

**INTRODUCTION** Mental Health, Healing, and Wellness  
*An Intellectual History of Self-Care*

In this country, black women traditionally have had compassion for everyone else except ourselves. We cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers. We need to also learn to care for ourselves.

—AUDRE LORDE, “The Great American Disease” (1979)

Remember, wisdom comes from combining what you know intellectually and what you feel in your gut. . . . stop and ask: Is this good for me? Am I still on my path? Am I listening to my inner voice?

—ELEANOR HINTON HOYTT AND HILARY BEARD,  
*Health First! The Black Women’s Wellness Guide* (2012)

AFRICAN WOMEN HAVE SALUTED THE SUN FOR CENTURIES. For example, Ethiopian references to Makeda and her people “bowing down to greet the rising and setting sun” redefine the roots of popular holistic health practices like Sun Salutations. This study of Black women’s wellness investigates healing traditions by placing race and gender at the center of discussion. In doing so, I seek to restructure contemporary conceptions of self-care.

In her song “Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care),” Solange suggests that we’ve been lovers on a mission who should take an intermission. This book is the culmination of my lifelong mission for empowerment education and

an attempt to take an intermission in order to catch my breath for personal, professional, and political well-being.

*Black Women's Yoga History: Memoirs of Inner Peace* explores self-care narratives to help relieve the pressure of Black women dealing with stress in isolation. By studying elder memoirs, we learn how historical factors contribute to health disparities, we learn how to manage stress more effectively, and we learn to better care and advocate for ourselves. Black women are the primary audience for this book, but the information is universally relevant, especially to those in mental health professions. This book expands mental health research at a time when stress management is at the center of global importance due to public health, economic, and political collapse on an international scale.<sup>1</sup>

As a nation, the United States has a higher stress level in this historical moment than in the past few decades. Discussions about mental health and self-care rose dramatically in the aftermath of an increasingly stressful political environment that emerged after the 2016 presidential election. The 2017 report *Stress in America: The State of Our Nation*, by the American Psychological Association (APA), shows Americans worried about the future of the nation (63 percent), money (62 percent), and work (61 percent). Areas of anxiety include issues like health care, the economy, trust in government, and hate crimes. The highest percentage of respondents in the *Stress Report* agreed on the need for mental relief: “Despite the divisiveness in many areas, most Americans (87 percent) can agree on at least one thing: a desire for people to take a deep breath and calm down.” Stress around these issues increased exponentially after the 2016 election, intensified in 2020 as an international reality in a global pandemic, and exploded in national unrest with the very necessary push for social justice by the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, the APA survey also revealed that anxiety around social issues was exacerbated by race and gender inequities. Fittingly, scholarship about Black women's lives has emphasized the imperative to focus on self-care, especially in times of national and global crisis when stress is more acute. For example, Karla Scott concludes her book, *The Language of Strong Black Womanhood: Myths, Models, Messages, and a New Mandate for Self-Care* (2017), with an explicit call for more information about how Black women can care for ourselves. She writes, “One of the costs of caring for others to the detriment of self, is the compromised emotional, mental, and physical health as evidenced by Black women's health disparities.” Scott highlights the imperative that Black women pay attention to mental health, especially

those who are activists or caretakers. Her study amplifies insights offered by feminist and womanist scholars who highlight the value of attention to our inner voice.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist Audre Lorde rightly claimed that any liberation movement Black women participate in must center our voices. She also noted that Black women must first practice peace in our own lives and then we can teach healing practices to others. In a 1979 article entitled “The Great American Disease,” published in *The Black Scholar*, Lorde unapologetically argued for Black women centering ourselves as a necessary step toward Black (and ultimately universal) liberation. As seen in the preceding epigraph, she also noted the racial and gendered politics of compassion and that Black women must care for ourselves in order to effectively deal with the “disease” of both racism and sexism. A decade later, while battling cancer, Lorde famously wrote in *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (1988), “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” The epiphany that self-care is both compassionate and political affirms notions of care in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1999) by Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>4</sup>

As with Lorde, womanist scholar Layli Maparyan dedicates ample time to define the meaning and importance of care that Black women must take for ourselves. Black women are disproportionately subject to personal, cultural, or structural violence, which results in what Maparyan identifies as imbalance. Bringing oneself into balance is how she imagines self-care. Maparyan constructs a model for defining self-care that involves three elements: health, healing, and wellness. In *The Womanist Idea* (2012), she writes, “Health, healing, and wellness practices are designed to rectify the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual imbalances that emerge in the process of daily living and also to foster dynamic vitality in the whole organism.”<sup>5</sup> Health, generally defined, is stability and the relative absence of illness. Wellness, on the other hand, indicates optimal health, what Maparyan calls “dynamic vitality.” For Black women, health and wellness usually are not possible without healing from some sort of violence or traumatic stress, whether personal, structural, cultural—all undergirded by historical violence. As seen in this definition, healing is defined in terms of holistic health—mind, body, and spirit.<sup>6</sup>

