

Black Feminist Strategies for Right-Wing Studies

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When researchers wade into work on the far right, they inevitably emerge transformed in some way. Despite the fact that fields like sociology (my own home ground) persistently cling to ideas of objectivity, the conversations I have with other researchers often involve the emotional and mental damage we feel after engaging in our research. Surely not all researchers feel the same way, particularly those whose political and social position are in alignment with their object of study. This essay is not for them. As a Black trans feminist who studies gay men's participation in right-wing (and often far-right) social movements, I find that my research takes a heavy toll. Days, months, and years immersed in texts warning of the dangers of "mulatto glitter fairies" and calling for the extermination of people who look, act, and sound like me cannot be approached from a place of objectivity. Yet, despite this I remain committed to the work I do. It feels increasingly important as the systems Dylan Rodriguez terms "multicultural white supremacy" become pervasive and ubiquitous.¹

Here, I aim to deepen the conversations scholars of right-wing studies are engaged in by framing our work with the tools and skills developed by Black feminists. First, I explore how Black feminism responds to what we popularly term "burnout" and how scholars of far-right movements can engage in these practices to promote healing. After laying this groundwork, I turn to challenging us all to think about the purpose of our work. These two points are aspects of the same analysis, an analysis that centers dignity and care as essential to resisting disposability and to orienting our scholarly work. Finally, I end with a call to action, building on the work of right-wing studies scholar and Black feminist activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Black Feminism

Before diving into how this framework is helpful for scholars of right-wing studies, I want to establish the commitments and orientation of Black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins argues that a core component of Black feminist thought is the recognition

1 Dylan Rodríguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 17.

that Black women, as an oppressed and subjugated group, have a particular critical social theory and praxis for understanding and resisting the interpersonal and systemic violence they encounter. Even more than this, Hill Collins positions Black feminism as a process of rearticulation—connecting the already developed consciousness of Black women to a vehicle for expressing this consciousness to the public.² Like Hill Collins, Barbara Smith identifies how this kind of theorizing centers autonomy while recognizing that the skills, theorizing, and organizing insights of Black feminism have implications for social change among other oppressed peoples.³ These insights are what I hope to draw out for both Black right-wing studies scholars and those who might not be exposed to Black feminist thinking in their daily lives.

Black feminist scholarship is not a stranger to right-wing studies. Although the field of right-wing studies is still coalescing within the academic arena, it has long been a part of Black feminist practice to accurately describe, understand, and combat right-wing social and political movements. Such knowledge has been essential to the survival of marginalized people, particularly Black women, and this is reflected in Black feminist scholarship. Within the lineage of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Black feminists have studied right-wing politics from lynching, to incarceration, to imperial war. Part of survival amid these systems is developing a painful intimacy with how harm is justified, normalized, and reproduced; it involves knowing how your pain and labor are the necessary ingredients to the society that others are fighting to keep in place.

For some, this intimacy can be internalized as necessary, for others it reveals that another world is possible. Black feminism takes this intimacy as a starting place to challenge our internalized commitment to domination. Patricia Hill Collins explores this commitment through the framework of the matrix of domination and the internalization of dominant narratives by Black women.⁴ From political figures like Candace Owens and Condoleezza Rice, to business and entertainment figures like Oprah and Beyoncé, there are examples of how Black women can be coopted into projects of Black capitalism, grind/hustle culture, and American imperialism. Their success rests on the continuing dispossession and exploitation of others, and so while each of these women is an example of “success,” their success rests on the control and coercion of others. Lifted up by various systems of exploitation, they demonstrate the pleasures of domination—that part of “making it” rests on your ability to step on others to affirm your importance and worth within society.

