contact with such a kind, patient, and compassionate soul. I don't think anyone could have helped me in the way she did, she was perfect for this assignment. Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge the work of the four collectives I will present in my thesis. Without their work my thesis wouldn't be possible, they are the proof!

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my mother specifically. I just love her so much that it hurts sometimes. I am extremely empathetic, especially when it comes to the people I love. I also dedicate this to the black community. may we find peace and healing. may our health improve and may we become free at last.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1– Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – Personal Reflection.....	3
CHAPTER 3 – Background.....	6
CHAPTER 4 –About Feminism	11
CHAPTER 5 – OUR BODIES, OURSELVES: Reclaiming Bodily Autonomy.....	13
CHAPTER 6 – HARRIET'S APOTHECARY collective healing and the search for Liberation.....	16
CHAPTER 7 – Intergenerational Trauma: Inheriting the ghost of the past	19
CHAPTER 8 – Everyone needs to eat.....	23
CHAPTER 9 – Soul Fire Farm.....	26
CHAPTER 10 – Conclusion.....	29
REFERENCES	32
VITA.....	34

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Health is a human right, not a privilege to be purchased.” – Shirley Chisholm
Shirley Chisholm was an American politician, educator, and author. In 1968, she became the first black woman elected to the United States Congress.

“At the end of the day, your health is your responsibility.” – Jillian Michaels
Jillian Michaels is a world-famous fitness expert and motivational life coach. She motivated 10 years' worth of contestants and viewers on NBC's “The Biggest Loser”.

Some people argue that racism no longer exists now that we have had a black man as president. They say that racism's traces are lost to the injuries of time. While it's true we don't have slavery and Jim Crow laws anymore, those who experience being black will say that racism is alive and well.

The fact is that racism persists in many areas of our society, as well as sexism.

Specifically, and statistically, black women face inequalities at an alarmingly higher rate than other people in the world. Inside the traditional medical system in the United States, Black women trust their doctors to help them, but they often end up suffering from illnesses that never become resolved. The statistics are telling. Statistically black women experience general health problems at a higher rate than white women. They also experience more complications throughout their pregnancies than whites. Black women are the most likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth in the United States compared to any other racial group.¹

This paper is about how racism and sexism affect the health and lives of black women. It

¹ Marian F. MacDorman et al., “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Maternal Mortality in the United States Using Enhanced Vital Records, 2016-17,” *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 9 (2021): 1673-81.

also looks at ways we can address these problems through our activism. The truth is that many black women receive lower quality care. Seventy-five percent of black women give birth at hospitals that serve black populations, which tend to typically provide lower quality maternity care.²

Black women are more likely to experience a pregnancy-related death than white women.

In general, numerous black women find it difficult to access health care that meets their needs. But also, sometimes the women are victims of ignorance about how their bodies work. Maybe if there was better access to the resources about health, they could avoid a constant cycle of illness. Having proper accessibility to resources helps women to plan their families, improving health outcomes for women and children. This essay highlights the importance of research. Knowledge is power and educating yourself in general about the health of your body is essential to becoming the agent of our own health. This essay introduces models for how women and women-identified people are doing this together through inspiring projects that helped me understand that our health is our responsibility. It is not the responsibility of a health official, a doctor, or anyone else. People who are in good health are less susceptible to getting sick. Not to say healthy people cannot get sick at all because any unexpected thing can happen. For example, gun violence and shootings are health risks that seem to be more common these days, especially in minority communities. But you reap benefits when you take good care of yourself and make sure you have all the vitamins, nutrition, exercise, and rest that your body needs. We need to take responsibility for our own health, which means educating ourselves about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and then do the actions required.

² “Black Women's Maternal Health.” Black Women's Maternal Health: Accessed July 1, 2022. <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/health/reports/black-womens-maternal-health.html>.

CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL REFLECTION

For as long as I can remember my family has suffered from health issues. Strokes, cancer, schizophrenia, dementia, and the list goes on. The most common illness in my family is diabetes. My mother has type 2 diabetes and so does my grandma. My auntie on my father's side also had diabetes and later passed on from it. There are ways to prevent these "common family illnesses," that are not always made apparent to us. However, it has been made apparent that these illnesses "run in the family." I recognize that to say they "run in the family" is a kind of resignation and acceptance of this poor health. By simply living and maintaining a healthier lifestyle early on in life, we could help reduce so many of these issues, or even prevent them. The key is not waiting until you have already fallen ill to start your research and health journey. It's best to start prior to feeling any symptoms. You should already be living in a healthy manner when you are not feeling sick.

Out of all the people in my family, my mother seems to fall ill the most. I am extremely close to and grateful for my mother, so a lot of her pain reflects onto me. Growing up and having to learn to be strong at an early age sometimes affected and still affects my mind. Instead of praying to God that I would get a nice toy for Christmas, I prayed that God would not take my mama away. These experiences have instilled my passion to research women's health, anatomy, and well-being.

