



Book Review??Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood by Tamika L. Carey

Description

In an era when self-help narratives dominate the wellness industry, **Tamika L. Carey**'s *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* offers a vital and thought-provoking critique. Carey emphasizes the importance of placing Black women's quality of life at the heart of rhetorical healing efforts. By challenging individual wellness approaches, especially those that commodify or exploit Black women, she exposes systemic issues and prioritizes Black women's lived experiences. Carey invites readers to evaluate wellness initiatives based on their resonance with lived realities, acknowledgment of personal and spatial politics, and consideration of their long-term impacts (Carey, 2016, p. 45).

By determining the fit of a wellness campaign, I am arguing that rhetorical healing processes must centralize Black women's quality of life. . . .To test the fit, then, is to keep Black women at the center of these efforts, remember the personal and spatial politics that inspire these discourses, and consider what longterm effects healing projects have.~**Tamika L. Carey, p. 45, Rhetorical Healing~**

This critique of individual responsibility sets the stage for Carey's broader argument: that wellness must be reframed as a collective endeavor rooted in historical and cultural practices.

Cover of *Rhetorical Healing*: Image of [The Better Half](#) by Kevin Okeith

Oprah Winfrey's Lifeclass segment on PAIN

Through her analysis of Oprah Winfrey's *Lifeclass* and Tyler Perry's films, Carey examines how mainstream healing discourses often depoliticize Black women's struggles, focusing on personal transformation rather than societal change. In this segment, Winfrey and guest **Iyanla Vanzant** present pain as a transformative signal—Pay Attention Inward Now—encouraging viewers to view discomfort as a call for introspection (Carey, 2016, p. 3). Carey notes that Vanzant's therapeutic rhetoric, while rooted in African American traditions, individualizes healing, obscuring systemic sources of Black women's pain.

Winfrey's promotion of this concept reflects a broader cultural shift toward self-help as both an individual and community praxis. According to Carey, the resonance of such messages within Black communities stems partly from the historical legacy of African American preaching styles and community-oriented healing practices (Carey, 2016, pp. 4-5). Winfrey's integration of these traditions into her media empire exemplifies how Black women's pain—historically underrepresented or misrepresented—has become a focal point of mainstream self-help rhetoric. The segment's acronym, PAIN, resonated deeply with audiences, particularly as it reframed suffering as a path to deeper self-awareness. It likely drew viewers in precisely because it draws on oral traditions, where storytelling and metaphor have long been tools of empowerment and communal bonding, despite the fact that it pushes responsibility to the self for communities that have been marginalized and may need more support.

However, Carey critiques the potential depoliticization embedded in these frameworks. By urging individuals to turn inward, these messages may inadvertently obscure the structural and systemic origins of Black women's pain (Carey, 2016, p. 6). Winfrey's reliance on therapeutic rhetoric risks framing healing as an individual responsibility rather than a collective endeavor to address societal inequities. This critique underscores the tension between personal transformation and systemic change, a recurring theme throughout Carey's analysis.

One of the most potent claims among feminist and womanist scholars is that church leaders, and church communities by default, have ignored, overshadowed, or caused the oppression of certain individuals and marginalized groups. ~**Tamika L. Carey, p. 86, Rhetorical Healing**~

Carey highlights a powerful critique within feminist and womanist scholarship, emphasizing the role of church leaders and communities in perpetuating systems of oppression. By situating religious figures, like **T.D.** In Chapter 4, Carey suggests that institutions, as influential entities with significant social and moral authority, are not merely passive participants but active agents in marginalizing individuals and groups. This critique explores how religious spaces, often regarded as sanctuaries of hope and healing, can paradoxically become sites of harm, particularly for women of color.

By identifying varying degrees of complicity—ranging from passive neglect to active harm—Carey underscores the need for accountability within these institutions and others. Carey's argument aligns

with Black feminist efforts [e.g., Geneva Smitherman, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Elaine Richardson, and Gwendolyn Pough] to challenge white patriarchal structures within religious traditions and to expose and dismantle dominant narratives that silence marginalized voices. In the context of Rhetorical Healing, this acknowledgment of harm is a critical step toward addressing and redressing systemic injustices, laying the groundwork for rhetorical strategies that empower and heal oppressed communities.