The Combahee River Collective also calls out this recurring need for domination in their critique of both feminist and Black liberation movements, arguing that feminist

2 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

3 Hill Collins; Barbara Smith, introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), xix–lvi.

4 Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

movements maintained systems of racial domination and Black liberation movements maintained systems of gender and sexual domination.⁵ Put a different way by someone outside the Black feminist tradition, we all need to confront and kill the fascist within.⁶ Effectively utilizing the strategies and tools offered by Black feminism requires us to engage in this critical work—not only to see the meaning-making and violence of the far right somewhere outside ourselves but within our own world-building and practices. Identifying this desire for domination can be difficult, and here Corey Robin’s definition of conservatism may be helpful:

Conservatism is the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of the subordinate classes. It provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity. Submission is their first duty, and agency the prerogative of the elite.⁷

This animus is concentrated and distilled in far-right studies, where scholars are often immersed in texts calling for the subjugation or elimination of vulnerable groups. Such animus may not only be resisted by researchers but may also resonate—in perhaps lesser, more invisible ways—with our own internalized commitments to domination. Confronting and navigating this tension itself can be labor for the researcher, and another source of exhaustion. It can be hard to realize we see ourselves in those we study, especially when they may represent groups who harm us and our communities.

The work we do then can constitute a form of moral injury to ourselves on multiple levels. A moral injury is “the strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person’s moral or ethical code.”⁸ As such, it more closely resembles Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes’s definition: “a profound exhaustion paired with an injury to our dignity or sense of belonging or a violation of our boundaries.”⁹ This spirit of domination directly relates to burnout as Kaba and Hayes define it; we as

5 Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* 1 (1983): 264–74.

6 Michel Foucault, introduction to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), xl–xlv.

7 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7–8.

8 Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.

9 Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 199. See especially chap. 10 on “Avoiding Burnout and Going the Distance.”

researchers regularly find ourselves exhausted, not just by the material we encounter and its consistent crossing of some of our most closely held boundaries—that we, and our communities, are worthy of dignity and autonomy—but by the fact that we are forced to look into the parts of ourselves that find pleasure in domination.

Care Work

Responding to this kind of chronic injury requires healing. One source of Black feminist healing in the face of recurring violence is the practice of care work. This can look like practices of pleasure, of finding joy and connection with others through forms of what adrienne maree brown terms “pleasure activism.”¹⁰ Other forms of care work involve the mundane, and sometimes onerous, tasks of making sure our own needs are met. While some traditions within feminism have, rightly, called into question care work as a site of feminine labor exploitation, such labor is simultaneously necessary for practicing social relationships and building institutions that reaffirm both group and individual dignity. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a disabled Brown disability organizer, shares, the key to reconciling these simultaneous truths is to recognize that care work is labor—rather than a peripheral aspect of organizing, it is central to the entire project of crafting a world contrary to hyperexploitation, ableism, racism, and misogyny.¹¹

Because care work is unevenly distributed, with normative gender structures placing cis men as recipients of care work but rarely its laborers, it is important to think about your own particular social location. Cis men engaged in this work should be particularly attuned to sharing the labor of care work and to how this can ground them in a broader network of support. For others, how can you request support from a broad network of others in your community? And no matter what your social location, how can you support your own boundaries and those around you? Developing a praxis that frequently checks in about these questions takes work, but it is necessary work to develop a resilient network of care.

So let us be frank: right-wing studies can be debilitating. If we take seriously the ways doing this work can be damaging, what are some of the practices we can engage in to keep ourselves and our communities from burning out? These are intertwined questions because Black feminism challenges the binary distinctions we make between the mind and body, and between ourselves and others. Sami Schalk specifically uses the term “bodymind” in her work to underscore this connection. A term coined by Margaret Price, the bodymind, Schalk argues, “insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult if not impossible to clearly

10 adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019).

11 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

discern in most cases.”¹² If the dangers we navigate are both intellectual and embodied, solutions to burnout also have to include intellectual, emotional, and physical healing and grounding practices.