The thing that stresses me the most is seeing my mama having to constantly go to different doctors; doctors sending her from one doctor to the next. As soon as I think my mother is better, another problem arises, and she must see another doctor. I hate the smell of hospitals; they give me chills, and it seems like you go there hoping to get fixed, but you end up leaving with more problems, not only just physical but now also emotional and financial.

I do not think there was a time my mother ever felt well. She experiences pain every day and that really pains me. My mother still sees multiple doctors and still has the same problems, and I really wish it didn't have to be that way. She is prescribed many different medicines, and each of these medicines has side effects. The side effects make her have new symptoms and illnesses. She thinks her body just has to "get used" to the medicines. I find this very unnatural.

I grew up thinking going to the doctor was scary at times. I was so used to bad outcomes. As an adult, I'm learning that doctors are not always healers. They do not always offer proper medical guidance. Sometimes the doctors cannot even tell you what is wrong. I get that they are only human but if a doctor cannot help their patient, why does a patient still need to pay the facility for ONLY receiving a conversation or recommendation to yet another doctor? This is now a waste of money and time. I hate the life my mother lives when it comes to health, and I am only on the outside looking in. I cannot necessarily feel the pain she endures daily, but for me mentally and emotionally, it hurts to see my mother suffering and I don't know how to help her. The doctors don't even ask the patients the right questions. The only thing they seem to know how to do is keep her prescribed and keep her coming back to their facilities. The focus of my paper is obviously women of color, but this issue is not just one that women of color suffer from.

A snapchat friend of mine, a young black man, posted something pertaining to black people and health. He was recently diagnosed with anxiety and depression and shared how the regular doctors he saw when he was a teenager never asked questions related to mental health. They did not give him proper guidance and for 10+ years he dealt with his health issues in silence. Finally, at age 25 he went to a Chinese and natural doctor who diagnosed him with depression and anxiety. He is now prescribed herbal medicines that he says have really helped him mentally. He stressed how much better he feels after using the herbs daily. It was such a

coincidence to see his post for me.

Again, not only black women are unaware of the ways our bodies work. Many different kinds of people are vulnerable to gaps in medical knowledge. This story also makes a great segue to the next section, which will summarize the horrific practices black women experienced during enslavement.

CHAPTER 3

BACKGROUND

In her thesis, “Mind, Body, & Soul ” 2021: The Medical Exploitations of Black Women in The United States, Erikah Lewis focuses on the exploitation of black women by the medical industry. She discusses how racism negatively influences the health outcomes for black women and documents some of the historic medical abuses black women suffered.³ She addresses how poor medical treatment is also a result of racial stereotyping regarding black women’s medical health. Lewis’ thesis puts an emphasis on the many ways Black women have been exploited throughout the 18th and 19th century, starting with slavery. She goes into detail explaining how during times of enslavement, black women were used as test subjects and forced to undergo horrific and unnecessary vaginal procedures without anesthesia by white, male doctors like Dr. James Marion Sims (Holland, 2017)⁴. Dr. J. Marion Sims is known as the ‘founding father’ of gynecology. He earned this title by experimenting on numerous enslaved Black women.

It is documented that he used black slaves to test numerous surgical approaches to repair fistulas, which are internal organ damage caused by violence, rape, or nonconsensual sexual activity. The operations also took place without their consent. The men who owned these women gave permission for the operations, because, as slaves, the women had no power. The women went through these procedures without any anesthetic aid to cut the pain. The slave women have been described as screaming and crying while a team of physicians stood nearby observing and “learning”. There are stereotypes that black people can endure more pain than white women

³ “Black Women's Maternal Health.” Black Women's Maternal Health: Accessed July 1, 2022. <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/health/reports/black-womens-maternal-health.html>.

⁴ Holland, Brynn. “The 'Father of Modern Gynecology' Performed Shocking Experiments on Enslaved Women.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, August 29, 2017. <https://www.history.com/news/the-father-of-modern-gynecology-performed-shocking-experiments-on-slaves>.

(Hoffman et al, 2016) which continues today.⁵ How horrifying it is that doctors believe the color of a person's skin can determine the amount of pain they can endure. Of course, this is a falsehood that reproduces existing social barriers going back to doctors like Dr. J. Marion Sims. These treatments subjected black women to unnecessary suffering.

Lewis makes it apparent that these issues continue today by sharing how African American women in the U.S. face persistent health disparities compared to other women of different ethnic backgrounds. Black women experience high infertility rates, high stigma of reproductive challenges, and social barriers when accessing health care. Social barriers refer to differences and inequalities associated with diverse types of people in society. Lewis discusses how such stereotypes about black women and pain further endanger their health and welfare in health care settings.

Lewis also surveyed a range of women who shared how they were treated and seen through racialized perceptions and stereotypes by their doctors and physicians.

Erika Lewis shared her survey via Facebook so she could get a wide range of different voices from different backgrounds. I also shared the survey via my social media and people would comment to let me know they had completed it. Below I've included some of the experiences and feelings that were shared from people in Erika Lewis' thesis. The results help to put in perspective that this issue is not just a personal issue for me but for a lot of other women.