WELLNESS VS. SURVIVAL

In Chapter 2, "I Need You to Survive: Theorizing Rhetorical Healing," Carey delves into the intricacies of African American rhetorical traditions and their ties to wellness and survival. Carey builds upon **James Cone's** analysis of Black spirituals as "unity music," emphasizing their role in fostering collective resilience and inspiring acts of resistance and reform. Cone observes that these musical traditions were not only artistic expressions but also functional vehicles for political critique, social guidance, and instructional purposes, encapsulating the notion that "survival is a group project" (p. 31).

Cone states, that "art and thought cannot be separated" or that there were subversive political critiques, social messages, and forms of instruction within the songs. Black music was functional and evolving "unity music." Through sacred and secular forms, Black music was a means of structuring and, when necessary, restructuring African Americans' understanding of their collective existence and a way to inspire the acts of resistance, reform, and renewal that might advance the whole. Over these melodies and chord configurations were textual scripts reminding African Americans that the work of establishing Black identity and making group progress is only achievable in a "communal context" of collaborative work. Survival is a group project. ~**Tamika L. Carey, p. 31, Rhetorical Healing**~

Carey further elaborates on the concept of rhetorical invention as a communal process, citing Rhetorical Genre Studies scholar Anis Bawarshi's assertion that "writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres" (p. 32). This mutual influence underscores the importance of historical and cultural context in shaping and transforming rhetorical traditions. Genres, Carey argues, act as spaces for articulating communal values and enabling collective responses to societal challenges (p. 37).

Genres influence which strategies, resources, and techniques [quoting Bawarshi] "users generally imagine as possible within a given situation" and how they "come to know and respond to certain situations." In this way, genres are places of cultural and community articulation. ~**Tamika L. Carey, p. 32, Rhetorical Healing**~

Chapter 2 also examines the interplay between vernacular culture and rhetorical healing. Carey highlights how Black vernacular traditions, including gospel music and call-and-response practices, have historically functioned as tools for subverting oppressive narratives and fostering self-identification. These practices, she explains, arise from the need to navigate "double consciousness," as articulated by **W.E.B. Du Bois**, wherein African Americans reconcile their identity

within a dominant cultural framework that often devalues their humanity (p. 34).

Moreover, Carey critiques the influence of respectability politics and external surveillance on Black wellness campaigns. She notes that these campaigns often arise from a dual imperative: addressing the community's internal needs while contending with the external gaze that seeks to police behavior and representation. Healing, therefore, becomes a strategic act of resistance and a means of preserving collective identity under systemic pressures.

Even if instructors of writing, women and gender studies, or African American studies do not go so far as to read and teach specific genres such as Black women's self-help books or watch and interrogate gospel stage plays, teaching students to identify campaigns and track their functions across multiple forms of media is a generative exercise in research, analysis and criticism. ~**Tamika L. Carey, p.150, Rhetorical Healing**~

Ultimately, Carey positions rhetorical healing as both a historical and dynamic tradition rooted in African American culture. She emphasizes the need for these discourses to center Black women's quality of life, advocating for frameworks that empower and sustain the community while addressing the socio-political structures that perpetuate inequality.

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Reeducating Black Womanhood: Tyler Perry's Rhetorical Curriculum,

In Chapter 5, Carey critically examines the cultural influence of **Tyler Perry's** works and their role in shaping public perceptions of Black womanhood. Perry's films and plays, while often celebrated for their commercial success and emphasis on faith and family values, also carry complex rhetorical messages about race, gender, and morality.

Carey argues that Perry's narratives construct a curriculum that seeks to "reeducate" Black women by promoting a specific vision of healing rooted in conservative ideals. His characters, particularly the archetypal "strong Black woman" and the "redeemed woman," often undergo transformative journeys that emphasize forgiveness, submission, and reliance on divine intervention as pathways to healing (Carey, 2016, p. 113). While these narratives resonate with audiences through their emotional appeal and cultural familiarity, Carey critiques them for reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting representations of Black womanhood.

One of Carey's key critiques is Perry's tendency to frame personal transformation as the primary means of addressing systemic issues. In films like *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion*, characters' struggles with abuse, betrayal, and hardship are resolved through individual moral and spiritual renewal rather than structural change. Carey contends that this approach risks depoliticizing the root causes of these challenges, shifting the burden of resolution onto individuals.