Some of the practices I offer up here emerged from a scholarly panel titled “Mental and Emotional Tolls in Research on Extremism and Supremacism.”¹³ A few of these are relatively straightforward. For example, one suggestion offered by Dr. Elizabeth Pearson was to regularly engage with therapy to provide an important outlet for processing research-related harm. For me, this has been sound advice. Being in therapy long term has helped me to work through the hard-to-hold feelings that come with being exposed to my archive, interviews, and cases. Therapy can be an important way to avoid displacing harm onto our loved ones, or overactivating our community network with the daily experiences we have as right-wing scholars. There are some limits to this technique: not all scholars have the resources for or access to therapy; therapy can be a site of violence; and when you are doing this work the therapy process is not working toward some final goal. Even for someone positioned relatively well within academia, getting access to consistent therapy has been hard. Going from grad school to an academic job, moving around the United States, and having intermittent insurance make it hard to find the right therapist; plus, inconsistent resources and access make it especially difficult to find a therapist that understands both why I continue to do this work and the unique needs I have as a patient. No matter what, it is important to develop other, less institutionalized, relationships of care alongside developing a strong therapy regime.

Bodies matter to this healing care work as well. Particularly as a researcher I often find myself ruminating on my work and failing to attend to my body’s needs; disrupted sleeping, missed meals, forgotten medications, high caffeine intake, and long periods without moving around are all common occurrences as I navigate far-right archives. The institutionalized ableism of the academy helps to instill practices like these as a necessary part of doing “rigorous” scholarship.¹⁴ Even more than a necessity, engaging in these practices is glorified as part of the acculturation to academia—as a sign that you are worthy of being included within the academic ranks. This contributes to burnout, as our minds and bodies are inextricably co-constituted. When I was burned out following the completion of my dissertation, it was both my mind and body that were injured. It looked like drawing into myself, spiraling anxiety, and a fixation on my work, which

12 Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5; Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

13 Alexandria Onuoha, Elizabeth Pearson, and Blu Buchanan, “Mental and Emotional Health Tolls in Research on Supremacism and Extremism,” virtual presentation, Conference on Supremacism and Authoritarianism, Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, December 1, 2022.

14 Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

produced only exhaustion and mental and physical self-harm. I stopped treating myself like I matter. I did this because I was trained to believe this kind of mental, emotional, and physical space is what produces scholarship. But effective scholarship, especially when faced with violent material, cannot be done without taking care of your body and your mind.

Both parts of the self in this case require rest. Here again we can take a page from Black feminism. Black feminists today are immersed in a world where Black death is a button click away—dehumanizing content is the digital water in which we swim.¹⁵ Stepping away from social media alone does not protect us from the embodied and material experiences of misogynoir—alone it does not offer rest. Just as our research into the far right may expose us to death, torture, and other forms of moral injury, so too does the daily experience of Black women. So, what can we learn from Black feminist praxis around rest? As Tricia Hersey discusses, rest requires intentional practice. What, if any, are your practices of rest? Do you feel bad about resting? Her work around The Nap Ministry argues these intentional practices of rest are a form of resistance against white supremacy and capitalism—it is a way to ground yourself in your own dignity and worth.¹⁶

Just as we are not discretely parsed into mental and physical components, researchers are not islands unto themselves. Part of the healing involved with care work is about putting ourselves in connection and community with others. Engaging in mundane community-related activities, ranging from mutual aid to other forms of care work, is equally important, as they build not only personal resiliency in the face of harm but a stronger network to navigate the impacts of dehumanization.¹⁷ For example, amid recent Israeli genocidal violence¹⁸—in seeing via social media the maiming, crushing, and explosive harm being done against men, women, and children—the only way to hold and process that grieving has been to act together in community. On campus, I worked with faculty, staff, and students to organize against our institutional complicity.

15 Alexandria C. Onuoha, Miriam R. Arbeit, and Seanna Leath, “Far-Right Misogynoir: A Critical Thematic Analysis of Black College Women’s Experiences with White Male Supremacist Influences,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2023): 180–96; N. N. Shahid, T. Nelson, and E. V. Cardemil, “Lift Every Voice: Exploring the Stressors and Coping Mechanisms of Black College Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 44, no. 1 (2018): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417732415>.

16 Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

17 Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)* (New York: Verso, 2020); The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (New York: Verso, 2017).

18 For more on why what is happening is understood as genocide, see “Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel),” International Court of Justice, United Nations, accessed June 17, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>; and Francesca Albanese, “Anatomy of a Genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967” (advance unedited version), United Nations Human Rights Council, March 25, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf>.

