

The Henceforward Episode 20 Self-Care, Smudging and Penguins

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness but more, to imagine shared futures and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Sefanit: Self-care has become a buzzword of sorts. In this episode, we hope to think through what self-care is and could be to the work of the henceforward. We'll hear from various voices. Some will consider self-care, collectively and individually. Elder Jacqui Lavalley generously explains smudging, and with words of Audre Lorde, dark surveillance is offered as a form of self-care. A majority of this episode takes place at the kitchen table, a common site of care and community. We hope you enjoy our imaginings of self-care.

Sandi: Welcome to the kitchen table where Indigenous folks and Black folks come to meet to discuss some very serious topics. I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I'm Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Sandy: I've been kind of critical of the way that self-care is sometimes, in activism, really an individual thing where sometimes, I think when self-care got really in vogue in activist communities, be like someone who would take self-care at the expense of everyone else. It felt like we should have a community construction of care that allows revolving ins and outs. It shouldn't be just someone thinking about it on their own and whatever. It should be everyone actually caring for each other. It needs to be thought of communally. I think sometimes, because we live in such an individualistic culture, we do self-care in a way that can harm other people, and we should think about that.

Michelle: I worry about losing momentum within our movements if we focus on individuals, just as you said, Sandy, trying to work their way through trauma as opposed to looking at how these processes have come into practice, and coming together collectively to challenge those systems. I worry about the shift between the

individual versus the focus of a movement. I know that it's important to have boundaries, and it's important to know when those boundaries are being breached for an individual, but we can't get lost in our own pain. It's a community, and we need to keep that in mind in the concept of self-care. Or it can be hijacked for purposes to divide us.

Sandi: I think, following up on that, Michelle, is that the pain happened together. The pain didn't happen individually. The pain happened as a community. So, going along with both of what you said, I totally agree, Sandy, that I think that it is something that needs to happen as a community and as a group because that's how the pain happened, historically, too. It didn't happen individually. I think that coming together -- I think it's irresponsible to think that healing can happen individually.

Sandy: Yeah, very good way of putting it.

Sandi: Thanks, Sandy.

Megan: I also think that -- I conceptualize the work of building new ways of being as self-care. It's just like I cannot exist in this world, it's shitty, and I need to create a new one. The constant process of imagining what that could look like, how we could create it, where we fit in it, is care for community. I don't know if a lot of people see it that way. Or maybe they do, but they don't know that they do. I think that that's a really crucial -- that's my conception of self-care anyway. It's a really crucial conception of self-care because to envision it that way also makes the work... I don't know, it just feels more necessary and true. I don't know what the right word is, but it just feels more responsible, maybe is the word I'm looking for, like you said.

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Michelle: So something active and creative that leads us to build new possibilities as opposed to something where you're withdrawing, internal?

Megan: Yeah, Michelle. Let's imagine a small suspension or let's not think of it so, so macro, but let's think of it micro. If we're thinking about like a school board, for example, or some messed up stuff happening in school, to kids, how would we care for those kids where we would we try to change how the school is enacting that type of violence on those children? We wouldn't say like, "Come home, my child, and have a bubble bath." That's not necessarily healing or something. I mean, that's a certain kind of care. I think that's a certain type of coping maybe. It's not necessarily a full idea of caring for the children in that space who would need a different way of being, and I think that that's care.

Cornel: I've been thinking about what Sandy has said about care in relation to labor and that within the context of community-building, it's often the responsibility, or the labor of caring for the community tends to fall on women most of the time.

Thinking about the fact that within the Black communities specifically, women are often expected to be or seen as the providers. They're often the ones on the front lines doing the labor. So I guess, sometimes, I wonder what would it look like for us to care for Black woman or who is caring for Black women because it's often the case that they're caring for everyone else and the expectation that strong ones or the strength, the rock of the community which can end up being exhausting, potentially violent perhaps.

I'm also thinking about the tension between care as an individual project versus something that's more communal. I do think there's a point at which perhaps one needs to step away from the community and care for one's self individually. Because doing community work is not only hard but sometimes you can get lost, so I think there's something to be said about selfishness in that respect, in terms of this idea of preservation.

