

CHAPTER 1

Are You Sure You Want to Be Well? *Healing and the Situation of Black Women's Pain*

Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? . . . I like to caution folks, that's all. . . No sense us wasting each other's time, sweetheart. A lot of weight when you're well.

—Minnie Ransom in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*

Unfortunately, we cannot know exactly how the late Toni Cade Bambara would respond to the messages about Black women's pain and wellness appearing on shows such as *Lifeclass* over three decades after publishing *The Salt Eaters*. Her 1980 novel extended a conversation she launched a decade earlier about the importance of Black women's self-care. In her 1970 edited collection, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Bambara told women who were fed up with the racism of the women's liberation movement and tired of the forms of sexism she and other women had encountered in Black liberation movements to turn their attentions inward. Her reasoning was simple: "Revolution begins with the self, in the self" because "the individual . . . must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard the next larger unit . . . that put the entire movement in peril."¹ For Bambara, an inward turn was crucial. Only by focusing on themselves could her readers begin to develop an "Afrafemme worldview," or a standpoint situated in the experiences of Black womanhood.² This was a worldview that situated "first the interiority of an in-the-head, in-the-heart, in-the-gut region of discovery called the *self*" and tested "the desires, the longing,

the aspirations of this discovered self with and against its possibilities for respect, growth, fulfillment, and accomplishment.”³

With the cautionary tale of Velma Henry in *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara illustrated what could happen if Black women fail to make this inward shift and invest in this process of self-discovery in time. The novel opens with a disheveled Henry meeting Minnie Ransom, a “fabled” healer in Bambara’s fictional Clayborn, Georgia town. Ransom questions whether Velma actually “want[s] to be well” and do the work to get there given the responsibilities a healthier version of the protagonist would face. What seems like an unnecessary question makes sense as the novel progresses. In subsequent chapters, readers discover that Ransom’s concern about “wasting each other’s time” is not only an indicator of how extensive her spiritual healing ritual is, but it is also an indication of the investment Henry’s community has in her wholeness, an investment best exemplified by the twelve-member group referred to as the “Master Mind” that assembles to participate in the healing. The pathway to wellness Ransom unfolds is as multi-faceted as the forms of disillusion, mounting work pressures, threats of nuclear destruction, and emotional betrayal at the hands of the man with whom she’s been having an extramarital affair that precipitates Henry’s nervous breakdown and suicide attempt. But this is the point of Bambara’s novel. Acquiring the types of revolutionary self-knowledge that enables African Americans to address what Kimberly Nichele Brown describes as “the American diseases of ‘disconnectedness’ and double-consciousness” that likely inspired Bambara’s novel is a process.⁴ Healing takes time, community, and work.

Since we can only speculate if Minnie Ransom would ever be invited to participate on *Lifeclass* as a teacher, this chapter explores discussions of pain within Black women’s literature as a context for understanding the rhetorics of healing that have emerged in the last three decades. In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, bell hooks explains how teaching *The Salt Eaters* to a group of young Black women illuminated conditions that wound members of this group and revealed how their writings sometimes contain imaginative “maps to healing.”⁵ The number of her female students to identify with Velma Henry’s suicide attempt validated the work of “progressive” Black women writers in such texts as Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. In these works and others, Black women writers make legible “the deep, often unnamed psychic wounding” and help readers name these forms of pain.⁶

What hooks describes as the transformative aspects of books such as *The Salt Eaters*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies as part of the consciousness-raising processes and forms of empowerment Black women have developed over time as a social theory for surviving and subverting dehumanizing contexts. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins outlines a variety of landscapes where Black women have developed unique epistemological standpoints, oppositional knowledges, and discursive practices for understanding, protecting, and, when necessary, healing themselves. Historically, literature and essay writing have been some of the most potent textual spaces for Black women's self-empowerment because, as Collins explains, readers can observe women moving from states of "internalized oppression to the 'free mind' of self-defined, womanist consciousness."⁷ These moves have not come without consequences or backlash though. Therefore, to understand how writers launch discussions of wellness that feel urgent and relevant to Black women, it is necessary to start here.