This included holding a memorial event that let people grieve together in public while connecting the issues of state violence in the United States to those killed in Gaza. Off campus, I connected with local organizers who were protesting Raytheon's production plant here in Asheville, with Palestinian community members, and with community safety teams who were coordinating their efforts to make our local community safer. Perhaps most importantly, I worked to connect campus and off-campus networks to increase our overall capacity to hold our local institutions accountable. Seeing the United States support this violence has shown me acutely, as a Black trans person, exactly the price tag to human life. Against this, I have only the common Black abolitionist phrase "We keep each other safe." But to keep each other safe we must know one another in order to practice the kind of world we want. We need to know that others have our backs, and that we can rely on one another in the face of increasing state and vigilante violence. If part of the harm we experience as researchers is immersion in a world where our communities are robbed of their dignity, practices of community care demonstrate another moral framework that can help heal these moral injuries.

Balancing these connections, with others and with our work, is also important. Part of the harm involved in our work is the dissolution of our own boundaries. Activities that reaffirm those boundaries can be helpful to reasserting our own sense of dignity. This balance can be a hard one to strike. On the one hand our work is bound up with our ability to meet our basic needs: things like putting shelter over our heads and food on our table. On the other hand, our communities are often in a state of crisis, immediately engaged in some struggle that feels urgent and has immediate consequences for those at risk. Here Audre Lorde gives us a guide when she writes, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."¹⁹ Although this quote, like self-care in general, has lost much of its contextual potency through commercialization and co-optation, its original meaning still resonates as a key part of Black feminist praxis. Taking care of yourself, establishing boundaries around your energy and capacity, is important to the continued work required in both contexts.

At the same time, self-care can become a mantra for disengagement or political apathy. Countering this requires pairing self-care practices with practices of accountability. An informal but important source of regulation can be found in a practice called pod mapping. This exercise, developed by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Coalition (BATJC), is focused on mapping out your relationships of accountability. The "pod" in this case "is made up of the people that you would call on if violence, harm or abuse happened to you; or the people that you would call on if you wanted support taking accountability for violence, harm or abuse that you've done; or if you witnessed violence or if someone you care about was being violent or abused."²⁰ Mapping out

19 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Ixia Press, 2017), 130.

20 Mia Mingus, "Pods and Pod Mapping Worksheet," Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, June 2016, <https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>.

these connections can help to ground right-wing studies scholars within a broader moral context, as well as create a supportive environment for handling their chronic exposure to violence.

A network of scholars is also a necessary component of doing right-wing studies. Black feminist scholarship stresses the importance of dialogue and conversation.²¹ Again, this intervention often butts heads with conventional academic wisdom, which encourages us to internalize the image of the singular scholar working alone tirelessly in the archive or field. This image has detrimental effects for scholarship in general but is particularly harmful for those of us who regularly engage with the logics of genocide, oppression, and normalized violence.

Avoiding burnout also means leveraging whatever resources are available at the institutional level. While this can be a fraught process, as academic institutions are themselves rooted in right-wing logics, it is important to use whatever resources we can garner to transform and support the conditions under which we labor.²² Is your institution actively committed to professionally protecting you from right-wing attacks? Do they have a strong commitment to academic freedom? On a smaller scale, do you know your department administrator and have you talked with them about contingency plans to ensure the privacy of your information? Do you have a safety plan that does not rely on policing as the catch-all answer for right-wing threats? For example, I have gotten hate mail sent to my department mailbox, and I have talked with my administrator about strategies to record, monitor, and prevent such hate mail in the future. While most institutions lack specific and recognizable resources for right-wing studies scholars, building relationships and strong communication within your institution can help to offset potential violence before it happens.

Last, but certainly not least, is practical application. As hooks argues, the development of theory or the observation of phenomena should never be understood outside their effects on our everyday lives and practices.²³ hooks shares how one reason for the gap between theory and organizing is that theory is seen as an impractical, navel-gazing exercise. Connecting the theoretical or empirical results of your work to active personal and communal action helps to make the work transformational rather than observational.