In his films, Perry positions Black women's empowerment as a return to traditional family values, often mediated through the guidance of a strong, matriarchal figure like Madea. While these narratives resonate with audiences seeking stories of healing and redemption, they also risk reinforcing patriarchal norms that confine women's roles within the family structure. ~**Tamika L. Carey, p. 112, Rhetorical Healing**~

Additionally, Carey examines the role of humor and melodrama in Perry's works as rhetorical devices. While these elements engage audiences and create moments of catharsis, they also simplify complex social issues, potentially undermining the depth of their critique. Despite these limitations, Carey acknowledges the significance of Perry's platform in amplifying Black voices and initiating conversations about healing and resilience within Black communities (p.112).

Literature and Language as a Balm for Healing

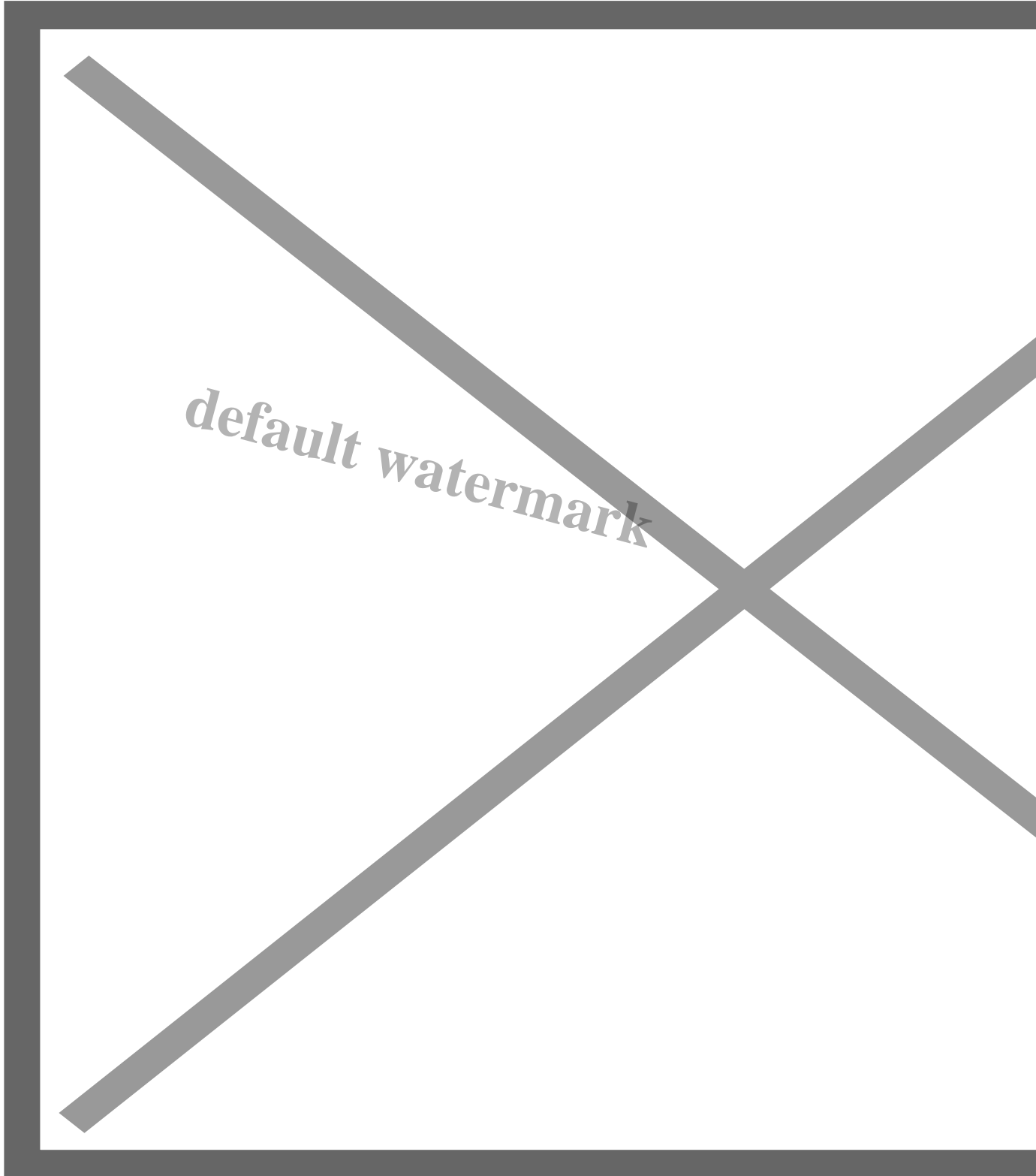


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Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, Toni Morrison's seminal novel *Beloved* remains an enduring masterpiece. The Folio edition is introduced by Russell Banks and features illustrations by Joe Morse.