The Balm of Memory: Literature and Language as a Domain for Healing

The esteemed roles of healers within African and African American cultures and the efforts of Black women writers to recover their traditions through literature offer a fertile starting point for understanding rhetorics of healing. Historically, healers held the dual position of being their tribe's priest and physician. Through their spiritual authority and their training in the "arts of magic" and the "science of medicine," healers were responsible for offering religious rituals and ministering to the body and soul of the sick. According to Athena Vrettos in "Curative Domains: Women, Healing, and History in Black Women's Narratives," these acts helped ensure their "tribe's coherence and communality" against outside threats.⁸ Unsurprisingly, the healer's authoritative role evolved once the transatlantic slave trade brought Africans to the Americas. In this context, intentional threats to the Black family through separation and other means made tribal reformation relatively impossible. In turn, healers reinvented themselves as conjurers. Assuming the role of medicine men and medicine women, conjurers held roles of social reverence on plantations and beyond.⁹ When necessary, they dispensed traditional African medicines as cures for new-world ailments and as antidotes to the forms of neglect and malnutrition slaves would incur at the hands of

their masters. Healers and conjurers helped preserve African Americans' physical lives within dehumanizing conditions.

Conjurers did not work just to ensure the survival of African Americans during slavery. Occasionally, they put into practice spiritual methods such as voodoo to inflict pain on oppressive slave masters or evil individuals. Zora Neale Hurston's discussion of Madame Marie Laveau in *Mules and Men* illustrates how the healing conjurer posed a direct threat to oppressive power throughout history.¹⁰ In an interview with a Louisiana native about the famed New Orleans voodoo priestess, Hurston describes the way Laveau came to study the religion, her appeal among local and visiting whites who were in awe of her power, and the fear she invoked when she reportedly walked on the waters of Lake Pontchartrain during one of her annual feasts to celebrate Midsummer's Eve.¹¹ This fear has obviously held its historical currency. Writers of the FX Network series *American Horror Story: Coven* featured Laveau as a character during the show's 2013–2014 season. In the storyline, a set of modern-day witches cross paths with an immortalized Laveau who spends the majority of the season wreaking havoc on the witches while running her braiding shop, Cornrow City, as a front.

Hurston offers a better indicator of the healing conjurer's day-to-day role within her respective communities through the account of a woman who approached Laveau seeking help with an "enemy" who had "tried [her]" and convinced her "loved ones" to leave her. According to Hurston's interviewee, by the time the woman finished her plea for help, Laveau had transformed herself and was "no longer" a woman "but a god."¹² Much to the woman's relief, Laveau responded, "Oh, my daughter, I have heard your woes and your pains and tribulations, and in the depth of the wisdom of the gods I will help you find peace and happiness."¹³ Part spiritual conduit, part social worker of sorts, Laveau exemplifies one of the appeals of the healing conjurer among African Americans in this example. With their ability to tap into otherworldly resources, healers held the capacity to challenge forms of systemic authority and remedy cultural as well as material wounds. In this respect, healing conjurers posed a threat to the institution of slavery in antebellum America by offering African Americans another measure of agency in their social lives; and they provided a measure of balance within the interior lives of Black communities. In doing so, these healers resisted and repaired what Gay Wilentz calls the cultural forms of "dis-ease," or deep emotional and sometimes physical trauma and illness that result from oppressive social conditions.¹⁴

Early- and mid-twentieth century Black women novelists seemed to pay homage to this tradition in their fiction. In such books as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, healers are women who hold integral functions within their communities. With their knowledge of medicinal treatments and spiritual remedies as well as their understanding of the relationships African Americans hold with the land even as their people have been transported to American soil, fictional healers were vehicles for the enacting and preservation of cultural traditions. In the characterization of female healers such as Bambara's Minnie Ransom and Naylor's *Mama Day*, Black women writers turned African and African American healing traditions into what Vrettos calls a "metaphor for spiritual power" by illustrating a current of resistive and restorative agency.¹⁵ The choice to adopt the genre of the novel as the venue for these stories enabled these writers to "emphasize the restorative potential" of Black women's "own narrative acts" in "reclaiming a tradition."¹⁶ As a result, Black women writers of this period have made historical memory a balm, seizing "the inspiration and authority to heal" their readers by "locating in language a new curative domain" of experiences, memories, and possibilities.¹⁷

The narrative landscape Vrettos identifies in Black women's writing about healers and healing is one we must also understand as a domain of linguistic and rhetorical practice. In addition to using religious and medicinal remedies, African Americans have continually used language as a form of preventative and restorative agency. As Keith Gilyard explains in "A Legacy of Healing: Words, African Americans, and Power," African Americans historically developed subversive counterlinguistic strategies as adaptive responses to cultures of victimization and wounding.¹⁸