In this book, I combine Lorde and Maparyan to create a feminist-womanist framework for reading Black women’s long history of self-care. I

argue that Black women's quest to find balance has encompassed mental health, healing traditions, and historical wellness in a way that demonstrates self-compassion but is also inherently political. Surely, if the personal is political, as Scott concludes, Black women's self-care is revolutionary. Compassion and politics clearly emerge as salient themes throughout this book, as I share in the conclusion, and are as palpable as themes of health, healing, and wellness in Black women's experiences. Sustainable self-care, a popular theme on social media, deserves an assessment that considers the significance of race, gender, and aging.<sup>7</sup>

Education theorist Howard Gardner identifies *intrapersonal* intelligence as the ability to develop a "sense of self" in healthy relationship to society:

At its most advanced level, intrapersonal knowledge allows one to detect and to symbolize complex and highly differentiated sets of feelings. One finds this form of intelligence developed in the novelist (like Proust) who can write introspectively about feelings, in the patient (or the therapist) who comes to attain a deep knowledge of his own feeling life, and in the wise elder who draws upon his own wealth of inner experiences in order to advise members of his community.<sup>8</sup>

My study advances a premise that elder life writing can offer some transparency of inner lives and confirm the possibility of inner peace through sustainable self-care. Many Black women are experts at developing road maps for stress management and inner peace in a way that is useful for those struggling to find a balanced relationship with themselves and with society.

Despite the connection of stress to illnesses, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and obesity, the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that 33 percent of Americans do not discuss ways to manage stress with their healthcare provider. Given the contentious and predatory relationship medical examiners often have had with Black Americans in general and Black women in particular, Black women are sometimes reluctant to go to a medical doctor or a mental health professional. Elder memoirs offer an introduction to the language of self-care so Black women can care and advocate for ourselves as effectively as we do for others. Memoirs offer public health professionals strength-based tools with which to work toward a collective healthier future.<sup>9</sup>

The imperative for Black women's self-care is clear in public health research. One of the most salient studies to date appeared in the *Journal of*

*Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services* (2019). Titled “Leveraging Community Engagement to Develop Culturally Tailored Stress Management Interventions in Midlife Black Women,” the article called for specific self-care interventions to manage main stressors including work, family, money, and social media. Researchers, led by Dr. Holly Jones at University of Cincinnati, again identified the “Strong Black Woman persona” as part of the problem, along with sociopolitical challenges, that result in hypertension and health disparities: “Gendered racism and discrimination and life imbalance emerged as underlying stressors linked to the Strong Black Woman persona. This persona prioritizes resilience and self-reliance while suppressing self-care. The stressors identified will inform the development of an intervention and should be considered when providing care for midlife Black women.”<sup>10</sup> In a follow-up article published in *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing* (June 2019), the same research team published “Stress Reduction Strategies Used by Midlife Black Women to Target Cardiovascular Risk,” which identified exercise, faith, and prayer, self-care, sisterhood, volunteerism, and mindfulness as interventions that helped Black women manage stress. This research team recommended delivery systems of programs that included informative lectures and coaching, demonstrations, team sessions, strategic social media, and continued access to information. These findings are consistent with previous stress management research by Black Women’s Health Imperative, the Mayo Clinic, Robert Sapolsky, and others highlighted in this book.

The self-care and stress management practices at the center of my personal experience are also reflected in numerous memoirs published by Black women that I have surveyed over the past decade. Interestingly, health, healing, and wellness are vividly discussed in memoirs by centenarians (women who live to age one hundred). It turns out that Black women who live to be one hundred know a thing or two about maintaining balance. Thus, I began this query in 2013 to answer one simple question: How have Black women elders managed stress?

The struggle to manage stress is not new and my interest in Black women’s self-care is not simply a personal one, so intellectual history, or the study of ideas, is a natural fit for a book about inner peace. This research on elder narratives examines emotional, psychological, intellectual, and social well-being. In short, this work traces how Black women learned to breathe (expressed in popular culture as “woosah”), despite conditions that were

painfully breathtaking. Specifically, I investigate the inner peace practices that elder Black women have used to try to bring their lives into balance, especially after being subjected to personal, cultural, or structural violence.

The 2017 *Stress in America* report identified the four most popular types of stress management: music, exercise, prayer, and yoga/meditation: “One coping method is on the rise, with 12 percent of people using yoga or meditation to manage their stress (compared with 9 percent in 2016), the highest percentage since the survey first asked about these activities in 2008.”<sup>11</sup> The multifaceted practice of yoga and meditation has continued to grow exponentially in the United States, particularly in the past decade. While they often appear separately—yoga *and* meditation—I recognize yoga as an umbrella term that includes meditation practice in various forms. This requires nuance because meditation is also often conjoined with prayer and yoga with exercise. They are separate activities, but can also overlap.

