



Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20>

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To cite this article: Karina L. Cespedes, Corey Rae Evans & Shayla Monteiro (2017) The Combahee River Collective Forty Years Later: Social Healing within a Black Feminist Classroom, *Souls*, 19:3, 377-389, DOI: [10.1080/10999949.2017.1390361](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1390361)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1390361>



Published online: 16 Jan 2018.



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The Combahee River Collective Forty Years Later: Social Healing within a Black Feminist Classroom

Karina L. Cespedes
Corey Rae Evans
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We are representative of the power and potential to black feminist thought upon two generations of women of color. We were brought together as members of a course on black feminist thought and within this class the Combahee River Collective Statement played a central role in defining and transmitting the healing power of black feminist thought. This article adheres to the form, structure, and tradition of the Combahee River Collective in order to identify four topics that are of great importance to us as inheritors of a black feminist intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Black feminism, Combahee River Collective, social healing

We are representative of the power and potential of the black feminist vision ignited by the Combahee River Collective (CRC) and its Statement. As two millennials born decades after the first publication, and as a generation-X-er who encountered the CRC Statement (CRCS) in the 1990s—and has been teaching the CRC Statement for over a decade, our articulation of identity as women of color—located at the intersections of being working class, queer, American and Cuban, black and mixed-race are representative of an intersectional feminism in practice and identification that transcends national boundaries. We decided to write in the form, structure, and tradition of the CRCS to embody and better identify four topics that are of great importance to us as inheritors of a black feminist intellectual tradition. The three of us were brought together within a course on black feminist thought as an undergraduate student, professor and graduate student assistant, at a state institution located in a western “frontier” state. Within the class, the CRCS played

a central role in defining and transmitting the healing power of black feminist thought for black women struggling to navigate white supremacy's control over visibility and institutional resources.

Born out of the women of color coalitional feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s the CRC was among a number of important decolonial feminist groups agitating for a critical feminist practice that tackled colonization, imperialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. Commemorating the actions of Harriet Tubman, the only woman in American history to plan and lead a military campaign freeing 750 slaves, the CRC drew its name from Tubman's underground railroad operation. The CRC members were in conversation and alliance with additional women of color feminist groups and often engaged with the intellectual traditions emerging out of radical queer Chicana, Asian American, and Native American feminists circles.

Active in Boston from 1974–80, the CRC began as a black feminist lesbian organization instrumental in institutionalizing black feminism and marking the ideological separation that has distinguished black feminism from white feminism. The CRC created a distinct political and intellectual space, marking along the way its critique of hegemonic feminism's limited fixation with gender as the prime oppression for women. The collective authored one of the most important statements of black feminist thought of the late 20th century, a statement that would become a key document for contemporary black feminism's deployment of intersectionality and the development of identity politics as a concept. The framing of identity proposed by the CRC has influenced subsequent generations of political activists and social theorists. The CRC is the first to frame identity politics or the political positions of social groups through an intersectional lens, incorporating an examination of the multilayered texture of black women's lives at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, politicizing a shared structural position.¹

Similar to the motivating principles that fueled participation within the CRC, some of the women enrolled in our Black Feminism class entered the room with the goal of engaging in consciousness raising political work and manifesting the healing power of a black feminist intellectual tradition. These students were all the while also navigating the treacherous terrain of a post-Obama 21st-century America riddled with appropriations and misuses of black feminist thought.

Within the context of our class we noted the nimble and unique ways in which intersectionality has been severed from radical women of color feminist ideology, and simultaneously the growth of a neoliberal re-definition of identity politics devoid of a critical political position on imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism; we witnessed the rise of an understanding of identity politics uninterested in organizing around black feminist issues. Said differently, we witnessed something akin to the rise of an Alt-Right occupy—as white students attempted to take over the space and intellectual traditions created by our foremothers, thereby creating a new urgency among millennial black feminists.