21 bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 1–12.

22 The field of critical university studies deals directly with the connection between the academy and naturalized systems of domination like racism, ableism, and classism. See, for example, Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); and William Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2001).

23 hooks, "Theory."

Example

One question I have seen circulating in my research spaces is about personal and community safety. Because universities, and often our own departments, are structured around the assumption that research safety is unidirectional, the protocols for research safety and ethics focus primarily on human subjects training and on ensuring the safety of our study participants. An enormous gap lies at the heart of this institutional ethics process: what happens when your study participants would like nothing better than if you dropped dead? As Elizabeth Pearson and her colleagues found by surveying right-wing studies scholars, there is often a feeling of isolation in which scholars are expected to keep the violence they study far from their friends and loved ones.²⁴

This isolation extends beyond our conversations; in the face of potential vigilante violence by far-right groups, we can also feel isolated from our communities at large. During a conversation on the emotional and mental health tolls of research in extremism and supremacism, one issue led to division among presenters: the reliance of researchers on police to protect them from far-right extremists.²⁵ One practical intervention given by a presenter was to contact university and local police to let them know about the potential threat of right-wing violence. This suggestion, while practical, was not endorsed by the other panelists. At the heart of this division were competing visions of world-making, with one presenter believing that police would protect her from extremist violence and the other two seeing the police as part and parcel of that extremist violence.²⁶

Rather than delve deeper into which of these worldviews is correct, I would like to suggest that the fundamental desire for safety is something shared by all right-wing studies scholars. One limitation we face is that we often have to develop safety practices on our own, and in a world in which police are a hegemonic institution associated with safety, it can be hard to think of other alternatives. Black feminism offers a number of alternatives, focused primarily on mutual aid and care work. I, for instance, contacted all of my neighbors to let them know there could be a risk of far-right violence because of my work. By providing them with my contact information, an opportunity to talk about risks and strategies, and why I was undertaking this work, I not only got a chance to build community but shifted the responsibility for safety away from historically violent, right-wing institutions like the police to a network of individuals who shared an interest

24 Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway, *Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field* (Vox Pol, 2023), <https://voxpath.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf>.

25 Onuoha, Pearson, and Buchanan, "Mental and Emotional."

26 Onuoha, Pearson, and Buchanan.

in protecting their community. It also began important conversations about what safety looks like, and why far-right violence could happen to us. This safety practice inverts the isolation so often experienced by right-wing studies scholars; it reconnects individuals with their community and helps others in the community to make informed decisions about how to care for one another.

This inversion practice comes from a number of feminist sources, from disability and racial justice movements in particular. It shifts the weight of our work from the individual to the community, while reaffirming our place within a collective world-building project. It is not foolproof. As scholars of right-wing studies, and as community members, safety is always relative. The key to avoiding burnout is not to completely avoid risk but to enter situations in a way that maximizes our agency and consent to undertake the risks involved. As the example provided earlier highlights, this agency and risk assessment is never made alone but always in connection to others.

World-Making

To assess risk thoughtfully requires thinking about what kind of world you want to emerge from your work. While a call to actively engage in articulating this world-building may be unusual, the university as a social project is deeply invested in world-building projects (albeit a world often at odds with Black feminist values). Practicing care work as part of right-wing studies is less a departure from the world-building of the university than an intentional divergence from these projects to forge a practice of care and dignity. Here is where avoiding burnout requires developing a keen and deep understanding of our own commitments and desires. What kind of world are we hoping to ground ourselves in? Within what kind of world are we renewing our emotional, intellectual, and physical selves?

The work of early sociologist and Black feminist scholar Ida B. Wells-Barnett provides a good example of how world-building can inform right-wing studies. Her work on the structures and causes of lynching in the United States rested on the practical desire to see a world in which such events were relegated to the past. Driven to talk about lynching following the murder in Memphis of a Black grocery store owner and his two employees, Wells-Barnett connected her personal experience of trauma with the need to address this rampant form of social violence.²⁷ Before Wells-Barnett's work, mainstream white media thought of lynching as a spontaneous and uncontrollable social phenomenon.²⁸ Her empirical research established deep connections between the use of lynching and the maintenance of social, political, and economic stratification.