No one definition of yoga exists, but the most popular definition translates the meaning of this traditional Indian practice into unification with the self, others, and the universe through meditation, breathing, and physical postures. Yoga is as popular as ever, but my study shows this interest is not new. While there is a social media trend of saying things have been “hidden” while in plain view to historians, this research truly has turned up items that were virtually unknown, even in professional histories—like the fact that Rosa Parks did yoga.

Yoga was a smaller subsection of my study on mental health and wellness until 2015, when I found textual evidence, in her niece’s memoir, that Rosa Parks had a four-decades-long yoga practice. Through yoga and adopting a vegetarian diet, Mrs. Parks lived to age ninety-two. After diving into the Library of Congress archives, I found photo evidence that Mrs. Parks not only took yoga classes but gave public demonstrations in Detroit as early as 1973, right after her sixtieth birthday. When a colleague shared my research on Twitter, nineteen thousand likes and hundreds of comments showed that this aspect of Mrs. Parks was unknown to professional historians, as well as longtime yoga instructors and practitioners (called yogis). My research was such a unique contribution and gained popular recognition that *Yoga Journal* eventually posted a feature in their “History of Yoga” section.<sup>12</sup>

A closer look at primary sources reveals evidence of a lifelong practice. Rosa Parks’s memoir, *My Life* (1999), makes known how she had been “stretching” and “exercising” her whole life, a daily practice that had been

taught to her by her mother. This daily practice became essential in her healing from childhood illnesses, as well as from the stress she faced during her Civil Rights Movement activism, which has been documented by scholars like historian Jeanne Theoharis and Susan Reyburn of the Library of Congress. This realization about Parks's lifelong inner peace journey made me pay more attention to my own burgeoning yoga practice and want to learn more about the depths of Black women's yoga history. This involved gathering memoirs as primary sources but also accessing a range of source types to help define what self-care has meant in African American women's lives. Meditation was found to be a more popular term, making a narrower focus on yoga even more compelling.

My study of Black women's yoga traditions is a study of mental health history. This book is a meditation, from Black women's perspectives, about what mental health researchers have called the inner life or inner voice. When I say it out loud, the proposition to study inner peace seems downright silly. Corny. Stupid. Lightweight. Unscientific. Shiny-happy history. But I can't help that. Toni Morrison said to write the book you want to read and this is the book I most want—need—to read because managing chronic stress is a lifelong struggle. Inner peace is a journey. Self-care strategies (like meditation, music, prayer, yoga, and exercise) are vehicles on this journey. Stressors are events that inhibit smooth travel on our journey, and chronic stress may stop our movement on the journey to inner peace altogether. The struggle for inner peace is real, but manageable. *A luta continua.*

As a survivor of three sexual attacks before the age of sixteen, I experienced bouts of depression when I was a teenager. Y'all, I almost did not make it this far on my journey. Though I have been fortunate to find wellness practices that have brought me peace, as well as access to professional counseling while in college that helped bring me into balance, I will never forget the feeling of hopelessness I had as a youth and the haunting feeling that I was alone in my suffering. One explicit goal for my research, even though I focus on elders, is to inspire youth and readers of all ages who feel hopeless and alone to learn about how others have felt as we do and how they grew beyond these feelings to have long, meaningful, purposeful, and joyful lives.<sup>13</sup>

Yoga, a holistic health practice that encompasses meditation, is a topic of research in several academic disciplines, including psychology, religious studies, education, sociology, political economy, human development,

kinesiology, public health, and several areas of medicine. Scholars regularly debate how inner peace practices like yoga and meditation can help to create mental, spiritual, and physical balance, counteract the stressful impact of racism and sexism, and improve quality of life by relieving a range of illnesses and health conditions. As will be outlined in chapter 1, yoga and meditation are very distinct but overlapping exercises, though I often refer to them interchangeably in this work.

Publications on Black women's mental health history—particularly on histories of wellness rather than illness—are sparse at best. This study of historical wellness contributes much toward an intellectual history of self-care. Fortunately, primary sources are readily available. African American women have a rich history of writing about mental health in general and self-care in particular. My initial survey of over 200 electronically searchable narratives showed that over 150 memoirs mentioned meditation and about 50 mentioned yoga. When I surveyed the Africana Memoirs database of Black women's autobiographies, an online library that I created in 2013, my review provided narrative evidence in support of empirical research from authors who identify yoga as a pathway to healthy living. This extended survey of elder yoga memoirs reveals how a hidden demographic of African American women has engaged yoga as a little-known positive, healthy lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