I'm thinking back to Christina Sharpe's book as well, in terms of how care is conceptualized for Black people and caring for themselves, for the women in their community, versus how that states, as it were, perhaps will understand care. I'm thinking specifically, there was a section where a police officer tells a young man he has accosted, to stay safe, which is a weird statement to say after you're responsible for a violent encounter, that kind of situation.

It's often the case too that when communities of Black people are taking care of themselves or holding space for themselves, they're often either attacked or vilified by the government or the police, whatever the case is. So, is there a way for us to conceptualize care in a way that caring for Black people isn't seen as a threat to the state, as it were? I think, I'm talking abstractly, but, yeah.

[End of Kitchen Table Talk]

[Drumming]

Jacqui: [Anishinaabemowin Greeting]. I was asked to talk a little bit about smudging. Ever since I was a little kid and learning about ceremony in the bush with my mom, she told me a lot of things at that time that I've been carrying into the future just as an active defiance against colonialism. I never did see it like that, but that's the way it was.

When I came to the city and started doing, singing on ceremony. I hear people get up and talk and talk about smudging as being a cleansing ceremony. Every time they'd say it was a cleansing ceremony, my little inside Jacqui would jump up and say, "Bullshit, that's not what it is." That's not what it is.

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What it is, is that when we draw that smoke over our mind and our eyes, our ears, our nose, our mouth, our throat -- it's really important that we do our throat. Everybody bypasses that, but you need that connection, and your heart. You put some in your tummy because that's where soul spirit lives. That's where he is, on our body. If we were to say he was anywhere, that's where he is.

When we smudge and we draw all of that beautiful, beautiful smoke over our body, it turns us into spirit so that all the spirits, other spirits that are of the spirit world and not of this reality, it allows them to move in and out of our body. When it does that, when those spirits do that, spirit of creation does that; they see -- because they are genderless, they have no gender, male or female. When they come into our body, they discover all our weaknesses. Those are the gifts that they give us. When people say the gift of spirit, that is what they're talking about. They're talking about that connection that they have through soul spirit, through your own soul spirit.

So, smudging, opens that part. It exposes your heart and everything that's in it. All your loved ones are there. Anybody who has impact on your life is there. That smoke covers your brain. It's almost disallowing this reality from being there at that time because it is such a profound state of being, is to feel and know that's what's happening when you're smudging. That's what smudging is for. That's what smudging is all about. It allows for that spirit, connection to spirit to happen.

Sandi: Is smudging something that somebody can do every day? Or do...

Jacqui: Yeah. Every morning, after you have your shower or whatever you do, you fix yourself up, when you're all fixed up, you take out your smudge. You draw that smoke over yourself. What it does, it puts you on a good armor, a good shield. It protects your whole body from invasion.

Now, what's going to invade our body? Any kind of airborne virus, when you smudge, hey, you're protected, and you walk with that confidence. If somebody is against you and they're mad at you and saying angry words, that, what you've covered your body with, will deflect all of those things. Not get sent back to where it came from, we don't want to do stuff like that, but you deflect it. You don't give it directions. Spirit will give it direction. That is there. That is the way they work. So, yeah, you do that in the morning when you get up, every day, if you want to, but that's what smudging is all about.

[Return to the Kitchen Table Talk]

Nic: In *A Burst of Light*, Audre Lorde writes, "Crucial. Physically. Psychically. Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Dark sousveillance is a way of self-care as we actively theorize the everyday practices of countering surveillance to preserve the heavily surveyed bodies. With

the echo of Audre Lorde's voice in the back of our minds, we suggest dark sousveillance is a form of self-care, the imaginaries of the hopeful ways of being which insist on a critique of surveillance.

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To counter surveillance for Black and Indigenous peoples is to confuse the settlers' gaze that tries and tries again to survey them, to discipline them. It is to care and to attend to their own bodies. It is to speak back to that disciplining gaze. It is to reduce stress in the everyday practical living. It is to deny the nonsense of living under the racializing surveillance gaze.