• *"I had very sharp pains during my pregnancy, but the doctors suggested that it was probably nothing, and that it was normal to feel pain during pregnancies. But, my family comes from a long history of health issues, so I wanted them to make sure nothing was wrong.*

⁵ Hoffman, Kelly M., Sophie Trawalter, Jordan R. Axt, and M. Norman Oliver. "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296–4301. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1516047113>.

I had to learn to advocate for myself, and tell the doctors that I know when something is wrong”

- *During my pregnancy, I begged the doctors to test me for PCOS (Polycystic ovary 22 syndrome). I ended up testing positive, but before the testing, the doctors told me that I will be alright. I was extremely scared during my childbirth”*

- *“As Black women, we are always viewed or expected to be strong. When we feel pain, it’s like a shock to people, even though we are still human. As a Black woman and mother, I feel like I have to put my health on the back burner, and try to balance out everything else in life first”*

Lewis also presented personal testimony of how Black women are not taken seriously in the health-care sector.

- *“I literally had to beg my doctor for a covid-19 test. I had all the symptoms, and I knew something was wrong, but they didn’t want to test me. They assumed it was a flu/cold and wanted me to leave. Turns out, I actually had covid-19, and if I didn’t beg for a test, I could have been spreading the virus around unknowingly”*

These testimonies helped me to see how many people have negative experiences when it comes to health treatment. The people who took this survey and expressed these feelings could be people I see daily and I wouldn’t even know they felt the way they felt.

Not even as a woman but as a person this is extremely problematic! People associate Black women with being strong so often that I'm starting to dislike this adjective. It feels like being strong is not so much a compliment as it is a pressure put on us by society. This adjective sometimes operates as a way to forget that black women are still people, not mythical creatures. We hurt, bleed, and we feel just like any other human on this planet.

Near the end of her thesis, Lewis talks about how the medical field has tried to make

some improvements in ensuring equitable healthcare, but social barriers still remain. There is at least increasing attention to the experience of Black people in healthcare, especially since COVID. There have also been some improvements made in doctor-patient relationships. New research and health campaigns have helped bring awareness, and more diversity, into the healthcare system. Change is something to be grateful for but not to settle for. As you can see from the statistics and from the survey responses there is still room for improvement to ensure healthcare is equally beneficial for all.

Lewis stresses that the high number of negative health outcomes for black women today is a result of a lack of awareness, education, and access to health-related information. A part of her thesis that stuck with me was when Lewis says, “Beyonce, who has a very high-status profile, reminded other Black women that they are not alone. When it comes down to health complications, especially during childbirth, Black women are unfortunately faced with life-or-death experiences. The famous tennis player, Serena Williams, had a really negative experience when delivering her daughter in 2017”. I was not happy to hear more stories of black women suffering and being overlooked. Even wealth does not override the social perception of blackness. It’s shocking to learn that William's wealth did not guarantee good treatment.

I do find relief, however, in learning that no one is alone in this situation. It seems the best solution is educating ourselves and doing our research because it seems that money can’t even fix this issue.

Though sickness is present in my family, I want to break this generational curse. Sometimes I worry about my mother and her lack of knowledge of her own body. I don’t want my mother to give up on herself. I don't want her to continue to accept that she is sick, and I don’t want her to accept all these different opinions that get nowhere. I don’t want her to keep taking all of these medicines. I only want her to be aware and healthy.

My mother was born in 1964, prior to the internet. She could not just take her phone out and google what foods lead to diabetes. I am not saying the information wasn't out there; she could have gone to read books on it. But who even thinks of that when you are young and feeling fine, especially when your body is at the stage when it can heal quickly. My mother had me, her second child, at 32 in 1996. She became sick when she was pregnant with me and this is also when she was diagnosed with diabetes.

This paper addresses the role that western medicine plays in separating people from understanding their own bodies. Although western medicine heals some diseases, western medicine also creates a distance between black women and their understanding of the foundations of health. This is the result of black women losing the knowledge they once had to heal themselves and to maintain body autonomy. In this research paper I will trace back to the knowledge about healing and agency held everywhere at one point in time by women. I will summarize how this was lost and show how it is being regained by black women activists and teachers who are reclaiming the knowledge to heal themselves, and then to build healthier communities. Some examples I will share are:

1. Black Feminist Combahee River Collective of 1974
2. The Boston Women Book Collective
3. Harriet's Apothecary
4. Soulfire Farm

CHAPTER 4

ABOUT FEMINISM

“Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” -

bell hooks

bell hooks wrote a book called “feminism is for everybody.” In there she writes: “To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.”⁶ Before I begin to introduce these collective projects, I'd like to point out why feminism is, as bell hooks says, for everybody. This project focuses on Black Women because there isn't enough emphasis being put on the betterment of our lives. Feminism addresses the problems that women have that are different from non-women.