One of the ideas we most want to convey is that geographical location matters; the particularities of the oppression black women experience on campuses across the country often times vary based on their geographical locations and while many

notable black feminist scholars have historically produced works that draw much from the experiences of black women in states or geographical areas with considerable numbers of African American, it is crucial for our purposes here to emphasize that most of the black students in our class are from a western “frontier” state and as such we are interested in centering what it means to hold a black feminism course located miles away from a considerably sized black community. Within the context of our geographical region in the United States black women endure daily the manifestations of settler colonialist white supremacy, the invasive centering of whiteness and its control over the U.S.-occupied territories referred to as the “frontier.” This context has caused black women on college campuses in the western states to experience a violent remapping of intersectionality informed by the neoliberal nature of academic institutions which see competition as a defining characteristic of social interaction. As a point of reference we wanted to convey the paucity of support by pointing to the fact that regionally we have found only 4 out of 106 organizations claiming to do work serving people of color that might include working with black women’s unique experiences of navigating institutional oppression. The fact that the western “frontier” has been historically defined by colonialism, overt imperialism, expansion, the conquest of native populations, the reliance on black labor, growing environmental racism, economic manipulation, social inequality, labor conflict and urban expansion is always a lived reality for the black women in the class. For black women living in “frontier” states, the colonial, antebellum, and post-slavery legacy of white supremacy within the western “frontier” continues to perpetuate discriminatory racial ideologies that reinforce racial, gender, sexual, and class oppression within institutional spaces.

Providing a context about the geographical area we inhabit seemed to us crucial and a necessary way by which to articulate the ways in which hegemonic feminist discourse was used against Black Feminism within our course. And it explains why during the process of writing this article we often felt as if we were writing from the trenches back to the women of the CRC; recounting the exploitation that occurred in the class as a means to report back on the intellectual, political, and spiritual work still necessary for our own liberation. What we would report back to the women of CRC after forty years is that the energy drain experienced by us as millennial black feminists has made us feel like prisoners of a feminist war. We have found ourselves captive within the context of an academic feminist classroom where the liberatory potential of black feminism was obstructed by the entitlements of white supremacy which sought to consume and devour the fruits of black feminist thought as a product; extracting the labor of black feminists in the class and cherry-picking ideas from black feminism to create their own version of “intersectional feminism.”

As young black women in their twenties at a predominantly white campus, Corey and Shayla encountered the history of the CRC through the institution’s ethnic and women’s studies programs. Corey initially engaged the CRCS as a teaching assistant in the Black Feminism class aforementioned in this piece. Experiencing the institution as a “toxic place” Corey connected deeply with the CRC regarding the

emotional impact of navigating white supremacy as a queer woman of color, grappling with feelings of craziness when she found herself unable to contend with the violent identity politics being enforced by institutions. Upon engaging the CRCS, she developed a deeper consciousness of identity politics rooted within the black feminist tradition as opposed to the appropriation of identity politics she had previously experienced. Stemming from the powerful statement “the personal is political,” she sought to reconstruct an identity politics that embodies the sentiments of the CRCS: “the inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, third world, and working people ... as feminists, we do not want to mess over anyone in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society.”² It is Corey’s contention that manifesting the CRC’s mission of spiritual rejuvenation or healing will assist individuals in empathizing with one another to unite and engage in a critical analysis of systems of power.

Shayla’s connection to the CRCS comes out of her experiences as a girl negotiating the violence of settler colonialism both domestically and internationally. Shayla has endured intergenerational family violence, poverty, teenage pregnancy, incarceration, sexual and spiritual violations. Until she encountered the black feminist literature she had found no place to heal. Within the women of color feminist courses she encountered sacred texts that illuminated her connection with her spirit, her body and strengthened womanist position and understanding of the world. There were moments where she felt profound confusion and found herself living in the borderlands, but she felt reassured when she encountered the statement “The personal is political.” The emotional and spiritual solace imbued within these words opened her to a new dimension of how she could hold and create a place for herself and other women of color engaging in their healing process. She found within these words a possibility for plurality and, moreover, she connected deeply the psychological warfare and spiritual hermeneutics of the CRCS’s structural analysis of the textured layers of being a women of color. Shayla’s politics are grounded in living the words “Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and community, which allows us to continue our struggle and work.”³

Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism

In the tradition of the CRC, we find that contemporary black feminism continues to draw on the “historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation.”⁴ Forty years after the first publication of the CRC, Black women navigating institutions across the United States and globally continue to contend with the structural system of white supremacy that centers and privileges whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and elitism to enforce the neoliberal agenda of U.S. institutions. As a graduate student working as a teaching assistant in the class and as a volunteer at the campus diversity center, Corey has listened to a multitude of stories on the small victories and large defeats that black

female students have traversed when existing in these types of spaces that feel exclusionary to them. Black women within the class continuously articulated the multi-layered texture of their lives, revealing the interlocking locations of their racial, sexual, gender, and class identities that made their political struggles with anti-racism, anti-sexism, homophobia, and anti-elitism inimitable.

We found that the misuse of intersectionality on our campus contributed to a weaponizing of identity politics within the class that manifested itself most prominently in group struggles for visibility and that served to undergird the institutionalization of imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. A legacy of exploitation manifested itself in the tense moments where intersectionality and identity politics were misused within the class revealing how institutions of higher learning are often treacherous spaces where the appropriation of intersectionality and the invalidation of black intellectual traditions are commonplace. This historical legacy entitled white students to demand being at all times centered within the class, which resulted in either white settler colonial logic dominating the room or demanding that the women of color “blacksplain” and serve as cultural translators for white supremacy’s benefit. Some hegemonic feminists in the class demanded to use their experiences of sexism, heterosexism, and elitism to decenter blackness and to avoid accountability from their complicity in racial oppression while exploiting black women for their knowledge, experiences, and labor.

As women within a Black Feminism course taught forty years after the publication of the CRCS we see ourselves as the inheritors of a black feminist intellectual tradition that has become increasingly more possible to institutionalize, and as a part of that institutionalization we have witnessed the appropriation of intersectionality by hegemonic feminism, and the “whitewashing” of theory produced by black feminists. Within “frontier” institutions intersectionality has been taught outside of the context of a black feminist intellectual tradition. Instead, intersectionality is generally taught as a euphemism for diversity and inclusion; applied to the most rudimentary forms of acknowledging the existence of multiple identities that are produced interchangeably by systems of oppression or privilege. This interpretation allows for the application of intersectionality devoid of any analysis of power, and at times deployed as a way to create equivalents in oppression. As one of Karina’s colleagues once said, “black women are not the only ones facing oppression—we all have intersectional identities.” The avoidance of dealing with race directly has manifested itself in intersectionality becoming a term used to avoid talking about race. Karina remembers giving a presentation on intersectionality to a group of social work Master’s students and afterwards one of the participants within a mostly white middle-class audience stated, “I really like intersectionality because with intersectionality I can get beyond race.” A corrective response by Karina to this student’s statement failed and was judged as hostile. We have found that when intersectionality is covered theoretically its critique of legal and social institutions is well received—but when these critiques are simultaneously attached to real and living women of color, black women, and queer black bodies, we have found resistance and an open lack of interest.

Within our class most students had encountered the term before and believed to understand its meaning. Everyone recognized and felt comfortable with the wheel of oppression and privilege because it took the pressure off of confronting privilege and it ironically deemphasized any analysis of race. Some white women in the class had via their previous experience with intersectionality developed an identity as a member of “the oppressed” failing to critically analyze their roles in maintaining racial oppression, conflating the oppression of white women and the oppression of black women, violently using “we” to position women in the class as a homogenous group whose experiences of battling patriarchy were the same. Discussing intersectionality had become for these students meaningless, old hat, allowing some students to further disconnect from structural inequality, racism, heteronormativity, or elitism.

The power of hegemonic feminism to impose itself within the class had no better example than the appropriation of intersectionality—taken away from a coalitional decolonial woman of color feminist tradition, intersectionality on a good day, had become at best acknowledged to be “coined” by one woman alone. We found ourselves grappling with two questions; the first being, why does intersectionality so often begin with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s important work, but not with the CRCS, or even Sojourner Truth or Angela Davis? The second question we encountered in the flesh is what do we do when even the problematic historicizing that gives only credit to Crenshaw is itself erased?