In *Black Women's Yoga History*, I engage the concept of regeneration to structure a three-part reflection: a look inward to my own experience and the meaning of stress, a look back to historical memoirs to better understand origins of community health, and a look forward to the next generation of wellness practitioners who are carrying on healing traditions. At the dawn of my fiftieth birthday in 2019, my quest for understanding my own mental health maintenance matched my academic interests, particularly as I had become more adept at managing my stress level—though not always completely mastering it. Stress is a problem of interest for me because of my past challenges at overcoming the anxiety that built up after years of trauma. I moved out of my mother's house at the age of sixteen after several challenging years there and found my own way to provide life's essentials. But my anxiety hit an all-time high when, eight years after graduating high school, I was tasked with figuring out college and graduate school on my own. Over a decade later, after earning the rank of full professor, I became interested in documenting the factors that contributed to my professional success. The wellness practices I developed to foster inner



peace over time—dancing, hypnotherapy, cardio kickboxing, meditation, and yoga—became as much of an interest to me as my traumatic past.

I have meditated (“organically,” as Jana Long observes) for as long as I can remember and have taken a number of yoga classes over the past two decades, beginning while a graduate student in 1999. I also became a cardio kickboxing aerobics instructor in graduate school, apparently finding joy in both sitting peacefully and kicking things. Even though I have earned a certificate attesting to my basic knowledge of the essentials of Kemeti yoga, I am just a novice. My personal yoga practice is consistent but messy. I practice every day (what I call pajama yoga), sometimes multiple times a day, and I feel better after every session, no matter how short. Sitting meditation is part of my daily yoga practice and mindfulness is an ongoing effort throughout the day. So, I keep studying, practicing, and striving to learn more. Like Jana Long who penned the beautiful foreword, I am committed to self-study, though my interest in African roots and African American practices rather than Indian or South Asian traditions is paramount in my approach. This book, which examines the historical record of Black women’s yoga narratives, is a concerted movement in the direction toward continued learning.

### **Letters to Our Daughters: Narrative Mentoring and Reclaiming a History of Africana Yoga**

Many Black women have a history of practices and traditions that assisted in their mental health maintenance. . . . Psychology and other mental health disciplines could actually learn a lot from a group of people who routinely suffer from racism, sexism, and economic disenfranchisement simultaneously, yet persevere and find ways to thrive, or find inner peace.

—KANIKA BELL, “Sisters on Sisters: Inner Peace from the Black Woman Mental Health Professional Perspective” (2017)

Maya Angelou, author of the most popular survivor narrative of the twentieth century, suggests memoirs are “letters to our daughters” that convey vital lessons. Both author intent and reader response demonstrate that life writing can be used for mentoring. Literary mentoring is a concept

I developed in 2013 to explain how readers can engage books as tools for guidance; today I would say “narrative mentoring” is a more appropriate characterization of this work. As a youth, I traveled to several locations, and books became one of the only constants in my life. While personal mentoring is absolutely necessary for growth, books can support a person’s quest for self-knowledge. Maya Angelou wrote in *Letter to My Daughter* (2008): “You will find in this book accounts of growing up, unexpected emergencies, a few poems, some light stories to make you laugh and some to make you meditate. . . . We may act sophisticated and worldly but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home.”<sup>15</sup> Angelou is the undisputed godmother of life narrative and she explicitly wrote her meditations as guides to inner peace for the generations of women who follow her.

The sound of Dr. Angelou’s voice has been heard in countless arenas, yet much work remains to be done to measure the range, tone, impact, and echoes of her life and life’s work. Angelou’s publications have had wide exposure throughout her career, largely as a result of the popularity of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), which has resonated with audiences for several generations. Angelou’s message is broadcast widely via global networks and media outlets due in no small part to Oprah Winfrey and her life-changing experience of Angelou’s acclaimed autobiography. Angelou was called by presidents and international leaders to define exceptional moments in time. This distinguished “mentor-mother-sister-friend” was a force of nature and a source of boundless energy.

Maya Angelou published several types of books, including cookbooks, children’s books, poetry, speeches, and essays, in addition to recording a calypso album. However, autobiography was her primary genre, and she wrote seven full-length works in addition to the autobiographical pieces included in other genres. Of the thirty-six published works, most are best sellers, and Angelou’s arc of productivity in recording the phases of her life, up to the final work *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), is unmatched in the genre.

Angelou’s writing regimen was recorded in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984), edited by writer and poet Mari Evans. In this collection, Angelou describes her process:

I keep in my writing room a Bible, a dictionary, Roget’s Thesaurus, a bottle of sherry, cigarettes, an ashtray, and three or four decks of playing cards. During the five hours I spend there I use every object, but I play solitaire

more than I actually write. It seems to me that when my hands and small mind (a Southern Black phrase) are engaged in placing the reds on the blacks and blacks on the reds, my working mind arranges and rearranges the characters and the plot. Finally when they are in a plausible order, I simply have to write down where they are and why they say.