In a rich exploration of literature and language, Carey underscores their role as vehicles for resistance and restoration. Citing examples such as works by **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Toni Morrison**, and **Ntozake Shange**, Carey demonstrates how Black women writers use storytelling to reclaim agency and

articulate humanity (Carey, 2016, pp. 16-18). In



Cover, 1935 first edition of *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston republished online by
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Carey draws attention to Hurston's *Mules and Men* exemplifies the cultural and spiritual resilience of Black women through its portrayal of conjurers and healers as custodians of oral traditions. Similarly, Morrison's *Beloved* illustrates the dual power of language as both an instrument of oppression and liberation. Characters like Sethe and Baby Suggs reveal how reclaiming voice and memory facilitates healing from trauma (Carey, 2016, pp. 20-21). Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* extends this theme, using collective storytelling to confront pain and foster communal renewal. Carey's analysis affirms that such literary practices empower Black women to rewrite narratives imposed by systemic oppression.

Carey discusses how Black women's pain is often central to conversations about healing and advocacy. However, she differentiates between the pain experienced through certain literary works (e.g., *Beloved* or *For Colored Girls*) and the therapeutic, restorative engagement she found in analyzing the rhetoric of wellness figures like Vanzant. This distinction underscores her nuanced approach to understanding wellness as both personal and political.



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Image Credit: [Title Page of For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf](#) designed by Paul Davis

Everyday Rhetorical Healing

In Chapter 6, Carey shifts focus to the everyday rhetorical strategies Black women employ; drawing on [Alice Walker's "Everyday Use,"](#) to examine how Black women navigate familial and cultural tensions while preserving heritage (Carey, 2016, p. 143). The family quilt in Walker's story becomes a metaphor for stitching together fragmented histories to create continuity and belonging.