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an example of the ways Black women writers portray this practice. The novel vividly depicts the dialectic between the forms of repression African Americans have had to navigate to preserve their sanity, life, and wellness and the means of expression they used in doing so. For example, as a child, Sethe, Morrison's protagonist, suffers the unthinkable trauma of witnessing slaveholders hang her mother. The experience is made more traumatic because young Sethe had barely had time to know her mother or learn any of her mother's traditional African language and had been taught to recognize her only by a mark on her body.¹⁹ Morrison also shows the influence of language in the experiences of those around Sethe. Fellow Sweet Home slave and love interest Paul D suffers because of the fear of African Americans' communication and language. He is forced to wear bits that render him silent as punishment for trying to escape. Even after Sixo,

another Sweet Home plantation slave, defends his act of stealing a pig with the argument that he was actually improving the owner's property, logic and verbal skill offer him no long-term protection. Schoolteacher, the sadistic plantation overseer, still beats Sixo to teach him the lesson that "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined."²⁰

Through these stories, Morrison's novel gives a historical account of the ways oppression has been linked directly to the suppression and denial of language and the consequences of African Americans' subversive use of it. The character Sixo is brutally whipped, burned, and shot later in the novel but, in a final act of defiance, he yells out "Seven-O" to symbolize that a part of him will live on in the life of his unborn child. The act is one of several illustrations of resistance throughout the novel. Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, two former slaves, both reject imposed names later in their lives, choosing, in the case of Baby Suggs, to retain the name that would allow her husband to find her and opting, in the case of Stamp Paid, to proclaim himself free from all debts to this world. The gestures allow them to seize a small type of salve for their wounded spirits.

These literary representations of healers offer two precedents for what Black women's wellness should involve. As cultural histories, the depictions of conjurers and medicine women by writers such as Hurston remind readers of a tradition linking healing to spiritual practices and acts of resistance. In illuminating these additional domains of agency that readers can tap into to repair and enhance their quality of life, these Black women writers suggest that Black women's healing and—in this instance, the healing of African Americans collectively—has to champion alternative means of empowerment and expansive visions of individual agency. Further, as writers such as Morrison portray their characters using their expressive agency and language rhetorically to move themselves closer to healing, they offer what Gilyard calls a "counterstory" to dominant and pejorative narratives about the inferiority of African Americans' language traditions. As characters such as Sixo subvert or, as Gilyard would proclaim, "flip the script[s]" of linguistic hegemony, they expose the flawed logics upholding their condition and push those logics back in the face of their oppressors. Healing can involve verbal warfare and should result in a woman's rhetorical agency. Among Black women writers of this period, acquiring knowledge of cultural memory and developing a command of language are steps to reclaiming and restoring the self.²¹

Talking and Reading Cures: Renaissance and the Situation of Black Women's Pain

Through works such as Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, critics have come to interpret Black women's attempts at self-healing as a rhetorical situation.²² When Shange began to write and perform the poetry that would become her famous choreopoem in the mid-seventies and called for somebody, "anybody"—to "sing a Black girl's song" and help them to discover the "sound of [their] own voice[s]," she joined a community of Black women writers and intellectuals producing art, literature, and theory from Black women's experiences. Consciously transgressing unspoken codes on gender, respectability, and privacy in Black communities, Shange and her peers went public with accounts of rape, physical abuse, emotional trauma, and mental illness to show how Black women survive the sexism in their communities that complicates the existing racism and classism many of them endure. They wrote about the ways of knowing that some Black women have chosen to practice as a radical form self-love while living in environments and participating in families and communities that did not always love them back. Through their characterization of Black women moving from states of being wounded to wellness, their insight into the specific sources of these traumas, and their critiques of the institutional and individual complicity in their hurt, these writers called out the contradictions in their relationships with themselves and others. Their writings mobilized an audience, many of whom were Black women who wanted to hear a Black girl's song in a Black girl's voice, while providing narratives to support public conversations about the sexism and racism, which feminist scholars such as Michele Wallace were raising at that time in books such as *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*.