Later, after I have returned home . . . I bathe and change clothes. This seems to signal my total mind that it may now stop working for the writer and begin to think for the woman, the wife, the friend, and the cook.<sup>16</sup>

Here, we are treated to an inside look at the daily contemplative writing process of someone who was so clearly productive, but through a mindful and meditative process that incorporated props and accessed different parts of the brain. Angelou clearly counted both reading and writing as meditative rituals.

In *Letter to My Daughter*, Angelou makes explicit her intention to gather recollections in a way that benefits future generations. In a summary of how to deal with life, she writes, “You may not control all of the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”<sup>17</sup> Her narratives reveal that she was raped at the age of eight by a boyfriend of her mother, was manipulated into hustling as a sex worker for a short time, at one point, managing other women, and lived in many ways in the entertainment industry that some might find unsavory, at best. Yet, she wrote herself with clarity, fairness, and dignity—in ways that sought not to diminish anyone else’s humanity or set herself apart from those, like sex workers, not deemed respectable. Her writing created a paradigm for self-awareness and self-acceptance and was a healing journey to sustainable optimal mental health that has reverberated through an incalculable number of Black women’s hearts. Angelou taught us how to find home in the self.

Black women’s survival narratives, like Angelou’s, are life-affirming practices that connect past, present, and future struggles. The memoirs of elders show how “challenges, triumphs, and lessons” are prevalent in Black women’s empowerment narratives. Angelou suggests narratives exhume lessons about health and healing for future generations:

Let’s tell the truth to the people. When people ask, “How are you,” have the nerve sometimes to answer truthfully. You must know however, that people will start avoiding you because they too have knees that pain them

and heads which hurt and they don't want to know about yours. But think of it this way, if people avoid you, you will have more time to meditate and do fine research on a cure for whatever truly afflicts you.<sup>18</sup>

Time to meditate, research, and heal is, indeed, time well spent. From 1950, when she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, to her passing on May 28, 2014, at the age of eighty-six, Angelou not only allowed herself time to contemplate her own wellness but also provided templates of “phenomenal women” rising to the occasion of living their most authentic and peaceful lives.

Oprah noted that reading Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* helped her come to terms with and heal from her own abuse. Their bond of friendship was grounded in survival, faith, and love, which sprang from a writer–reader relationship. Narrative mentoring is also visible in how Oprah then worked with Tina Turner. In her second memoir, *My Love Story* (2018), Turner indicates that she agreed to repeat her experience of surviving Ike Turner's abuse in order to support and encourage survivors of domestic violence:

Whatever I felt about Ike and our past, and as much as I wanted to put it behind me, I was moved that my sad story had the power to help others. Oprah, who has interviewed me many times, had a habit of asking me the same tough question: “Do you remember the first time Ike hit you?” Sensing that I was tired of reliving these memories, she said privately, “Tina, you know why I keep asking.” Oprah saw a higher purpose in our discussion. She helped me understand how important it was for me to keep talking, that I was offering a lesson. It was an opportunity to reach out to abused women and bring the difficult subject into the light. If they heard me talking honestly about my experiences, they might find the courage to do something about their own situations. I'm told over and over again by fans, those who approach me in person, others who write very emotional letters, that some aspect of my story—my escape from Ike, my determination to survive on my own, my dedication, my resilience, and yes, my optimism—actually did help them.<sup>19</sup>

Black women's memoirs can be read as letters between generations about how to find historic wisdom, internal fortitude, and political courage. In my own writing over the past two decades, I have engaged autobiography

as a source of epistemological guidance from Black foremothers. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's recent work in intellectual history also invokes this intergenerational support as "grandmother knowledge" demonstrating a collective understanding of the interconnected nature of Black women's epistemologies. *Black Women's Yoga History* examines published reflections about yoga and meditation by Black women elders over the age of seventy (seniors) or over fifty (midlife).<sup>20</sup>

I define yoga as an inner peace practice to unify the body, mind, and spirit. Africana yoga, simply put, is Black women's tradition of inner peace practice. My articulation of Africana yoga in no way seeks to erase the history or traditions of Indian and South Asian yoga. The existence of a Black women's tradition exists alongside holistic health practices around the world. While I acknowledge the intractable contribution of traditional Indian yoga, my work demonstrates unique (sometimes overlapping) pathways to holistic health and personal power. The term Africana signals Africa and its diaspora. This is particularly appropriate in this study because I recognize the ways some Indian and South Asian people with apparent African heritage (as discussed in chapter 1) identify as Black. This is true even though the vice presidential candidacy of Kamala Harris has raised complex issues and engendered difficult discussions about relations of India to Africa, unearthing anti-Black bias. In this case, nevertheless, "Africana women" is a broadly inclusive identifier.