27 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster, 2nd ed. (1970; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 42–43.

28 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: The New York Age Print, 1892).

This meant lynching could be eliminated because it was the product of a set of human decisions and institutions.

Black feminism makes this kind of world-building central to replenishing and healing ourselves in the face of violence; and using the tools of this theoretical and methodological tradition demands that researchers ask themselves what the purpose is behind their engagement in this work. Within conventional scholarly conversations about research, the stress tends to fall on whether our questions are “interesting,” and for those of us in social sciences, on whether there is a way to gather empirical data. But this leads to a fundamental contradiction with the foundations of Black feminism. Approaching right-wing studies as a set of intellectual puzzles will stymie the use of Black feminist strategies because such an approach ignores the material and social consequences of our work. To utilize the tools Black feminism offers requires engaging in a serious reflection on the kind of world we are working for as scholars of right-wing studies. Engaging in this work as an intellectual puzzle limits researchers’ abilities to see and recognize the harm caused by these ways of thinking and acting, both to themselves and to the wider world.

This kind of world-building also allows us to connect our individual purposes for doing this work with the collective purposes of our various communities. It asks why our research matters, not just as an intellectual exercise but to the people on the receiving end of right-wing violence. As such it asks us to be accountable to the people whose harming creates the data we sift through and work with every day. The work of Wells-Barnett articulated not only her own understanding of right-wing social movements but also put forth a community demand to end lynching as a form of white terrorism. While scholars who study oppressed people often discuss amplifying the needs of their research subjects, scholars of right-wing studies should still maintain an ethical relationship to end the violence and stratification they study.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s work again gives us a template for how Black feminist strategies are informed by world-building. Her exploration of lynching challenged the common ideas of the day—especially among whites—that this kind of violence was natural and normal. Her work was relentlessly public in nature, aiming to transform the common consciousness through rigorous engagement with the structures of white supremacist and far-right thinking. Rather than an intellectual puzzle to be solved, her work was constantly grounded in the material, embodied realities faced by Black people under this regime of terror. As Shaonta’ Allen lays out for us, Ida B. Wells-Barnett is a template for how Black feminism lies at the root of scholar activism (in sociology and beyond).²⁹

29 Shaonta’ E. Allen, “The Black Feminist Roots of Scholar-Activism: Lessons from Ida B. Wells-Barnett,” in *Black Feminist Sociology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Zakiya Luna and Whitney N. Laster Pirtle (New York: Routledge, 2022), 32–44.

This commitment to world-building, to living otherwise, informs the way scholars can engage their work in right-wing studies. If care work creates the conditions under which we can continue to do our work, it also creates the conditions for our self and community transformation. Without such transformation not only will scholars suffer burnout, but we will be engaged in reinforcing the very violence we are immersed in.

Conclusion

Detaching from my work after coding a hundred documents containing swastikas takes more than looking away from the screen. Studying the far right is more than an observational exercise but rather involves immersing oneself in the logics, symbols, and affect of violent stratification. Combating the emotional, mental, and physical toll this takes requires drawing deeply on the practices and strategies developed to create sustained resistance to these systems of domination. It means rooting ourselves deeply in our relationality, with other people and with the world at large.

While this research can be incredibly isolating, we are situated within a long tradition of scholars who have tried to understand far-right movements. Just like these other scholars, our work is the product not only of our own intellectual labor but also the networks of care within which are situated. Scholar-activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett have been lifted up as figures radically applying their knowledge to a transformation of the world, but they are the tip of the historical iceberg—their work was only possible because of the people who sheltered them, cooked them meals, and eased their heartache in the face of myriad attacks by right-wing organizers.

This essay is by no means a comprehensive guide to avoiding burnout. Here, I have opened the door to the conversations I have had with other researchers, loved ones, and community members. In many ways it has instead offered a set of guiding questions and tentative practices for researchers as they engage in right-wing studies. It asks why you have decided to take up this research in the first place. Above all, it asks where your research fits in the world you are working to create.