The criticism was intense. Some Black scholars, journalists, and literary critics tore into the work of Shange and her contemporaries, arguing that the stories of empowerment were sensational and promoted anti-Black-male and anti-Black-family sentiments. Vernon Jarrett of the *Chicago Defender* compared Shange's choreopoem to the pro-KKK film *Birth of a Nation*, calling it a "degrading treatment of the Black male" and a "mockery of the Black family."²³ Slightly less incendiary was Mel Watkins's charge. For Watkins, Shange and other women writers of that period had breached the "unspoken but almost universally accepted covenant" among Black writers "to always present positive images

of Blacks,” and they did so by portraying men as “thieves, sadists, rapists, and ne’er-do-wells.”²⁴ Similarly, in his 1986 parody *Reckless Eyeballing*, Ishmael Reed’s depiction of emasculating female characters makes a subtle, but no less pointed suggestion that second-wave Black feminism was oppressive to Black men. Shange, Alice Walker, and a cadre of other writers and intellectuals such as June Jordan and Angela Davis brought to the public’s attention a different conversation about the fracturing and wounding women were incurring behind the doors of Black homes at a time when most discourses about Black power were masculinist. By the end of the eighties, the conversations these works generated had galvanized a substantially large publishing market for writing for, by, and about Black women. Scholars coined the moment a “renaissance,” but it was a period that would never fully escape controversy because of the attitudes expressed by such Black male literary critics as Darryl Pinckney who described the moment with the claim that “Black woman writers seemed to find their voices and audiences,” while “Black men seemed to lose theirs.”²⁵

The increased period of publishing by Black women at this time was a literary renaissance, but the term “renaissance” is something of a misnomer given the ongoing discussions of pain Shange and her contemporaries engaged in during this moment. Literary critics tend to agree that depictions of physical suffering can achieve levels of aesthetic pathos where civil discussions and oratory fail because, as Elaine Scarry explains, pain is “unsayable.”²⁶ When it comes to Black bodies and forms of African American subjectivity, this pain has registered somewhat differently. In *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King suggests that depictions of pain can function as arguments among African Americans. When invoking images of wounded African American bodies, writers employ what she calls “Black pain,” or the visual and verbal representation of pained bodies, as a symbolic device. In this metonymic function, “Black pain” stands in as a sign of social, economic, and cultural woundedness that, at best, makes legible the sources of oppression and lack. Other times, Black pain is synecdochical through disidentification. By invoking images of the pained and wounded Black body, a writer—African American or otherwise—can establish distance between idealistic conceptions of America and realistic ones. They can define what America should not be.²⁷

Mid-twentieth-century Black women writers practiced similar forms of definition in their novels. With depictions of characters such as Lutie Johnson, the protagonist in Ann Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street*,

novelists cultivated notions of Black pain to illustrate what Black womanhood as a state of being could entail. Despite Lutie Johnson's social and economic position as a Black domestic who commutes to work for a white family in Connecticut, she is optimistic about her future at the start of the novel. Visions of affluence make her aspire to a notion of the American dream that would help her elevate herself and her family. The first crisis occurs when she discovers that her husband, who still resides in Harlem, has been unfaithful and her son needs full-time care. Despair sets in as Johnson returns, searches for suitable work in the city, and eventually discovers that she cannot rely on her extended family to help with childcare and financial obligations. As the single, poor, urban Black mother struggles to feed her young son and to raise the money to get him out of juvenile detention later in the novel when he is tricked into stealing mail and seized by authorities, the systematic obstacles that prevent her from achieving a measure of the American dream or maintaining faith in meritocracy become apparent. Johnson is not a victim of poor decision-making. Rather, she is positioned within a system of socioeconomic, gendered, and racialized oppression. Consequently, when a colleague attempts to rape her and she kills him in self-defense, Lutie's rage seems plausible. She does not feel as if she has any choices. Her final request for a one-way ticket to Chicago—as she flees Harlem with the resolve that her son is better off in the system than having her attempt to intervene—ultimately becomes a metaphor. Her plight and flight represent the converging issues that can make Black women feel they have no agency against oppression. Petry's novel illustrates how Black women writers use what King describes as a characters' "silent mobility" and "bold and, sometimes, violent screams" to give voice to the communal crises shaping their experiences. No, Lutie Johnson does not channel her frustrations into vocal screams. Strangely enough though, her final train ride is a literal form of "silent mobility."²⁸