The memoirs included in this study contribute to an ongoing discussion about Black participation in holistic health and innovations of yoga practice before and shortly after its national popularity in 1975, when several publications signaled a permanent nationwide interest. As BYTA founder Jana Long so elegantly articulated in the foreword, Black women have an "organic relationship with our bodies." I simply desire to show how there is a history of authentic practices both inside and beyond the Indian tradition.

Yoga is widely known as a practice that emerged out of first-century India, dating back to the Indus Valley civilization of circa 3500 BCE. As will be seen in several memoirs, the practice of yoga is a holistic health practice of integrated spiritual and mental contemplations with physical activities. Like meditation and prayer, yoga reflects a broad cultural engagement that is inclusive but not restricted to the Indian cultural tradition. Just as dance and martial arts have a number of cultural interpretations, yoga, as a healing

system of the mind, body, and spirit, has innumerable cultural translations and interpretations of health and unity. That said, it is essential to recognize the particular cultivation of a unique system created and developed in India, known worldwide as yoga.

Yoga was formally introduced to the United States in September 1893 at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago by Swami Vivekananda. Several teachers followed, bringing yoga to the United States, including Paramahansa Yogananda in the 1920s and Swami Satchidananda in the 1960s. Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) is an enduring classic narrative and Satchidananda is widely recognized as the most influential yoga instructor in the West because he moved to America. B. K. S. Iyengar traveled to Switzerland in 1952 and the United States in 1956. Iyengar's focus on proper form for the asanas, or postures, became the cornerstone of modern yoga worldwide, even though he noted that yoga is a practice of holistic health or the "subtle body," rather than simply a program for the physical body. Several subsequent waves of yoga teachers fed into the 1960s and 1970s craze, hitting an all-time high in 1975, with publication of *Yoga Journal* in the United States.

Yoga has a rich history in African American communities as documented by Jana Long, director of Black Yoga Teachers Alliance (BYTA). BYTA began as a social media interest group in 2009 and established itself in 2016. Cofounded by Jana Long and Maya Breuer, BYTA is an ever-growing community of instructors in a range of yoga approaches, some of whom enjoy practices of over forty years. In the BYTA documentary *The Uncommon Yogi: A History of Blacks and Yoga in the U.S.* (2016), African American presence in yoga is connected to transcendental and theosophy movements at the turn of the twentieth century, which developed alongside the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Long identifies several generations of Black yoga teachers and practitioners, including "innovators," "friends," and "the new breed," explored more fully in chapter 1. My work extends the BYTA historical narrative by focusing on gender in addition to race, explicitly connecting an African tradition for a further reach back into ancient yogic practices, and by identifying organic and sometimes more informal or alternate traditions.

Evidence embedded in narratives suggests that many, like Sadie and Bessie Delany, learned yoga from television as a direct result of people like Richard Hittleman, who began airing his *Yoga for Health* in 1961. *Yoga for*

*Health* was televised for four years straight and reached millions. As Jana Long mentioned and will be seen in the Delany sisters' narrative, television shows like these were very influential.<sup>21</sup> An understanding of various Indian influences in the United States can also be seen in the well-known case of Tina Turner's daily chanting, which she explicitly names as Buddhist and directly relates to her study of Hindu culture. She was even slated, at one point, to play Shakti in the never-released movie *Goddess*.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, Harriet Jacobs offers a case in point that African American women's holistic relationships with their bodies was not solely a result of the introduction of Indian yoga or Asian influences in American popular culture in 1893. Jacobs was enslaved in North Carolina in the early 1800s. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Jacobs writes about meditation and her stretching exercise, which she practiced as she planned her 1842 escape from the Auburn plantation to Philadelphia. She mentions meditation three times in her memoir, including a time when she was in deep walking contemplation, developing a plan for her and her children to escape after her so-called owner intensified his sexual advances and threatened to put her children to work in the field. She also outlines the "various applications to bring warmth and strength to my limbs" and her "constant exercise" and stretching, both to prepare for escape and to repair her mind and body after hiding for seven years, from 1835 to 1842, in her grandmother's attic.

Harriet Jacobs, enslaved but literate, who penned her own narrative in 1861, wrote cogently about her seven-year wellness practice while in hiding, and she was not the only one to develop a system for her body to heal from trauma in a way that was not based in Indian traditions. As related in this book's opening epigraph, Jacobs defines her determination for freedom as a determination to have peace in this lifetime. After her escape, she penned her memoir, worked with her son as an abolitionist and with her daughter as a teacher, and lived a full life to the age of eighty-four.<sup>23</sup>

Another example of an arduous but fruitful journey toward peace is Katherine Dunham's *A Touch of Innocence* (1959), which details how her creative life as an anthropologist and dancer sustained her to the age of ninety-six. Dunham chronicles the depth of her suffering from her father's molestation after her mother's death, which caused her to be removed from his home. In addition, she reveals an instance where a homeless man cornered her under a bridge and forced her to watch as he masturbated. Her

development of holistic healing grounded in physical, intellectual, and spiritual development is on display in her second memoir, *Island Possessed* (1969), about her Vodun study and practice.