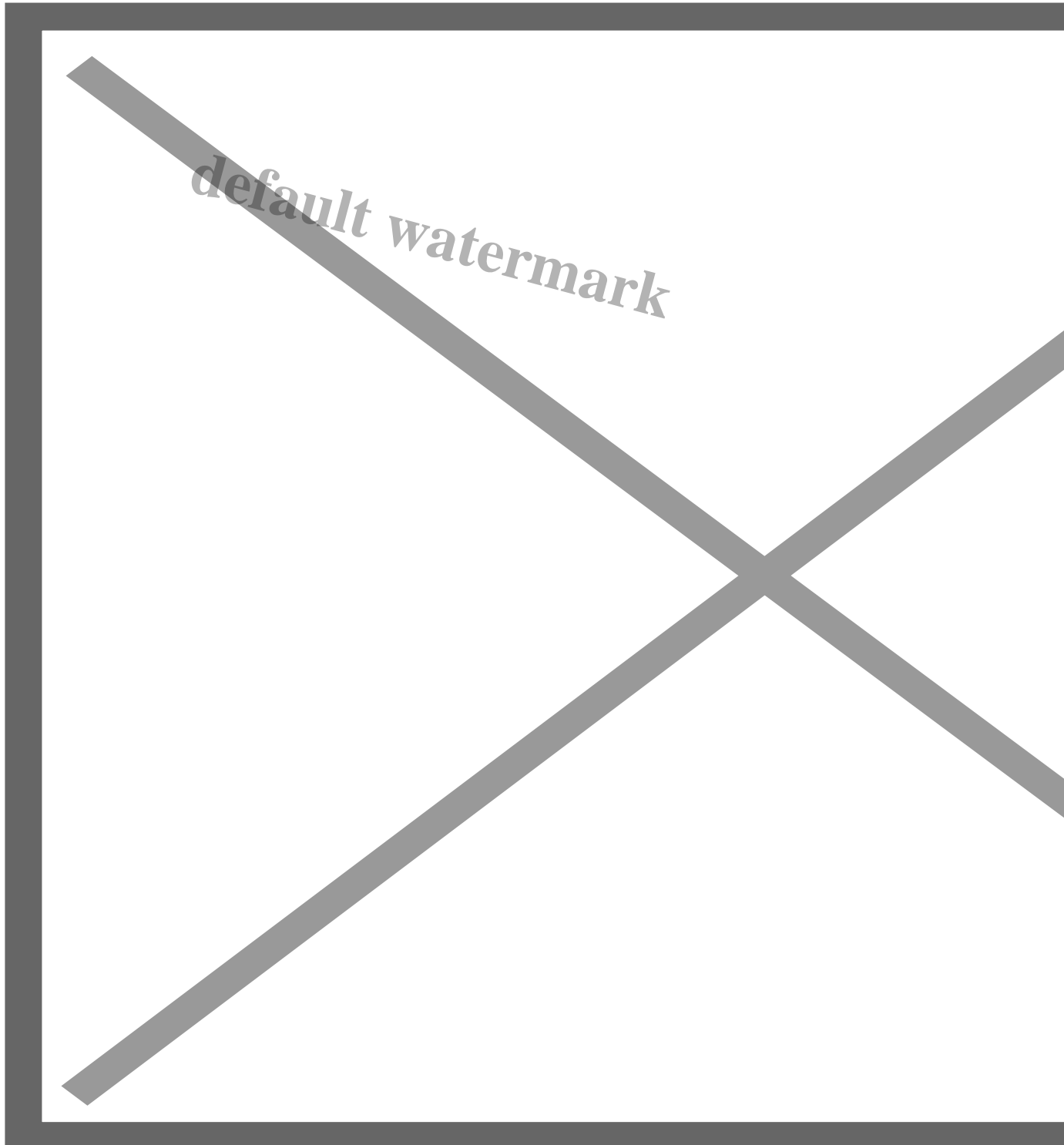


Image Credit: [Haiku Deck](#)

Furthermore, Carey highlights the role of maternal figures in rhetorical healing, emphasizing their ability to nurture resilience and empowerment through storytelling and guidance (Carey, 2016, pp. 145-147). Mothers and other matriarchal figures become custodians of cultural knowledge, passing down wisdom that equips younger generations to confront systemic challenges. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge exemplifies how rhetorical healing operates not only within individual lives but also across community and temporal boundaries.

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
My name is my own my own my own
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life.

[Jordan, June. *The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005.](#)

Carey also examines the informal, yet powerful, rhetorical strategies Black women employ in everyday interactions. From the ways they navigate microaggressions to the subtle assertions of agency in professional and personal settings, these practices reveal a dynamic interplay between resistance and survival. By reframing mundane acts of self-expression as rhetorical healing, Carey underscores the transformative potential embedded in daily life.

Conclusion

Rhetorical Healing makes a significant contribution to feminist and rhetorical studies by critiquing mainstream wellness discourses and emphasizing the need for frameworks that address systemic inequalities. Carey's work bridges literature, feminist theory, and rhetorical studies, offering a model for analyzing cultural artifacts that is both academically rigorous and accessible to broader audiences. Her reflections highlight the importance of balancing scholarly critique with empathy and respect for the communities being studied. Carey's book offers a nuanced analysis of how Black women's rhetorical traditions have pursued healing through diverse methods. It opens the door to ongoing exploration of rhetoric's capacity to cultivate authentic healing and equity.

Carey's work raises profound questions about the responsibilities and failures of the structures we rely on for healing. Who is responsible for providing restorative spaces, and how do these same structures sometimes inflict harm? As Carey illustrates, institutions that claim to promote wellness often embed and perpetuate systemic inequalities. This calls for a critical examination of their dual roles in both harm and healing. Can systems responsible for harm truly become sites of transformation, or must new community-driven models emerge to break these cycles? Such questions urge us to reimagine the foundations of rhetorical healing and its potential to promote genuine equity and well-being. Ultimately, Carey's work invites readers to explore how storytelling, rhetoric, and introspection can serve as powerful tools for navigating the intersections of pain, resilience, and empowerment.

