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WEEKEND

get ready with me

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the politicized self-obsession with 'me time'

A common occurrence: Sitting on the heater in the corner of my suite, makeup still done and an essay unwritten, I open TikTok to decompress from a long day of skipping lectures and socializing. The first three videos I see, perhaps the fault of my algorithm, are influencer "Get Ready With Me" clips that weave together product placement, brand promotions and girl talk. I cannot help but think that self-care, a term that could gesture to anything from knitting to botox, has gone too far.

I won't bore you by listing the dozen new beauty fads of the past two days, like thousand-dollar red-light devices and serums that promise to reshape your face while you sleep, because it is self-evident that the self-care industry is gargantuan. It primarily targets burnt-out women and individuals managing McKinsey-level work-life balances on a McKinsey-level salary.

Self-care feeds our individuality complex in all its forms. The term literally places Self before Care, which provides some linguisting food for thought. There really is no community to be found or empathy to be developed in three hours spent in front of the mirror. The modern, neoliberal self-care is concerningly self-obsessed.

The term "self-care" was coined by Black feminist activist Audre Lorde as a radical attack of the status quo. "Caring for myself is not an act of self-indulgence," she wrote in her 1988 essay collection "A Burst of Light." "It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

While battling cancer and fighting for inclusive liberation, Lorde advocated for self-care insofar as it let her live another day despite a system's desperate effort to wear her down. Time spent on oneself is time spent away from the office, so in a way this trend represents an anti-capitalist sentiment that we should carry into the twenty-first century. Prioritizing skin care over money could still be radical.

I'm trying to find this disconnect. Self-care no longer feels like preservation. It's exhausting. It's oversaturated with trends and buzzwords and must-buy products. Rather than a respite from the office, self-care constitutes another full-time job.

Still scrolling, I find a video with, as of March 3, 5.2 million likes. The "Get Ready With Me" from TikTok influencer @manelparletrop begins as Manel, looking as though she just underwent an intensive reconstructive facial procedure, removes an elastic jaw compression strap from her face and peels her overnight face mask off. After using 42 products in her morning routine, she changes out of her pajamas and concludes the video. I look at the caption. Manel has tagged the brands of every product she has used, starting with chin strap and ending with mascara.

Much of modern self-care is more tame than these overproduced and sensationalized videos. It serves many purposes — feeding our cultural obsession with vanity, to be sure — but also it acts as a more accessible, and many times more affordable, alternative to health care, especially for women. This emphasis on preventative care is backed up by science, but it can quickly turn from healthy to paranoid. If I, running from a horde of costly medical issues, apply just one more Magic Dream Youth serum, will I be saved?

Indeed, part of the appeal of these self-care practices lies in control. Through elaborate routines, we curate our own appearance as much as the one we present to others, vanity displays doubling as social signaling. In every example I've listed, women are at the center of this industry. Beyond the unnecessary consumerism that plagues the self-care trend cycle, the actual act of self-care takes hours.

In a world where our time is measured in "productive hours" defined by our labor contributions to the economy, the self-care industry increasingly keeps women caged in "idle" hours, separated from work and excluded from social mobility under capitalism.

So where did Lorde's version of self care get lost in this consumerist shuffle? Political rebellion aside, modern self-care focuses entirely on the consumable. To force a homophone, we've replaced care for one's soul with care for one's sole.

In 1808, Charles Fourier wrote that, "Often, when we think we are merely enjoying ourselves, we are involved in political processes of the highest importance." To reduce this philosophical musing to a pithy aphorism, joy is radical. Capitalism has convinced us that we exist as isolated economic agents, but community care could be, perhaps, the best self-care. In other words, wine nights with the girls might be the next cure-all face mask. Care for yourself, yes, but not selfishly.

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