

## Collective Care in a Sick Society—Transcript

**Angela Davis:** (0:00-0:10) Anyone who is interested in making change in the world, also has to learn how to take care of herself, himself, themselves.

**Michelle:** That's the voice of Angela Davis. For me, her voice has become much more familiar over the last few months. I can't count the number of interviews I've watched of her. This is mostly because her work is central to two of the demands of protestors this summer: defunding and abolishing the police. Yet here, she is emphasizing another aspect both in justice movements and in her life.

**Angela Davis:** Personally I started practicing yoga and meditation when I was in jail, but it was more of an individual practice. Later I had to recognize the importance of emphasizing the collective character of that work on the self. And if we don't start practicing collective self care now, there is no way to imagine much less reach a time of freedom.

**Michelle:** Her language of self care stands in contrast to many of the ways we often hear it. You can google self care and get endless videos and blogs on new skin care products or bubble baths. But for folks actively involved in struggles for justice, such as Prentis Hemphill, that version of self-care is distorted.

**Prentis:** [00:09:02] Self care as it's often kind of practiced or encouraged, is often about kind of consumerist approaches. What can I do/buy in order to be well. It doesn't situate wellness in relationship to others or environments. It doesn't illuminate the question of why. Why our wellness for what, towards what?

**Michelle:** Prentis has spent 15 years working in and with social movements, including as the Healing Justice Director at Black Lives Matter Global Network. While generic versions of self-care may focus on products for the surface of the body, Prentis studies embodiment in a fuller sense, which is called somatics.

**Prentis:** what we embody, the things that we embody, how we are, is deeply shaped by the context you're in and deeply shaped by power. And so I might understand myself in a certain way, but I might not understand the way that trauma, the way that the trauma of oppression has shaped every part about me or many things about me can shape my mood, can shape my relationality, can shape my creativity, can shape so many things.

**Michelle:** What these more consumer-based approaches often lack is this understanding of the depths of what needs to be addressed. Our embodiment is about how we navigate the world. Power from unjust systems shapes us in ways that cause us to participate in their harm. Buying lotion or taking a bath won't change that. In fact, I would argue that the more you buy into these systems—the more you buy products thinking it will address the effects of these systems—the further you will get from the root issue: the need to face who we have become from living under these systems.

**Jasmine:** So if you're bypassing the entire reality of the truth of your embodiment as it's being experienced by you Then you can swallow a lot of delusions, you know. If we're in denial of what we're experiencing, if suppression of our actual feeling is our practice, which it is for so many of us, then you'll fall for whatever. And that's how It can come to be that human beings can treat each other with such dissociative, alienated brutality.

**Michelle:** This is Dr. Jasmine Syedullah, a black feminist political theorist of abolition. She is highlighting the consequences of what happens when we are shaped by these systems without considering their effects or costs: we lose connection with our embodiment and cause others harm. Black communities have been wrestling with these dynamics for a long time. Often, simply buying into systems built in anti-blackness isn't an option. Jasmine and I talked about what this reality has meant for black women historically.

**Jasmine:** I think the dominant narrative often of like black maternal support often fails the casualising of the internal life or joy or you know, health for ourselves and things like this.

**Michelle:** The need to be the strong black woman for the communities who experience the violence of anti-black systems comes with costs. Jasmine names some of these costs, such as joy and physical health. In our conversation, Jasmine brought up a book called *The Habit of Surviving*. It explores how black women have navigated being in a racist society and the costs the women in it endured. Yet, this story is not all pain. They also passed down practices of resourcefulness and creativity to help new generations.

**Jasmine:** and so this book, *Habits of Surviving*, takes the transgenerational look at the way black women support of others became self-sacrifice and how they pass that on to the next generation. Meanwhile, there's all of these threads of collective care and healing that are being passed down as well, not this kind of like the toxic waste of just getting by.

**Michelle:** Self sacrifice was passed down in this tradition of black women negotiating their relationship to power, community, and their selves. But, it also passed down practices of collective care and healing. Black social movements have received and innovated on these practices. One innovation is the notion of healing justice.

**Prentis:** How I would define that I guess is it's a framework that really helps us feel the ways in which everything that we do towards our own healing or towards our collective healing is a deeply political act. That's some of it it's like understanding how political it is to heal. I think Audre Lorde, you know, talked to us about this, too. It also helps us look at the kind of structures, systems, institutions, especially those that have that purport, I guess, to offer care or healing or wellness or health or whatever the words are. And see the ways in which they are politicized to maintain the same status quo.

**Michelle:** There are competing narratives around what it means to heal that are not just for individuals but also for institutions as well. We saw before that for some self-care is about consumerism while for others it is a personal and collective act of navigating power. Prentis is saying some stories frame healing in ways that do not get at injustice on a deeper level. In contrast, healing justice names and resists the diseased forms of healing at the individual,

collective, and societal levels. These various forms of injustice are why Prentis emphasizes political somatics. To engage and resist these narratives is a political and embodied act. Prentis connects recognizing the personal ways power has shaped us to naming power dynamics in larger forms.