Some of the problems that women face includes how, in war, women become targets of rape. Women make less money than men, they are harassed at work, their bodies are objectified and sometimes trafficked without consent. There are unrealistic beauty standards forced upon women. Generally, women do not get paid for housework and baby care. Women have to buy tampons and pads which are expensive on top of other expenses. Women are mistreated at the hands of male doctors. This is common with women athletes. These are only a few problems to say the least.

Webster's Dictionary says, “Feminism is defined as the belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.”⁷ What's wrong with that? Remember that once upon a time, women didn't even have the right to vote. Feminism is truly for everybody and feminism is important to this research paper. Most of the collectives I share are made up of

⁶ hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁷ Webster, Noah. *Webster's Monarch Dictionary of the English Language Being the Authentic Unabridged Dictionary*. Chicago: American Publishing, 1908.

women! It is feminism that has brought women together and out of being second class citizens.

In terms of this research paper, Feminism in terms of health care means ⁸

- empowering women's knowledge regarding their health
- battling against paternalistic and oppressive practices within healthcare systems
- changing how healthcare is delivered to individual women
- seeking social transformation

Feminism brought together one of the first women collectives in the United States. The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian socialist organization formed in Boston 1974 which remained active until 1980.⁹ We black women who are seeking to heal ourselves can learn a lot from them. This collective stressed that both the Civil Rights Movement and the white feminist movement were not meeting or seeing their particular needs as Black women and, more specifically, as Black lesbians. As a result, they dedicated themselves to ensuring that their needs were met and this they did together, as a collective.

⁸ Williams, Joni Strom, Rebekah J. Walker, and Leonard E. Egede. "Achieving Equity in an Evolving Healthcare System: Opportunities and Challenges." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 351, no. 1 (2016): 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjms.2015.10.012>.

⁹ *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. United States, 2015. Web Archive. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>.

CHAPTER 5

OUR BODIES, OURSELVES: RECLAIMING BODILY AUTONOMY

Body autonomy is the right to make decisions over one's own life and future. During slavery, Black women's bodies were used as property and today women are still denied autonomy over their bodies. In 2022, there are major debates about women's bodies surrounding abortion laws and birth control laws as well as many other debates. Body autonomy is not treated as a right in the United States. It especially affects black women that governments and officials dictate how women's bodies can exist in this world. Therefore, educating oneself through research is fundamental. It might sound clichéd, but knowledge is genuinely power. The key point in this thesis is to get out there and learn what they don't teach you at home, in schools, in church, in the doctor's office or wherever. Learn to understand your body, for you, for others, and generations to come. Let this knowledge bring you together and reduce the divisions between women.

Body autonomy is not only focused on reproduction but also simply being able to make the right decisions about what foods you should put into your body and about having access to good foods.

Unlearning and relearning about my body is something I have had to do while creating this entire project. If I don't take my body seriously, who else will? Regardless of how you grew up, you can always change course. Everybody can unlearn and relearn. It's a gradual experience, one step at a time. I am learning about bodily agency and how to sustain my agency over time in order to be a healthier woman myself. If any issues arise then I will know how to talk with doctors and ensure my visit is informative. I will not fall prey to the medical industry.

My built-up frustrations with my mother's doctors tether me to many generations of other women who have experienced similar feelings of frustration and anger towards doctors and the

medical industry in general. Boston's Women Health Book Collective, in the early 1970s, had the same frustrations and did something about it.

The Boston's Women Health Book Collective (BWHBC) was a group of women who worked to redefine health education and care for women. These women authored a book together for each other which is a resource specifically for women. The book, "Our Bodies, Ourselves" is also constantly reprinted with new information. The BWHBC advocated that women need to research topics and learn about their own bodies by themselves.¹⁰ In other words, your health is your responsibility. The BWHBC also offered a safe space for women to learn about their bodies in an exciting way, so that information and feelings were "allowed to interact." They came together for classes, group discussions, and helped each other learn what they felt they were missing.

It is important to understand what a collective is and how it is different from individual striving. My thesis title, "Your Health, Your Responsibility", may sound individualistic, but I do not mean it in an individual context. I'm saying that it's your health so it's your responsibility and you must take that first initial step or initiative in wanting to better yourself. Once you do that the next steps will lead you to communities or collectives with the same goals.

A collective is a social structure that is intentional, where the goal is to learn together to achieve something you could not do by yourself. For example, the Boston's Women Health Book Collective came together to learn what they felt they were missing. They also came together to teach others who shared similar beliefs and experiences along with just having a space to be open and transparent with each other. Sometimes you need a space to express yourself, whether that's simply talking or other ways to be expressive.

¹⁰ *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1976.

"We found we could discuss, question and argue with each other in a new spirit of cooperation rather than competition. We were equally struck by how important it was for us to be able to open up with one another and share our feelings about our bodies"

The lesson we can take from their story is that we need help and cannot do it all alone. No one that is part of a collective is there by mistake. They join together to empower each other's unique way of thinking and lifestyle. The collective shares common ideas, experiences, and interests. These collectives are in place as communities that are there for people who are awakening the potential to their higher selves. We have, in a way, been brainwashed to think that we must achieve our successes alone. This is not at all true- it is a myth. What is to blame? The American Dream!