For us one of the most difficult lessons to impart was the fact that the Combahee River Collective Statement literally foreshadowed, embodied and made way for the framework of intersectionality; a term later applied by Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose groundbreaking legal scholarship built on the work of Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, Frances Beal, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and others. In the class we found personal and intellectual resistance and just bold face disbelief. For some students our efforts of “proving it” by showing “chapter and verse” from the CRCS was not enough to alter the appropriations occurring before our eyes; intersectionality was literally being “taken,” stolen, and applied by hegemonic feminists in a disorienting and dizzying appropriation. Shayla immediately recognized the conscious and unconscious appropriation of black feminist thought occurring: “It left me feeling lethargic mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I struggled to hold for myself a place previous generations had fought to carve out for women like me, it was no longer a space to curiously and innocently investigate our identities, colonial wounds, growth, (etc.) but ironically I was witnessing what it looks like, and what it means, to steal a concept away from its intellectual tradition(s).”

The foreshadowing by the CRC of intersectionality has been for a long time inadequately acknowledged within hegemonic feminism, and even feminist of color theorizing, yet all the while intersectionality has “blown up” within academia showing yet again the ways in which a framing, such as that of intersectionality, originally designed to make women of color visible has been colonized, capitalized on at the service of hegemonic feminism and white supremacy, and in our context weaponized as an additional method of producing invisibility. Experiencing the appropriation, Shayla recalls, “the tension I felt while sitting in class was suffocating, overwhelming,

Most of all, I felt the frustration pulsating from every fiber of women of color. I began to feel guilty and ask myself ‘could we have said more to crystallize our point? Should we have used other words or supported our thoughts with more quotes from the text? Maybe then they could have received us?’ NO. The truth remains the same now as it did forty years ago, the problem is not me, the problem is not black women, women of color, queer women of color. I felt women of color including myself were pouring our hearts and soul into the room, meanwhile hegemonic feminists were watching us bleed without lending any resources to the space.” Many times throughout the course, Shayla observed the ways that black women’s stories were dissected and dismissed to create moral equivalents in oppression. Rather than engaging collectively with the black feminist texts, Shayla sensed hesitancy from hegemonic feminists in the class to critically reflect on their dual roles as both the “oppressor and oppressed.”

Shayla found herself trapped in what she calls the “Sunken Place.” Her consciousness separated from her body by centering the embodied gestures of hegemonic white feminism and white supremacy. Screaming in silence “GET OUT!” Shayla was experiencing a disbelief of not being able to be seen and heard no matter how she presented herself in the space. She was still not seen. Her humanity was not seen or felt.

Additionally, speaking about spiritual aspects of black feminist thought in the class became exploitative. Hegemonic feminists and women of color alike were at times threatened by the sacred space some black women sought to create in the classroom and chose to perpetuate conformity and oppression under the guise of progress for all women by using the same fundamental system of a patriarchal line of thought (intersectionality by their definition).

Recalling a reflective assignment in which students were asked to discuss how they connected historically to the colonial and ideological legacy that enslaved Sara Baartman, whose body was displayed as the “hottentot venus” for European audiences during the 19th century, and whose dissection would be utilized by scientific racism, Shayla experienced a sense of invalidation when she read her poetry about Sara Baartman. Shayla expressed her inability to walk away from the life of Sara Baartman, “Her pain is my pain. Her tears are my wounds. Her body is my reflection. Her violation influences my movement. She is me, we are one.” Shayla was met with applause from hegemonic feminism and white supremacy. Not expecting the applause for what seemed a tragedy, Shayla felt dehumanized and frozen in disbelief. Making Shayla question, does hegemonic white feminism and white supremacy only know how to “relate” to me through what Maria Lugones has named “arrogant perception,”⁵ and is this poem perceived to be for their entertainment, and am I on display? Rather than engaging with Shayla through the “world traveling” Lugones describes as a requirement for avoiding arrogant engagement, Shayla was positioned to be merely a performer. If she had never consciously experienced before that moment the appropriating gaze she now seriously felt the terror and dangers of holding space through the embodied presence of hegemonic white feminism and white supremacy. She left the class that day contemplating, “how can we genuinely