By the 1950s, novelists were not only defining states of Black womanhood, but also illustrating their female protagonists achieving forms of self-definition. The dialogue in Shange's "Latent Rapists" poem in *For Colored Girls* reflects this shift as it shows female characters acquiring the self-knowledge as a way of identifying, resisting, and overcoming assaults on Black womanhood. In the scene, the lady in blue, lady in red, and lady in purple articulate common reactions to rape: "A friend is hard to press charges against," one says. "A rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate / someone you never saw / a man with obvious problems." They determine that when rape occurs, it can be dismissed

as a “misunderstanding” or something “women must have known.”²⁹ Although the dialogue seems to serve a clarifying function within the scene, it is also instructive. Through their dialogue, the women identify forms of internalized and community-based shame that can prevent some Black women from reporting these acts. When the lady in red finally surmises that “it turns out the nature of rape has changed . . .” because “we cd even have em over for dinner / & get raped in our own houses / by invitation, / a friend,” she brings into focus some of the ideologies that sustain rape culture.³⁰ Unlike Petry’s portrayal of Lutie Johnson who never fully conceptualizes the intersecting forces at work against her, Shange’s female characters voice their pain, identify their sources, and name them. Eventually, they take charge of their own wellness by performing a “laying on of hands” ritual where they administer healing to themselves and each other. It is a powerful moment. Together they enact a collective-knowledge-making experience as Shange’s characters ultimately determine that “finding God” in themselves and “loving her fiercely” is one way to resolve the “metaphysical dilemma” of “bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored.”³¹

The significance of Shange’s choice to make pain a site of interrogation cannot be overstated. In her analysis of this closing scene from *For Colored Girls*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies the importance of choice in Black women’s healing. In the “laying on of hands” scene, it is the lady in brown’s choice to move forward in pursuit of healing while grieving the murder of her child that illustrates for Collins the importance of self-definition. Even when Black women are in painful circumstances where they must remain “motionless on the outside,” they can still develop changed consciousness “inside” by moving towards sites and rituals that produce self-knowledge and aid in recovery.³² In these moments, Black women cultivate what Collins calls “oppositional knowledges,” or a type of knowledge developed to defend and benefit the oppressed.³³ When the lady in brown and her sisters begin to find “God” in themselves, they embark on a willful, intentional “journey toward finding the voice of empowerment.” Although Shange wisely ends *For Colored Girls* without delineating exactly what lady in brown’s vocal state of empowerment might involve, we can assume she has acquired the resources and self-knowledge to act in her own agency and change the conditions that diminish her quality of life.

In Alice Walker’s 1981 epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, the coming-to-voice process that Celie, the protagonist, experiences while working

through the pain of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse is partially textual. The epistolary form of Walker's novel serves a dual purpose. In one regard, Celie's letters form a narrative arc that enables readers to understand how she, as a poor and uneducated Southern Black woman, exists in both a material condition as well as social condition. Writing is a way for her to negotiate the exploitation of her labor and, at times, the denial of her personhood. In other respects, the developing legibility of Celie's letters documents her emotional development and transition to wellness. In what begins as brief prayers of desperation, Celie's letters reflect her growing awareness of her plight as a poor, uneducated, Southern Black woman. As the sophistication of the letters evolves, so does the protagonist's sense of self-awareness and engagement with her family members. Celie's voice moves from a tone of desperation to analysis, and ultimately argument as she shifts from addressing her letters to God to addressing her sister. These acts of self-composing and self-composure illustrate a transformation process. Celie literally writes her way from a state of silence about the forms of abuse she had encountered to, ultimately, a vocal and legible state of self-empowerment and economic independence. Literacy is freedom and empowerment. Moreover, it is a vehicle for emotional stability. As Celie explains how she came to terms with the limits of her on-and-off-again relationship with her female lover, Shug, in one of her final letters to her sister, her changed consciousness is clear: "*I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was supposed to learn.*"³⁴ As Celie rereads her past, rewrites her sense of self, reimagines sources of love, and revises her relationships, she experiences a form of healing.

Given the forms of autonomy, voice, and agency Celie develops throughout *The Color Purple* and the vision of Black women's wellness Walker portrays, the rhetoric of threat literary critics such as Darryl Pinckney used to characterize this literary renaissance is ironic. As Duchess Harris notes in *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, the female characters Black women create continually profess their desire for healthy relationships with Black men and families, even when they are not in romantic in nature.³⁵ Although Celie ultimately chooses to embrace a romantic and sexual relationship with her female lover, Shug, and retain a friendly relationship with Albert, she retains a steady commitment to her family and an insistence on healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex. The suggestion from Walker's text,

then, is that healing need not uphold heteronormative standards of desire and traditional family formations. To be “womanish” or grown, as Walker would later define the term, is a broad conception of wellness that enables Black women to love without restraint and stay committed to their own wellbeing and the “survival and wholeness” of their respective communities.³⁶