CHAPTER 6

HARRIET'S APOTHECARY:

COLLECTIVE HEALING AND THE SEARCH FOR LIBERATION

“Honoring and embodying the humanity and value of Black life is a lifelong investment that needs all of us. It beckons daily practices that shatter what we have learned from white supremacy about the divinity and sacredness of Black life. It requires a compassionate and rigorous exploration of the ways generational trauma has impacted our abilities to honor ourselves and each other.” -Harriet’s Apothecary

Harriet’s Apothecary is a healing collective/community of women that focuses on intergenerational healing.¹¹ “Apothecary” is a word used for pharmacy and/or pharmacists. The actual meaning of the word means one who prepares and sells drugs or compounds for medicinal purposes. The community uses ‘apothecary’ as a type of play on words to help redefine the modern-day pharmacy or doctor. This collective is not a pharmacy or doctor’s office. It is a community that helps people to learn and discover health and natural practices as part of reinforcing agency over one’s body.

This collective was founded by Adaku Utah who is also a 6th generation Nigerian Igbo traditional healer. Her work is dedicated to healing, justice, and civil rights. Utah is inspired by the American abolitionist Harriet Tubman, and like Tubman, and is dedicated to black liberation. Harriet Tubman was born a slave, escaped, and helped others to freedom. Utah follows in her footsteps by practicing the traditional earth-based remedies used by her own Igbo ancestors to nurture spirits and bodies in the most natural way possible.

Harriet’s Apothecary provides sanctuary for people of color who have experienced

¹¹ “Who We Are.” HARRIET'S APOTHECARY. Accessed June 30, 2022. <http://www.harrietsapothecary.com/who-we-are>.

exploitation and disappointment from medical institutions. Like Tubman, Utah leads people of color to freedom by offering a pathway to healthiness. This collective sees freedom as a connection between self-knowledge, liberation, and safety for your own body. In their mission statement they say, “We envision a world where Black, Indigenous, and People of color have the power, healing, and safety needed to live the lives we desire for ourselves and our communities.” Harriet’s Apothecary is centered around fostering healing, wellness, and resilience in communities without relying on the medical industrial complex. They do this while also taking health institutions to task about how they could create safer and thriving spaces for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

An example of an event the collective hosted in May 2016 as a healing experience was “DANCING WHILE BLACK.” Harriet’s Apothecary asked people to join them for a day to honor the essentials of self-care and to reinforce why it was a necessity at their DANCING WHILE BLACK event. The DANCING WHILE BLACK event was centered around healing and holding yourself. Dance is expressive. With expression you have the power to portray them. numerous feelings, emotions, or even traumas that are weighing you down. When you can’t think of how to communicate what you’re feeling, dance is one way to express oneself. Dance can be healing when you dance with intention.

In the book “The Dance Through the Ages,” dance critic Walter Sorell, describes dancing as, “old as man.”¹² Dance is a way for a person to express themselves and communicate one's joys and sorrows. Judith Hanna writes in *The Power of Dance* that dancing can promote wellness, and it may help the healing process as a person gains a sense of control of their

¹² Sorell, Walter. *The Dance through the Ages*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1967.

situation.¹³ Dancing while black is also an initiative that other groups lead as a dance workshop just as Harriet's Apothecary does. For example, Angela's Pulse, a community centered around black people, black stories, and vision; also hosted a few DANCING WHILE BLACK events.

¹³ Hanna, Judith Lynne. "The Power of Dance: Health and Healing." *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 1, no. 4 (1995): 323–31. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.1995.1.323>.

CHAPTER 7

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA: INHERITING THE GHOST OF THE PAST

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” - Audre Lorde

When our ancestors first came to this country, they had collective relations with each other that were broken by force because of slavery. Losing one's family and community is traumatic. This hurt the black people. Trauma means hurt, it's the wound left from a disturbing experience. This trauma is about the wounds that did not heal that no one wants to address, just erase.

Black women and men have encountered obstacles for generation after generation. Even in families where things seem kind of ok, it is now understood that older traumas are still passed on. Enslavement led to the breakup of families which caused damage that could not be easily fixed. Losing one's family and community is traumatic. Post war lynching and round-ups led black people to be scared to simply go outside and enjoy nature. Sharecropping put the black people in a bind and set them behind financially. Jim Crow laws took away the rights of black people and divided them from non-black people. There were numerous other obstacles blacks faced, the list goes on: sundown regulations, employment discrimination, environmental racism; all these harmed and hurt black families. These were traumas.

Trauma is passed on through generations. The things I've listed are brutal and cruel, and as anyone could imagine, these experiences can have an impact on us mentally. Our elders experienced a lot of pain and suffering that they were trying to prevent the future generations from knowing about. They wanted to protect us. Unfortunately, they were not successful because the violence continues.