Based on Dunham's anthropological research, which took her from Chicago, the hot bed of jazz music, to Jamaica, Haiti, and Senegal, she helped create jazz dance in the 1930s, which not only melded her passions but also demonstrated a mindful commitment to creative wellness. Though Dunham did not mention yoga in her memoirs, her explicitly African Dunham dance technique that incorporated ballet and modern dance can be appreciated as an example of how Black women have developed or incorporated African-based systems of creative and performative healing in ways that sustain spiritual self-care through a long life. Notably, Dunham taught Eartha Kitt, who is featured in chapter 5. In this sense, it is fruitful to study yoga from a historical perspective to unearth a rich history of mental, physical, and spiritual tools that African American women have used in a quest for inner peace. This work also demonstrates the ability to engage yoga without fetishization, erasure, or co-optation, which is the norm in American and European capitalist practice.

In addition to adding primary source material to the established self-care timeline, memoirs and autobiography by popular and lesser-known authors enhance the understanding and interpretation of yoga literature. By excavating the multitude of meanings this practice has had in African American women's lives, we can have a fuller understanding of the range of forms yoga has taken. This study also enhances our understanding about the indelible significance of yoga in US history and world history. This inquiry is a personal, communal, national, and international study of race, gender, and holistic health.

The "self" in self-care does not indicate that historical women healed without support, assistance, or vital social networks. Neither does "self" negate a focus on the support of others; in fact, this study shows self-care has enabled Black women to contribute to their families and communities in a sustainable rather than an exploitative way.

When I decided to focus on yoga memoirs, I consulted publications but also turned to the leading professional organization for practitioners, Black Yoga Teachers Alliance (BYTA). I found language that mirrors Maparyan's textbook womanist definition of self-care: "The Black Yoga Teachers



Alliance, Inc. (BYTA) is a collective of black yoga teachers who share a love of health, healing, and well-being. We offer an institutionalized voice in the broader yoga community to elevate the presence of black yoga teachers and practitioners in the yoga world.”<sup>24</sup> The “About Us” section confirms a synergy between research and practice—a praxis that is the foundation of Black women’s studies. This is a unique time to reflect on this point, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of both Black studies and women’s studies.

While healing from sexual trauma emerged as relevant and is a stated focus in my work, the BYTA and womanist articulation of self-care as health and wellness are equal areas of concentration. These articulations make inner peace a universal topic that is relevant to survivors as well as those who come to yoga without any experience of personal trauma. Either way, yoga can improve mental health.

### **Mental Health Maintenance: Stress and the Rationale for Studying Inner Peace**

When most of us think about mental wellness, we often think first of mental illness, but such a narrow perspective makes it hard for us to optimize our health on any level—mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually.

—LINDA GOLER BLOUNT, introduction to BLACK WOMEN’S  
HEALTH IMPERATIVE, *IndexUS: What Healthy  
Black Women Can Teach Us about Health* (2016)

Several Black women authors have published books on inner peace, including Ruth King, *Healing Rage: Women Making Inner Peace Possible* (2004); Mahima Klinge, *A Rebel’s Guide to Inner Peace: Live the Moment* (2013); Daya Devi-Doolin, *Yoga, Meditation and Spiritual Growth for the African American Community: If You Breathe You Can Do Yoga and Find Inner and Outer Peace* (2014); Rhonda Magee, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities through Mindfulness* (2019); and Adwoa Akhu, *Cultivating Inner Peace: A Sustainable System for Professional Black Women* (2019), all predated by Alice Walker’s, *We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (2006). African American women’s memoir, as a site of knowledge about sustainable

self-care, contributes to this developing dialogue. A history of inner peace provides epistemic healing that must be central to any effective public health policy, mental health services provided to Black communities, or activism that demands justice and a change to conditions that cause harm.<sup>25</sup>

On June 7, 2019, actress Taraji P. Henson delivered emotional testimony to the United States Congress about the vital need for mental health services in African American communities. Henson was at Congress to discuss the topic “Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health.” She passionately attested to the dire need to destigmatize the challenges, such as anxiety and depression, that disproportionately impact Black families. Historical research that focuses on balanced models of mental illness and wellness must be included in what Henson called “culturally competent” tool kits used by service providers to address this ongoing crisis. In particular, Black women, families, and youth are vulnerable to failures and lapses in services. Henson sought to raise awareness by sharing her personal connection to the issue and created a foundation to “break the silence and break the cycle of shame” around issues of anxiety and depression that cause so many to self-harm.<sup>26</sup>

Henson’s message resonated with me because, yes, once upon a time, I did have an ulcer. While traumatic stress is not the cause of ulcers (most medical research points to bacteria), stress is a known contributor and chronic stress is clearly connected to physiological breakdown of several bodily functions including those of the nervous, respiratory, circulatory, and digestive systems. In his book *Why Zebras Don’t Have Ulcers: A Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (1994), Robert Sapolsky identifies effective stress management strategies measured through behavioral biology. Evidenced by a large and growing amount of research connecting public health, medicine, and humanities, meditation in general and mindfulness or yoga in particular are effective stress management practices to address conditions that lead to ulcers. Mental health and physical health are inextricable.