The irony of the anti-Black-male and anti-Black-family discourses surrounding the publication of *For Colored Girls* and *The Color Purple*, then, reflects how matters of healing became urgent and discursive during the Black Women’s Literary Renaissance. As many of the vocal critics of this literary moment missed the opportunity to collectively theorize Black lives through the experiences of women, the fear of these texts as teaching tools and mirrors into Black communities and the potency of Black women’s agency as readers and as a rhetorical community remained. Coupled with the apprehension that these books would perpetuate historical images of the fictional brutish and villainous Black male character, these fears reflect what Kimberly Nichele Brown describes as the deep concerns about the “dirty laundry” of their “interior lives” and questions about the impact of Black spectatorship at this moment.³⁷ This type of fear is a thief that can make wellness contentious and healing a means of social redemption. The suggestion is that if women were to become well at a time when African American communities were still claiming a more visible place within the broader American mainstream, it could not be at the expense of their family or community’s reputation.

Independent Study: Reeducation as Remedy

Beyond poetic and fictional illustrations of empowerment, Black women writers during this literary renaissance also revived a rich tradition of essay writing as a means for working through painful situations. Cheryl Clarke’s “Lesbianism as an Act of Resistance” offers one example of the joint function of personalized theorizing Black women writers carried out through the genre by the mid-eighties. With an acknowledgement of the “white male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture” wherein most Black lesbians live, Clarke unpacks the ways this culture teaches them to despise themselves before concluding with a call for readers to stop “hating ourselves” and start to practice self-love.³⁸ Though the essay is brief, her deft movement between

acknowledging macroscopic issues and calling for personal action illustrates what Jacqueline Jones Royster considers one of the appeals of the essay for Black women. Unlike poetry, drama, and fiction wherein writers construct “imaginatively rendered worlds” and rely on the mediation of their characters, the essay, Royster argues, is a forum to address personal and social issues and their consequences and to call for action. Essay writing both reflects and fosters Black women’s intellectualism by providing them access to public discourse as pedagogues and theorists. When rhetorically sound, an essay can become an “instrument for healing,” Royster writes, or a means for Black women to enact their agency in resisting or repairing the conditions that wound them.³⁹

Audre Lorde exemplifies this tradition in the essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” from her 1984 collection *Sister Outsider* by outlining a pathway to healing that is procedural. Lorde opens with the question, “Where does the pain go when it goes away?”⁴⁰ The question is an inspiration for her to interrogate the “wide curve of ancient and unexpressed anger” that chips away at the positive forms of self-esteem Black women must develop to survive the “deathwish” of being born Black and female in America. Not unlike Shange’s “metaphysical dilemma,” the “deathwish” complicates their development of positive self-esteem and corrodes the most intimate parental, familial, social, and romantic relationships they may desire to form with other Black women. “We do not love ourselves. . . . Therefore we cannot love each other,” she surmises. “We see in each other’s face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting” and “we try to obliterate it.”⁴¹ Given the self-loathing and self-destruction this situation perpetuates, Lorde declares the “task” of training that “anger with accuracy” as one of the major works she has had to undertake in her life.⁴²

With her focus on clarification and relearning, Lorde’s essay “Eye to Eye” is one of the most effective examples of Black women’s writing where healing is not only a pedagogical act but it is a curricular process. As Royster explains, the appeal of the essay among Black women is that it offers them a means to communicate directly with audiences and demonstrate their intellect in practice. Lorde lays bare for readers a set of challenges to wellness and solutions specific to the experience of Black women—a group that has “had to build the knowledge of so much hatred into her survival and keep going,” while frequently lacking the “tools” to dissect it “or language to name it.”⁴³ In relaying her own process for acquiring these tools, Lorde directly instructs readers on a

process for radical self-care that involves debunking the myths about Black women's presumed inferiority, destabilizing the flow of hatred against them, and "reclaim[ing] the weapons" Black mothers give their daughters to survive.

Elaine Richardson makes a similar argument about the necessity of Black women applying the generational wisdom they receive from their mothers in *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life* where she cites her Jamaican mother's personal proverb "shame chree dead" to emphasize the importance of protecting one's self-worth.⁴⁴ Throughout Richardson's memoir, the shame chree becomes a motif in her journey to overcome the internal shame and low self-esteem that made her prey for human traffickers and predators and vulnerable to the lure of drugs as a teenager.