George Floyd's senseless murder was a new trauma piled on top of old traumas. Dante

Wright, Breyonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, the list goes on. These were innocent people who could have easily been myself or loved ones. These victims weren't even always at the wrong place at the wrong time, they were sometimes in their place of comfort, their homes. These Murders can be described as modern day lynchings and they are not easy to forget.

In fact, it is now known that our cells remember even if we don't consciously. Traumatic experiences can affect our genes, and the effects can be passed onto future generations through the genes. One of the effects of trauma is that people start to operate in survival mode.¹⁴¹³ Survival mode is an adaptive response of the human to help us survive danger and stress. There isn't a plan set in place on how you will heal or rest or care for yourself or your loved ones; you're just trying to get through the day. Survival can look like a multitude of different things but the important thing to remember is that living in survival mode is grounded in response to trauma and doesn't allow room for healing. Repressing emotions is one example of survival mode. The thought that I was the reason for my mother's illness (diabetes) was so terrible I repressed it. My healing starts with realizing it wasn't my fault my mother was sick. My healing continues as I am learning bodily agency. As I continue to gain this knowledge, I am exiting this survival mode.

It is said that remaining in "survival mode" can limit one's ability to thrive, and that survival mode can be continuously passed down over generations. Imagine how survival mode could potentially result in sending us all to eat sugar, comfort food, and maybe do things that are not good for us. Healing is intergenerational and it starts here.

Harriet's Apothecary and other similar communities are leading with a focus on

¹⁴ Genesis Women's Shelter & Support, May 17, 2021.
<https://www.genesisshelter.org/understanding-ptsd/#:~:text=When%20a%20person%20experiences%20or,senses%20and%20creating%20more%20adrenaline.>

intergenerational trauma by emphasizing that healing is also intergenerational. These are revolutionary movements. Because there isn't much research on intergenerational trauma, there isn't much therapy or treatment for it. Utah is learning that “My healing starts with the recognition that I have pain and recognizing that my pain is sourced from either anti-Black racism, generational trauma or [...] the way that I've been socially constructed to treat my body.”¹⁵ Her first step is to acknowledge that she has been in survival mode. In order to move forward she has to be aware of the trauma passed on to her.

Having communities lead with a focus in this area is a step toward impactful healing because community itself is part of healing. My project is a step in mitigating negative potential health outcomes for future generations by sharing the power of resilience through collectivity.

Just like a collective, supportive families can also ease the stress of discrimination and racism that underlies many health disparities in African American communities.¹⁶ These studies demonstrate that an individual cannot do it alone. The supportive family environment is like a collective. People are powerful in groups. I am trying to really express that collectives are important and extremely different from individual thriving. It's easy to forget that things are done better together, and we often forget we are human. When our ancestors came here, they had each other. They had a deep knowledge of land and plants, and their own religion which was based in nature. The condition of enslavement broke and changed their traditional spirituality. Over generations, many forgot what they used to know about community and love and the natural world.

Our ancestors were taught by white European descended people in the Americas that

¹⁵ Barber, Lauren. “Harriet's Squad: Black Women Using Ancient Healing Methods as Resistance.” ELLE, October 11, 2017.

<https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a46954/harriets-apothecary-ancient-healing-resistance/>.

¹⁶ Mulligan, Connie J. “Systemic Racism Can Get under Our Skin and into Our Genes.” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 175, no. 2 (2021): 399–405. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.24290>.

individual striving was the way to succeed. They were taught the American Dream, or rather it was forced upon them. We need to learn more about collectives and cooperatives because this patriarchal way of thinking pushes people further away from being free.

CHAPTER 8

EVERYONE NEEDS TO EAT

“By ‘food autonomy,’ we mean the creation of a healthy, local system for growing and distributing food, made available to all — with preference for the most vulnerable to food insecurity — outside of the barriers posed by both the market and government food assistance programs.” - Carbondale Spring

Food is fuel and food is also nutrition. People need food to help their body to function properly. Is all food medicine? No, it is not. Celery is good because it has no calories, salt, or fat and lots of water and some nutrients while it satisfies wanting to chew on something. Doritos on the other hand are the complete opposite. Doritos are fried in vegetable oils and are highly processed. This processed snack can cause inflammation, compromised immunity, excessive levels of bad estrogen and a lack of energy.

Our diet in the United States society is high in processed foods which contain saturated fats and refined carbohydrates; as a result, this can often lead to being overweight and to diabetes. This is proven by epidemiological studies that found that the western diet is related to obesity, cancer, and heart problems people suffer from.

Michael Pollan is a food journalist based in Berkeley, California. Pollan has written books that promote healthy ways that Americans and westerners can make dietary changes¹⁷. He stresses that if we continue to rely on the diet of processed foods, sugar, and added fats, we will “invariably suffer from high rates of the so-called Western diseases: obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer,” which 4 of the top 10 killers of Americans are linked to this diet.

¹⁷ Pollan, Michael. *Food Rules*. London: Penguin Books, 2021

“If you shop in a supermarket (and Mr. Pollan suggests that wherever possible, you buy fresh food at farmers’ markets), shop the periphery of the store and avoid the center aisles laden with processed foods.”