**Prentis:** So when I talk about politicized somatics, there's a whole field of work around somatics and and and really sensing bringing self awareness to our bodies. But if we don't understand the shaping of power and the shaping of oppression, then we really can't. We're really going to keep restoring people to some status quo that is in and of itself maintaining certain power dynamics. So for me, a politicized somatics is much more expansive and it's really trying to have us all re inhabit our ourselves, our bodies, our lives for the sake of liberation.

**Michelle:** What the generic sense of self-care hints at is that our society demands a lot of us. What the black social movements and Prentis are highlighting is that these demands can be violent, exploitative, and systemic. Our bodies are suffering under these unjust systems. In affecting our bodies, they affect our way of being in the world. Jasmine mentioned earlier that power deceives us and tries to get us to buy into narratives that will harm us in the long run. Reconnecting to our embodiment helps us resist these delusions. Jasmine writes about these dynamics as one of the co-authors of the book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*. In this book, she shows how Buddhist practices, such as meditation, can help us connect to our bodies and the way they have been shaped by power.

**Jasmine:** The goal of meditation isn't to stay on point. It's to come back to it. And if we can train our selves to come back to point. Whatever that point of focus is, whether it's the breath or counting or love, forgiveness, compassion, stillness. Silence. Whatever the point is, if we can bring ourselves back to it at any point No matter how far we've strayed from the point. Then we're winning. So being able to train our point of focus is actually the most disruptive radical practice that we could have.

**Michelle:** Meditation helps us identify and resist these narratives that confuse us and perpetuate harm. While mediation has reached mainstream conversations about self-care, Jasmine again brings up embodiment as crucial to this practice if it is going to work toward justice.

**Jasmine:** I think a lot of people, when they think about meditation, they think about clearing their mind and they think about, you know, Nirvana as space of emptiness or a higher plane of existence. And that's not the way I've been oriented to the aims of this work. The aims of this work of contemplative embodied practice are about being able to meet the world as it is. Which means we have to be able to meet ourselves as we are. Which means we have to understand our orientation in an embodied way to asymmetries of power that we may not have signed up for or endorse but have various relationships of Being targeted by and benefiting from.

**Michelle:** Embracing our embodiment can mean many different things for each of us. For both Prentis and Jasmine, part of embracing themselves includes their identities of being black and queer.

**Prentis:** I was telling somebody fairly recently that for me my queerness is like. Before my queerness is any kind of like sexuality, it's inside of me, it feels like a kind of like. Like a curiosity, it feels like a huh, like everything's just a little sideways inside of me. So I think that changes everything for me, it leads me to do a whole lot of things. It's like it's at the root of my spirituality to the root yeah of how my life gets organized. I think my blackness is it's almost everything. I think similarly you know, it's a queer-ness in its own way of like you're looking at the world from a perspective that's very different than the one that you know, you're taught and told and supposed to pretend you're like, but actually no everything is different. I could either try to like eat myself up because I could try to you know internalize all these things so I could make what you're telling me to be true. Or I could like I feel like my blackness help me bypass all the bullshit and go right to God in a way.

**Jasmine:** It's interesting to focus on queerness in particular. And I think there's something really salient in there About loving compassion. Like, how do you love? Have love and compassion for yourself as a queer in a world that says, particularly as a person of color, that queerness is worthy of damnation? It takes a lot of work to curate something like compassion and love for self in that container in that context and those of us who have learned how to do it knows something about going against the grain of narrative in order to claim our the seat of our liberation.

**Michelle:** At the heart of this episode is the truth that we live in a society that would love for you to think the more products you buy, the more you fit into its narratives of acceptable and desirable, the more you will love yourself. Yet, in reality the opposite is true. Many of the narratives in our society—including the ones about consumer self-care—are designed to distract us from really coming to terms with who we are, the ways we have bought into systems that cause violence to us, our communities, and our world. If we could identify those narratives. If we could learn what it means to really care and heal, then we could practice our freedom and love in new ways that make new forms of justice possible. That is why Jasmine says queer folks who have learned what it means to really love themselves in this society know something about liberation. In our last words, Prentis names what it would mean to take back the time these narratives rooted in white supremacy steal from us.

**Prentis:** But we we can free up more of our own energy through radical self-love. I think it just frees up a lot of this stuff to me is about freeing up our energy and making our energy precise. But the way that supremacy takes hold of us is that it makes each of us feel shameful for who we are. And that takes time. If we added up how much time we spend feeling ashamed of who we are, it'd probably years off to our lives. Years that we spent. It doesn't mean that it's our fault because power is enforcing that all the time. But I think radical self-love is the antidote that can help us free up some time and reclaim black lifespan span, reclaim lifespan for all of us.