In her memoir, Richardson does not name steps readers must follow. A memoir does not have to. On the other hand, Lorde's "Eye to Eye" can be read as a process for radical self-care that almost formalizes a map for developing oppositional knowledge. As Lorde explains,

Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that "Black is beautiful." It goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning. But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we risk another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging, since it pauses at the superficial. Certainly it is no more empowering. And it is empowerment—our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future—that will be the result of this pursuit.⁴⁵

Lorde does not go so far as to place the process of empowerment back into domains of epistemology and language, but her essay is a gesture towards the development of a situated literacy through forms of rhetorical instruction. Because reaching wellness is a process that requires Black women to decipher dehumanizing messages and images, navigate hostile situations and traumatic events, invest in more liberating language, and draw upon the survival strategies of their foremothers, the task of ridding oneself of pain can also be a way of cultivating forms of feminist epistemologies and discursive strategies. Healing, in this sense, becomes a learning cure.

Black Women's Discourses as a Learning Cure

This genealogy is an overview of the evolving ways Black women writers have understood the role of the healer, the narrative function of pain, the constitution of healing, and procedures for these processes. Although it is partial, it suggests that the Black Women's Literary Renaissance—and the subsequent ways theorists have articulated Black feminist and womanist thought in response—were literacy events that inspired wellness campaigns. Consider once again the indignation in Darryl Pinkney's response about Black men losing their voice. If there was a concern that Black women would no longer listen to Black men or invest in maintaining social institutions, then Thomas Miller's theory about the motives of a literacy campaign holds weight. When the oppositional knowledges and epistemologies that Black women began to articulate from their own standpoints and use towards liberation are viewed as literacies—and I very much hold that they are—the perception that Black feminism or womanist thought poses a threat makes healing an endeavor that can be appropriated. A wellness campaign can become a way to restore order, and the idea of Black women's pain can become an easily exploited crisis that recurs with increasing vagueness.

Regardless of how much we debate this theory about the relationship between the Black Women's Literary Renaissance and the rise of wellness campaigns, it does not negate that Black women do have agency and an investment in collective progress and wellness. Another point this genealogy drives home is that Black women have always been talking about matters of pain and wellness. Moreover, even if writers of this moment did foster among Black women rhetorical communities that invite people to respond to these matters with solutions, these writers have consistently inscribed the value of acquiring wisdom and choice. *The Salt Eaters* exists within this tradition because Bambara does not offer her readers specific or formulaic strategies for wellness. Instead, she seems to trust that her readers are literate and discerning enough to embrace what Kimberly Nichele Brown describes as an “epistemological challenge to recognize alternative ways of thinking and being in the world.”⁴⁶

Many have accepted the challenge that writers such as Bambara pose in their books. In Beth Daniell's *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*, for instance, she describes how reading books such as *The Color Purple* was formative for the presumably white female Al-Anon members of her study. For Tommie, one of the participants, reading Celie's letters was evidence that she could

also write herself free. "To me, my journal is writing to God. If Celie could do it, I could do it."⁴⁷ Oprah Winfrey's experience reading Walker's book and purchasing copies to share with her friends also attests to this community-forming function of these works. In one interview she confesses, "I remember getting out of bed and buying every single copy that they had in stock. I read it that day. I was devastated, overwhelmed, empowered. All of that. I gave the book to everybody I knew. I couldn't have conversations with women who hadn't read *The Color Purple*."⁴⁸ An evangelist indeed.

Winfrey's response to these books is a reminder of the social impact of these texts. In her need to talk about *The Color Purple* with other women discerning enough to understand its value, she highlights how these healing efforts foster discourse communities around the importance of learning as a step towards a better and more fulfilling life. Furthermore, through the strategies and customs for addressing pain and wellness I show in this chapter, Black women have established a set of conventions for writers who feel compelled to respond to matters of pain. Yet, because of the images they have invoked, the forms of knowledge-making these writers privilege, and the capacity of these books to resonate among and beyond communities of Black women, even the most well-intentioned individuals hoping to address the situations these writers illustrate or to market the processes for healing in Walker's and Shange's works would have to navigate these conventions and constraints as well. Given these communities and the conventions and constraints within Black women's writing, interrogating the processes of invention writers have adopted to launch healing must be the paradigm for understanding these campaigns and who may be served by Black women becoming well.