Pollan also writes that people who don’t eat from the shelves in the grocery stores experience these diseases at a much lower rate. He also notes those who later abandon Western eating habits for whatever reasons (ill health, dietary philosophy, etc) often do experience significant health improvements.

If a person is eating Doritos what are the benefits besides satisfying a craving? If one eats a celery stick there are tons of health benefits. There is indeed a connection between food and disease that most people seem to ignore. Eating too much or too little of certain foods and nutrients can raise the risk of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. Educating oneself about food consumption and changing eating habits will help improve health. Because food can work like medicine, people should have more choice over what goes into their bodies. Food autonomy is founded on these fundamental concepts: ACCESS, POWER, RESPECT, and ACTION.¹⁸

Access means having access to good produce and other healthy foods. Today, one out of every five Black households are situated in a food desert, with no access to grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers markets.

Power comes from knowledge. Black people in the US have a history of land-based oppression through slavery and sharecropping. As a result, Black people sometimes associate farming or growing their own food with being poor, because of these memories of sharecropping. In this sense farming awakens intergenerational trauma, by exposing an old wound. But knowing how to grow your own food is an important skill which can only lead to good benefits. This

¹⁸ “Carbondale Spring - Food Autonomy Fund.” SICF. Accessed June 30, 2022. <https://www.sicf.org/foodautonomy>.

knowledge is a form of wealth. It is a form of power that can be passed on through generations because when you grow your own food you know what you are eating and you know it came from the land. Farming can heal trauma. It will take strong unlearning and relearning.

There is power in knowing what you are putting in your body. This is when knowledge of healthy foods is important. The ability to purchase a variety of healthy foods requires you to be informed about food value in order to make good choices.

Respect is about how we must be good to the environment. We have to take care of the communities and neighborhoods around us. This includes respecting the lifestyles of others. This requires eco-responsible management of resources and fairness in the way resources are shared among everyone.

Lastly, action involves implementing a variety of methods, both collectively and individually, towards the achievement of real food autonomy. Action is empowering. Beyond problems with nutrition, the food system has other problems. It is built upon land theft and genocide of indigenous people and the exploitation of Black and Brown labor. We - all of us need equity in access to land, sustenance, and knowledge to be able to feed ourselves well in the food system.

Soul Fire Farm is another collective of people that have formed a community in order to feed themselves, to spread awareness of food sovereignty, and to create opportunities for people to experience and learn about food autonomy.

CHAPTER 9

SOUL FIRE FARM

“We commit to working alongside you to do everything within our power to dismantle structural anti-Black racism and are hopeful that WE WILL WIN. Let us channel our grief, rage, hope and magic into meaningful action.” - Kiani Conley-Wilson, Larisa Jacobson, Leah Penniman, Naima Penniman, Jonah Vitale-Wolff, Cheryl Whilby, Dayo Marsh, Brooke Bridges, Ife Kilimanjaro, Azuré Keahi, & Kai Thomas

At Soul Fire Farm (SFF), people grow food, learn, and teach other people how to do it. One of their goals is to implement afro-indigenous, regenerative ancestral framing practices.¹⁹ The farm is located on 80-acres of land in Petersburg, New York. On the farm, they are actively producing fruits, plant medicine, pasture-raised livestock, honey, mushrooms, vegetables, and preserves for community provision. The majority of the harvest is provided to nearby people and communities living under food apartheid or impacted by state violence. Soul Fire Farm’s focus is on healing from a history of oppression that has disconnected our communities from land. SFF has intentions to heal people in several ways. Food is one of the ways they do that. There used to be many more black farmers in the United States than there are now, but many of them lost their land during the Jim Crow period of 1877- 1950. People who lost their farms often migrated to the cities as did many of the slaves who had been freed earlier. In the city people could find work, but that also led to a concentration of people of color in urban environments.

In these urban environments, there wasn’t much funding to keep buildings maintained or for good schools or parks. In the city there are often other issues like, air pollution, excessive trash, fewer trees, much more traffic since the areas are so much more populated and smaller.

¹⁹ “Soul Fire Farm.” SOUL FIRE FARM. Accessed June 30, 2022. <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/>.

Children don't go outside because it is dangerous.

This could lead to people, especially children, not spending enough time outside in the natural world. This can be described as “Nature deficit disorder.”²⁰ Nature deficit disorder is the idea that humans, especially children, spend less time outdoors than they used to and that there is something that children miss if they do not get time outdoors that can lead to behavioral problems such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, poor eyesight, and lower achievement in school. The lack of access to quality food and playing outside puts younger generations at higher risk for early onset diabetes and learning challenges. Let's not forget to mention that later in life they might be prone to heart disease, sleep apnea, psychological challenges, stroke, and cancer. Engaging in food growth and being more in tune with nature are the next steps to creating a better place for future generations.