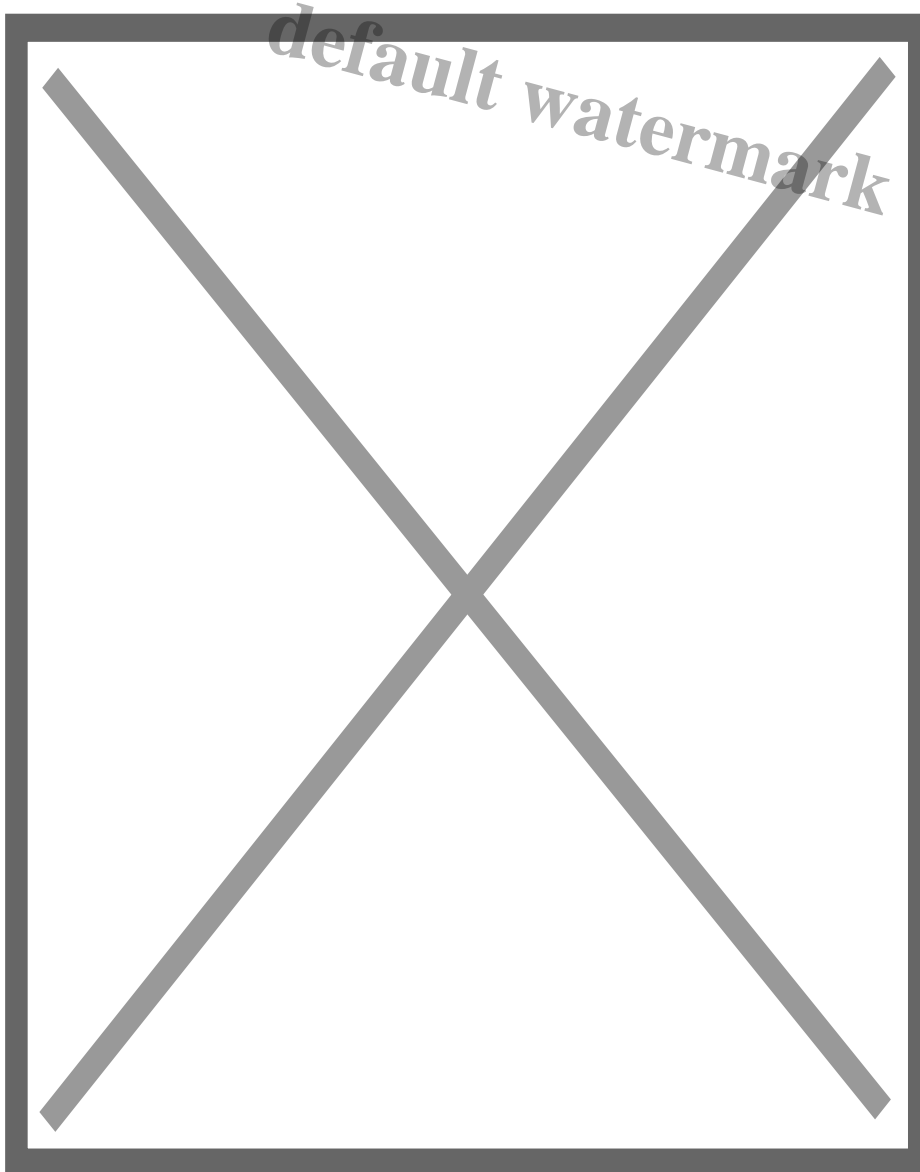
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Carey, T. L. (2016). *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*. SUNY Press.



Tamika L. Carey is Assistant Professor of English at the University at Albany, State University of New York, and the author of *Getting to Know Him: Observations and Experiences from My Walk of Faith*.

On Research and Teaching:

Carey is an interdisciplinary scholar trained in Rhetoric and Composition Studies, specializing in Cultural Rhetorics, African American and feminist rhetorics, Black women's intellectual histories and writing traditions, and the memoir. Her first book, *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* (SUNY 2016), is a feminist critique of the discourses and strategies in Black women's wellness culture over the last 30 years.

Books:

[Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood](#). SUNY Press, 2016.

- Review: Elaine Richardson for [Peitho](#).

Other Articles, Chapters, and Reviews by Carey:

- "Fighting Words: A Review of Vincent Lloyd's *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination*." • *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 26.1. (2023)
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