and lovingly hold space for women of color, queer women of color, etc. without positioning them to do free labor?” How can we defend our humanity and articulate the multilayered texture of our lives in battling racism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, and so on. Shayla entered the class with the vision and intention to deepen her feminist and political consciousness, to heal, to grow, and to curiously explore her history and self with other women like her and on similar journeys. However, what she was met with was resistance and invested ignorance. She often felt held-up in a space envisioned to hold her, nourish and love her. She felt conflicted trying to hold this ambiguity about the intentions that lead her to black feminism, to holding space with other women of color and white women—and as if that was not complicated enough—to contend with both women of color and white women who had brought their own distinct and opposing intentions into the room. Had it not been for the advice of one of the women of color faculty insisting that we had a right to honor and demand our sacred spaces, we would have given up on engaging in a tactic of spiritual intersectionality—deploying mechanisms through which the sacred can be embodied, maintained, made seen. It is also important to acknowledge that we inevitably all had our own individualistic understandings of what a sacred space is as a result of the multi-textured layer of our lives as black women. Given the variation of black women’s experiences, there were some of us who remained in the stance of dominance, or were stuck in a counter stance of defiance, and some of us who found our way towards a consciousness of disidentification—the impact of these positions within the class immediately manifested an overt discord between the colonizing force of hegemonic white feminism present within the course—both in the form of ideology and content and having the intentions to honor this space for ourselves. The women of color who intended to create a sacred space for black feminists.

While contemporary Alt-Right criticisms of diversity and safe spaces would like to see diversity centers for students abolished, our contention is that these spaces have always been fraught as institutions weaponized identity politics by creating forms of self-segregation in which designated safe spaces that purport to provide marginalized individuals educational resources, validation, a sense of security, and a platform to voice their unique experiences reinforce the ideology of white supremacy that continuously recenter whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and elitism. The capitalist nature of institutions manifested in limited access to visibility and financial resources for ethnic studies and women’s studies departments is representative of a separatist approach to identity politics and exposes the neoliberal agenda of institutions which promote individualistic approaches to intellectual and political work rather than collective action that takes an intersectional approach to examining and dismantling racial, gender, sexual, and class oppressions.

In our experience misunderstandings of intersectionality created equivalencies in oppression and disrupted the potential for students to engage. Instead, hegemonic feminists and black feminists battled over centering blackness, sometimes to the extent that white women in the course who identified as oppressed chose to continue gaslighting or questioning the intellectual contributions and emotions of black women.

In light of the tensions from individualistic misunderstandings of intersectionality, Karina, after teaching the class for almost a decade, witnessed for the first time a form of literal self-segregation where black and white women in the course chose to sit on opposite ends of the classroom, often holding adversarial positions or avoiding engaging each other in dialogue. Struggles developed over protecting the centering of blackness by black women and extended into debates over the constant invasive centering of whiteness within the class, imposing and mirroring an extension of the white supremacy that black women continued to endure on a predominantly white campus within a predominantly white city, and within a white “frontier” state that had exhibited greater antagonism at the conclusion of an Obama presidency.

It became clear to us that although the institution has made “space” for black women to organize and engage with black feminist thought since the student movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, we witnessed instances of what has been termed identitarian multiculturalism; some students privileged their own identities without challenging sexism, racism, heteronormativity, elitism, or the *status quo* of white supremacy at institutions. This approach limited opportunities to engage in intersectional analyses of power, and question the ways *de facto* membership rules around blackness also decenters multilayered black identities such as Afro-Latinas and queer black women.

Everyone in the class enrolled for reasons varying from completing a requirement to graduate, to desiring exposure to black feminist literature, while others entered the room with deeper questions regarding both historical and contemporary black struggles, and others sought out the creation of a sacred space to engage in a different project of healing and edification. For students interested in healing versus consuming, the levels of obstruction were visibly greater; as some were unwilling to “check their privileges at the door” to allow for the accommodation of the various needs that brought everyone into the course.