Jade: My thought isn't really – it's not like an echo of yours – it's more like a bridging of Megan's and Sandy's. So thinking about Audre Lorde when he talks about self-care being revolutionary, I'm thinking of a revolutionary act. Thinking about what you're saying, Sandy, earlier about thinking about possibilities and building a new world, it's a new way, at least for me, to think through self-care being revolutionary or a revolutionary act. It's one thing to care for yourself in a world that you're not supposed to be here, but it's another thing to think about self-care as a way to envision new possibilities. That was really interesting to think through the idea of self-care as revolutionary because, one, to take care of yourself in a world that you're socially dead and then, one, to care for yourself or envision new futures, that really spoke to me.

Sandy: Yeah, I agree with you. People need to, individually, take steps back at times because, of course, people can get lost. Someone who I work with named Janaya Khan came up with this model of thinking about how we can work together as communities and making sure that we have space for care. He came up with it while watching a documentary about penguins. It's very funny. They were watching the penguins do this thing where they move in a spiral formation to stay warm. There are always some penguins in the middle who are the most warm, and there are some penguins on the outside. They keep moving in this spiral so that the penguins on the outside come into the middle.

So for work that we organized with, we started thinking, from the beginning, can we organize in this spiral penguin formation where some of us will be on the inside at times, doing a lot of intense work, while others are taking a break? Can we come up with a model that allows for individuals to take a step back? We did it as a community, so it wouldn't be a situation where someone needed to feel guilty affecting someone else's own care by doing it unplanned. Do you know what I mean? It's not to say that unplanned things can't come up. We just shift the spiral when they do.

Jade: I remember Alissa in class the other day. She was talking about BLMTTO, and she referenced to quote that was made, I don't know by who, but she's saying that -- you guys were talking about BLMTTO being not leaderless but leaderful. That goes

really well with spiral. There's always someone stepping in when someone needs to step out, so it's leaderful. I don't know if that was what you were talking about.

Sandy: BLMTO being Black Lives Matter-Toronto.

Jade: Yeah.

Cornel: I've actually seen, I don't know if we're talking about the same documentary, but I've seen that clip with the penguins.

Sandy: I have not seen it.

Cornel: Oh, okay, well from what I recall, it was during the winter. The female penguins have gone off and it's the men protecting the eggs and so forth.

Sandy: It's history.

Cornel: It's a useful analogy too, if we're thinking about the weather, taking it back to you.

Jade: Killing it.

Cornel: Right. So I guess if we're thinking about the weather as anti-blackness, as Christina Sharpe says, in that kind of context; I guess holding space for each other, I do think that's a useful model for us to think about. I guess I'm not sure if we're all there yet. I don't think we hold space for each other in that way as a collective. Again, going back to what I was saying earlier, in terms of labor, it's often the case that it's Black women who are doing most of that work as well. What does it take for – I'm talking out here, so I need to... I'm saying, what does it mean for the rest of us to hold each other up in the way that those penguins seem to be doing.

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Megan: I need to watch this stuff.

Eve: Penguin politics.

Sandy: I'm not that interested in watching it *laughter*, but I appreciate learning from the penguins. They're excellent teachers.

Host: So we can have radical reciprocity.

Cornel: Ohh I like that.

Sandy: Oh!

Megan: I want to respond to what you were saying earlier, Sandy H, about making self-care communal and a collective process. Being a Cree person myself, I often feel so privileged that I can work across many different frameworks of thinking. I can look at what Western culture has to offer and what they say about self-care, and if I don't like it, I could say, "F that," and look at what my own people had to say about it from time immemorial.

Two concepts come to mind when we're talking about self-care, and one is *wahkohtowin* which is the act of being related to one another, extended family, and that's closely linked with *wicihitowin* which is the act of helping each other, supporting each other. I don't know if you're familiar with these concepts Sandi W, as an Anishinaabe person, but I really do think that when these individual concepts of self-care don't serve us, it's useful to look at what our own teachings tell us, that is, helping each other when we can't help ourselves.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

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