Alongside teaching people how to grow their own healthy foods, Soul Fire is also committed to highlighting Black Lives Matter, healing, environmental justice and to ending racism and injustice in our food system. Farmer Leah Penniman, the founder of Soul Fire Farm has written a book called, *Farming While Black* where one can learn more about the challenges BIPOC people face in terms of getting good food into their bodies.

Soul Fire Farm's mission statement says they are “an Afro-Indigenous centered community farm committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. They raise and distribute life-giving food as a means to end food apartheid. With deep reverence for the land and wisdom of our ancestors, we work to reclaim our collective right to belong to the earth and to have agency in the food system. We bring diverse communities together on this

²⁰ Jill Suttie, “How to Protect Kids from Nature-Deficit Disorder,” Greater Good, accessed July 1, 2022, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_protect_kids_from_nature_deficit_disorder, 2.

healing land to share skills on sustainable agriculture, natural building, spiritual activism, health, and environmental justice. We are training the next generation of activist-farmers and strengthening the movements for food sovereignty and community self-determination".

People of color are disproportionately likely to live under food apartheid and suffer from diabetes, heart disease, and other diet related illness. Labor laws continue to permit the exploitation of farm and food workers. Apartheid is apartness. It means people are treated differently. Apartheid is a policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds other than race. Food sovereignty is the right to have access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods that are also produced with sustainable methods. Food sovereignty is also about a person and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. Soul Fire Farm is doing all these things.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

When we are young, we might not be thinking of our health, especially if we are feeling fine. Given all the more visible ways that structural racism impacts black people, it's understandable that health may be at the bottom of your list. I hope reading this will allow your mind to expand and understand the importance of our health while we are young, we don't want to pay for it later. I have met (in the past) my mom before she had me, so I could help her learn about how important diet is while you're pregnant. Our research might have helped her avoid getting diabetes. When I decide to become a mother, I will do lots of research and have an experienced Doula by my side.

This thesis is not only about my healing. It's for future healing in other communities, maybe even yours? It's important to me that no one feels alone in this situation regarding health. Learning doesn't stop because you are not in school; throughout life you have to learn. It's important to me to use the space I have to express what I've had in my heart, mind, and soul for years. Though it started out as pain when I was a little girl, it's now turning into a beautiful expression. Admitting you are hurt is not easy, especially to those in survival mode. I want people to acknowledge the hurt, feel the trauma so we can go to the next step, healing. Again, you are not alone. I presented 4 (mostly black women) collectives: The Combahee River Collective, The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Harriet's Apothecary, and Soul Fire Farm, to remind people that you don't have to feel alone. These collectives show that there are like-minded people all over and in history.

I hope my essay falls into the right hands, because this is bigger than just a school paper. This is my real life. It affects other people's lives as well. One of my college professors said

growing up is, “disagreeing with your thesis you wrote in college”. When I grow up, I know I'll never disagree with this topic.

There are so many things that are just completely out of our control. There are also many things YOU have the ability to change. You can make yourself feel better. If you can make yourself, feel better, you can motivate others to feel better as well. Then we'd be helping each other. Let's step back and look at our elders, our aunts, our grandmas, and our mothers and ask how they are doing at this stage of life? Some people may say, “fine.” But, health wise, most of them are not; because they are suffering whether out loud or in silence. Why are we normalizing what is not normal? We have gotten used to certain behaviors.

Start with you! Then focus on the chain reaction. I think it was important to highlight what black women have done and are continuing to do, and the fact that they are doing it as a group rather than individually. The message here is about reclaiming power, reclaiming knowledge.

I may appear to be woke, but in reality, I am still working on self-improvement in all aspects every day. No one is perfect. The important thing is to take initial steps, and to remember that learning can be gradual. I am inspired by Queen Latifah who raps that knowledge is power. In 2022 I believe there is no excuse to stay stagnant. The topics I discussed and researched in this thesis are just the beginnings of what is out there. There is still more research to do and much to learn!

The funny part is a lot of it is free and at our fingertips. Let this be a guide to motivate and push you to be a better you for now and for the future of our people.

The more that people of color educate themselves on this type of knowledge the less chance we have of falling prey to a broken system that profits from illness. Gaining access to this

knowledge will lead people of color closer to healing and freedom. It is not our fault that we have been set back for many years, but with access to this knowledge we can make it our duty to relearn, rebuild, and recreate how to cultivate health.

Looking back at this project, I've gained so much, and felt so much. I find the topic of health to be overwhelming especially since I didn't grow up in a household where we maintained a healthy lifestyle. Throughout this project, I allowed myself to be vulnerable by opening up about my own family. I never tell personal stories like that. I felt the need to be vulnerable to get my point across. I want all black people's health to improve, not just my own families. I know there are other young people who are stressed and overwhelmed by the health issues that arise in the family. The statistics are the evidence.

I am always looking for a sign from the universe, and if you are too, let this be a sign for you; I want to motivate you. This is no longer a secret. We must spread the knowledge and leave our individualistic mindsets behind. We are powerful in groups. The collectives I have shared here (and the love that we share with our families and people) are proof that we do not have to embark on this journey alone.

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