Corey’s observations of both what students said and what their body language revealed reflected a deep struggle to articulate the multilayered texture of their lives within the contemporary Women’s Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement mirroring the exclusionary institutional spaces that cater to imperialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy that force them to compete for visibility and resources and make them defend their humanity. Many of the politically involved black women in the class had participated in the regional women’s march following the inauguration and had been met with disdain over their cries of “black lives matter”—verbal reminders of white women’s complicity in racism. Black women were labeled traitors that placed their own racial issues ahead of the issues of “all women,” echoing the sentiment of hegemonic white feminism that fails to critique racism, sexism, or elitism when deconstructing patriarchy.

What We Believe

“We reject pedestals, queen hood, and walking ten paces behind, to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”⁶

Black women in the class felt the necessity to work towards their liberation by and for themselves, the need for autonomy, freedom from external control. In the words of the CRC, within these places these students have echoed the painful reminder that “the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us.”⁷ Even more disheartening is this ideology invading spaces that were created specifically to address the experiences, struggles, and liberation of black people and black women in particular. Gaslighting black women’s intellectual contributions in the Black Feminism course invalidated them as knowledge holders and producers, and as legitimate political leaders in their communities. In the class hegemonic feminists often challenged the intellect of black women, uninterested in a contextual understanding of the multilayered texture of black women’s lives. In other instances, black women’s intellectual contributions would be stolen and reiterated without giving credit to the students.

In opposition to hegemonic feminism, black women’s unique social experiences and history of racial oppression necessitate creating community across gender lines. Unfortunately for some black men, the embodiment of hegemonic gender roles, and assumptions of behavioral differences based on gender, have created a significant obstacle in their ability to consider black women as autonomous individuals who have control over their own lives and bodies. The embodiment of hegemonic gender roles shadowed some black men’s ability to acknowledge and analyze gender and sexual oppression while deconstructing racial oppression. One of the forms it manifested in our class was an assumption that black men were ultimately responsible for the protection and liberation of “their black women.” All the while, black women shouldered the burden of defending their humanity and refusing to allow black men to act as “protectors” or “liberators” of their lives but rather as partners in mutuality struggling against the interlocking systems of racial, class, gender, and sexual oppression within institutions.

Shayla found that the power dynamics occurring in the class powerfully resembled the codes of black masculinity and a racialized embodiment of hyper hegemonic masculinity. Too often, she had invested energy into black student organizations and was met with an absence of love. What does it mean then that within political economic systems of capitalism, imperialism (etc.) we are to endure and witness sexism between and among people of color? And, how has this act of witnessing altered our gestures of love? Have we all become bystanders to black women’s oppression?

Problems in Organizing Black Feminists

Organizing around black feminist issues has proven difficult for black women operating in toxic heteronormative, white, male, elitist institutions. Often times black women do not have access to the visibility and financial or intellectual resources necessary to battle multiple systems of oppression and do not have access to the racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class privilege that would aid in these struggles. Spaces that could serve to ameliorate these conditions however have proven barren. For example, while particular university courses, such as Black Feminism, aim to address the

violence of white supremacy and cater to the marginalized identities of black women and men, it is only one of a handful of courses that attempt to provide such a space. And, just as in many other institutions, the role of diversity and inclusivity programs can be dubious. These approaches denote the need to collectively work towards our own liberation as part of a transnational decolonial project in academia. As contended by the CRC “if black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”⁸ While black feminism has a transnational and intersectional application, black women are often on the receiving end of unjust blame for derailing efforts to dismantle sexism and racism. Furthermore, there is a fear that black women, who exist at the forefront of several social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, will no longer participate in organizing around issues that largely center on the needs of white women and black men who will then be forced to confront their sexist, heteronormative, and elitist ways of interacting with and treating black women.