Sapolsky, a Stanford University professor of biology and neurology, has studied stress in animals from rats to primates to elephants. His conclusions after three decades of research indicate five strategies to cope with stress that produce measurable results: exercise, meditation, information gathering (to increase one’s sense of control), religion and spirituality, and developing a network of social support. As the leading researcher on stress, Sapolsky also

clearly identifies the environmental nature of what public health scholar Dr. Camara Jones calls the social determinants of health.

Early African American women pioneers of mental health research, including psychologists Ruth Howard Beckham (PhD, University of Minnesota 1934) and Mamie Phipps Clark (PhD, Columbia University 1943), made critical interventions in psychology, particularly child psychology, by operating from strength-based assessments of Black children and analyzing the impact of racism in American society. Black girlhood studies would evolve to include sociology, social work, and historical perspectives to trace the self-esteem development of those most directly impacted by intersections of racism and sexism. In particular, Clark developed mental health intervention programs to strengthen self-consciousness and understand self-esteem development in terms of power. Along with her husband Kenneth, she developed the famous doll test that identified internalized racism in Black children that became a cornerstone of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation case. In the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois and generations of African American mental health researchers like Mamie Clark, I acknowledge that Black women have problems. But Black women, ourselves, are not *the* problem.<sup>27</sup>

In the field of psychology, Diane Brown and Verna Keith's *In and Out of Our Right Minds: The Mental Health of African American Women* (2003) investigates how inner balance is imperative as a life skill for Black women. Brown and Keith investigate the deep historical roots of anxiety and depression. In an edited volume that contributes to this discussion, Kanika Bell, Nsenga Burton, and I present a follow-up to Brown and Keith's charge with a chorus of voices that exchange perspectives on race, gender, and wellness in a book titled *Black Women's Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* (2017). A decade after Brown and Keith's foundational work, more than thirty authors came together in fifteen chapters to deal with pervasive issues: surviving various types of violence (state, community, domestic, or sexual); struggling through depression and battling the mandate to be "strong" for everyone, to our own detriment; pushing back against stereotypes and social media pressures; identifying viable approaches to traditional therapy (including feminist and womanist counseling); teaching loving attitudes between mothers and daughters; and exploring lesser-recognized practices like contemplative writing, travel, and yoga to facilitate

well-being. The dialogical approach of this edited volume builds bridges that unite academic disciplines, mental health practitioners, and community agencies.<sup>28</sup>

Bell's essay "Sisters on Sisters: Inner Peace from the Black Woman Mental Health Professional Perspectives," the first chapter of *Black Women's Mental Health*, sets the tone for that book. When we began our initial discussions about the collaboration, I wanted to know what Black women therapists, psychology professors, and social work counselors thought about the topic of inner peace. Bell incorporated that question into her broader survey and the responses of fifty counselors and scholars were reported in her chapter. She concludes, "a central theme in the responses of this study concerned making peace a goal and finding ways to systematically maintain it."<sup>29</sup>

From Bell's national survey, the findings suggest "nine steps toward inner peace for Black women" based on strategies of counselors and practitioners. These include decluttering, self-care, and reconnecting to traditions that bring one joy. These practices are examples of how counselors recommend women find inner agency and, eventually, self-determination:

- Discover Inspiration . . . Black women must start viewing peace as an actual reality, not a mythical place reachable by everyone else. The first step toward inner peace is to view happiness as a possibility and be committed to achieving it.
- Black women must first commit to the *practice* of peace in their lives.
- Taking the risk to publicly stand against racism, sexism, economic marginalization, heterosexism, misogyny in the African American community, and other sociopolitical wrongs can restore a sense of agency to Black women who feel powerless.<sup>30</sup>

I have extracted some of the main themes suggested by the "Sisters on Sisters" survey and, in turn, seek out related themes in elder memoirs. Thus, this current book on yoga and mental health history is part of a cyclical, collaborative research process.<sup>31</sup>

In her survey of fifty Black women mental health professionals, Bell asserts that inner peace is possible, that Black women need to *practice* peace, and that "many Black women have practices and traditions that assisted in their mental health maintenance."<sup>32</sup> In my chapter titled "From Worthless