Some of the black feminists within the class organized study groups to engage more critically with texts such as the CRCs and to further develop their consciousness around black feminist issues and theories. Speaking through the black feminist literature has been meaningful for many of these black women who have created connections within the classroom through group projects where they have been at the forefront of leading by example for their peers. They organized to create networking opportunities to engage with other black feminists on a national level by attending a black feminism conference in Atlanta. Despite the pervasive attempt to center whiteness in the class, black women refused to allow the dialogue to be interrupted and when needed slowed down for the benefit of students that were experiencing discomfort or confusion. Black women in the class also dismissed expectations that black feminism would be dysfunctional and dependent on white feminists for liberation. Rather, many women in the class claimed their space, demanded to control the dialogue, and kept in check the appropriation of hegemonic feminists.

Black Feminist Issues and Practices: Finding Healing from the Trenches

“The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, third world, and working people.”⁹

Black women in U.S. institutions still shoulder the burden of addressing racism in the white Women’s Movement and sexism in the Black Lives Matter Movement. Black women continuously engage in dialogue about the presence of sexism in black spaces and racism in feminist spaces, requiring them to explain the multilayered texture of their lives to black men and white women. Our assessment of the contemporary state of black feminism forty years after the CRC’s intervention is a harrowing reminder that fighting racism, sexism, elitism, and homophobia remains a constant battle in the lives of black women caught within interlocking systems of race, gender, sex, and class oppression.

While institutional violence is still a primary component in the experiences of millennial black women enduring white supremacy we have all simultaneously

witnessed the healing power of engaging the CRC statement and the large body of work that sprung from that initiative. Speaking through the black feminist literature and engaging with the CRC piece have created a transformation of heightened political consciousness, reduction in levels of anxiety and the despondence that is at times a visible manifestation of long-term trauma from white supremacy. What replaced these maladies is a new self-confidence and social healing has emerged for the black men and women within the course. And most of all, where possible within the confines of an individualistic culture, attempts of coming together to support one another have materialized. Black women in the course have worked together to gather the resources necessary to further their academic and career goals through their personal, academic, and political work that centers the principles of black feminism. To the extent, that as Karina witnessed, “the students in the class are engaging the materials in ways that is seldom seen in other courses. When they walked through the door at the beginning of the semester the evidence of trauma was painfully obvious, but as I’ve seen every single year this material is covered, we are witnessing signs of healing—to the extent that for some this material is better than years of therapy and as such black feminist thought can be the best medicine—it holds within it a cure for what ails ya.” As Caridad Souza has stated, the work of women of color feminists speaks towards the collective aspects of trauma, wounding, and healing—the ways that collective trauma and wounding gets transmitted across generations, how it becomes embedded in social relations as a kind of political unconscious. These students embody black feminism by “growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression” as black women.¹⁰

As the “historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” persists in this moment,¹¹ through engaging the mission of spiritual rejuvenation put forth by the CRCs, Corey and Shayla have discovered a language and practice of healing. As representatives of a new generation of black feminists that now carry with urgency the torch of healing. With gratitude, we stand on the shoulders of all the queer, lesbian, women and of color that have contributed to an evolving black feminist tradition. We are demanding the autonomy to create inclusive healing spaces, to hold ourselves within this physical body and evolving our higher selves (our spiritual bodies). As Shayla puts it, “I acknowledge that I am a recipient of the intentions of the many generations of queer, lesbian, and women of color. And now I am a transmitter of the knowledge that I have acquired to act with a mind toward future possibilities.”

Notes

1. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016).
2. “Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, [1978] 1995), 235–39.
3. *Ibid.*, 234.
4. *Ibid.*, 232.

5. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2 (1987): 3–19.
6. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 234.
7. *Ibid.*, 234.
8. *Ibid.*, 237.
9. *Ibid.*, 239.
10. *Ibid.*, 233.
11. *Ibid.*, 232.

About the Authors

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Corey Rae Evans is a graduate student in the department of Ethnic Studies at Colorado State University. Her current research project is dedicated to examining and providing more accurate representations of identity development and self-conception in black mixed-race women and developing a healing practice model to promote positive self-conception. Her research and writing seeks to illuminate the voices of marginalized populations impacted by supremacist ideologies and historical trauma.

Shayla Monteiro is currently an undergraduate student majoring in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies. She is politically active on campus and in her community.