

Healing Justice as Intersectional Feminist Praxis: Well-being Practices for Inclusion and Liberation

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Abstract

Since at least the 1830s, Black feminists in the US have spoken of how oppression harms the spirit and have also expressed the need for Black people to respect themselves in the face of anti-Black racism (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The recognition that oppression negatively impacts well-being continues today. Research in community health and psychology has demonstrated how Black Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx people have been victims of mass incarceration, state-funded and state-sanctioned violence, and systemic discrimination in schools, workplaces, healthcare, and housing. Due to these conditions, racial and ethnic minorities in the US suffer disproportionately from mental and physical illnesses linked with stress, pollution, and trauma. Intersectionality has been recognized as a vital analytical tool in research, helping scholars, managers, educators, healthcare providers, policy-makers, and more understand the complexities of health risks and healthcare responses; of diversity and inclusion in schools, workplaces, and communities; and of inequalities in every area of social science. At the same time, intersectional activists have insisted on a holistic view of social change that forms the basis of what Reverend angel Kyodo williams calls “transcendent movements” (williams & Owens, 2016, p. 201). The work of well-being, on individual and community levels, has been part of resistance against oppression, exploitation, and prejudice which harm the mind, body, and spirit of those on all sides of oppressive power dynamics. As Ruth King (2018) notes, “racism is a heart disease, and it’s curable!” (p. 9). This essay explores past and present intersectional feminist activism that addresses well-being and the tools to achieve well-being as political strategy. It connects contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, transformative justice, and mutual aid with a history of work by womanists, U.S. third world feminists, intersectional feminists, and LGBTQIA people of color who have recognized that self-care and community-care are political work and that the work of diversity, inclusion, and well-being is one and the same. This knowledge emphasizes the importance of self-care and community-care in politics, public health, education, and other social change work.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Social movements, Well-being, Black feminism, Inclusion, Activism, Health, Oppression, Liberation, Abolition, Healing justice

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“Our movements themselves have to be healing, or there's no point to them”—Cara Page (in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016)

Introduction

Throughout the uprisings in the U.S. in the summer of 2020 and their aftermath, intersectional feminist organizers and freedom fighters have been focusing on healing and well-being in the physical and digital spaces they inhabit, even as “our communities face heightened threats” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. xviii). In Washington, D.C. (Modiano, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020), and Richmond, Virginia (Sczerzenie, 2020), activists engaged in meditation, yoga, and healing circles while occupying spaces in protest against systemic racism and police brutality. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, organizers have called to “build our people’s resilience through strategy, organization, infrastructure, and care” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. xix). The explicit integration of resilience practices into political organizing is a key part of how 21st century U.S. activists are, as Angela Davis (2017) comments, “pushing Black and left, including feminist and queer, movements to a new and more exciting level, as they seriously wrestled with contradictions that had plagued these movements for many generations” (p. xi).

The explicit incorporation of healing within activism and the recognition of healing as activism is what we refer to here as “healing justice.” The work of healing justice addresses the need to heal from generational trauma and ongoing oppression, to prevent burnout, and to create communities that strive to enact a vision of justice that does not leave anyone out. It is a key strategy for enacting intersectional feminism’s focus on inclusion. Healing justice organizers and practitioners view healing as essential to liberation and connect their work with diverse movements focused on racial, economic, gender, sexual, global, environmental, and disability justice.

Our focus here is on the perspectives, texts, and actions that have foregrounded well-being and healing justice in intersectional feminist movements in order to emphasize the importance of healing justice work for social movements more broadly. We want to share inspiring examples, not scrutinize mistakes or failures of individuals or organizations. We recognize that the organizations from which we draw our examples are not perfect organizations. We aim to encourage conscious integration of healing justice into activism to support people doing the work and to create spaces for individual and collective transformation “in the service of the work” (SONG, 2021). Here, we demonstrate how intersectional feminist theory and praxis are showing up in the 21st century, emphasizing the strategic and collective nature of healing justice work as an essential element of intersectional feminist social change. Section one of the essay offers a theoretical framework, while the second section discusses common themes and approaches to healing justice in intersectional feminist activism.

Sharon approaches this topic as a U.S. Southern, feminist, middle-class, white, Buddhist, queer mother of two, one who is often read as normatively gendered and is married to a cisgender man. They are also a contingent faculty member with a full-time appointment and a scholar of intersectional feminist theory and activism. Experienced in mindfulness practice and holistic approaches to healing for themselves and their children, who have food and chemical sensitivities and are neurodivergent, they draw together the two primary interests of their professional and personal life and seek to show how these two communities of social justice warriors and well-being practitioners must come together for all of us to survive and thrive.

Kalia approaches this topic as a student of the Black radical tradition committed to long-term principled struggle towards our collective liberation. She is a Black prison industrial complex (PIC) abolitionist from the southern region of the United States. She comes from generations of working-class Black people and a supportive community with a rich culture and history of resistance. She is a community organizer; director of an emerging youth-led base building organization for racial, gender, and economic liberation; a first-generation college graduate; and a recent (2019) MA graduate. Her scholarship has focused on activist burnout and activist sustainability in contemporary racial justice movements.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectional Feminism and Healing Justice

Intersectional Feminism

By “intersectional feminist” we refer to people committed to ending oppression who recognize the interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination and violence. Our definition draws on bell hooks’ (2000) classic definition of feminism as:

a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires (p. 26).

The self-development of people, and hence well-being, has been a central concern of feminism, particularly as articulated and enacted by intersectional feminists in the U.S. Everyone we cite here to explain intersectional feminism and healing justice may not necessarily identify as such, but we view them as continuing the work of Black feminists, womanists, U.S. third world feminists, radical women and queer people of color, feminist and LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities, working class and poor feminists and queer people, feminist and LGBTQIA+ advocates for global/economic/racial/environmental justice, and so many others whose activism and philosophy led to the methods for social analysis and change now most commonly referred to as “intersectionality.”³

Intersectionality is a practice of radical inclusion that centers those who are marginalized within oppressed communities (Garza, 2020; Ransby, 2018) and requires the incorporation of healing in liberatory movements. Cathy Cohen points this out when, in arguing for why Trans inclusion must be at the center of Black liberation, she articulates the broad vision of intersectionality: “this movement is about breaking down systems of oppression based on gender and class and race and sexuality that limit the ability of people to have full and happy lives—from having good jobs, to having the kind of intimate partners that they want, to experiencing joy, to having agency, to having control over their bodies and sexuality” (in Cohen & Jackson, 2016, p. 786-7). By focusing on valuing all Black lives and centering those who face multiple dimensions of oppression, intersectional activists build a movement that aims for liberation—defined as well-being (“full and happy lives”)—for everyone. Articulating this vision, Cohen continues the liberatory thinking of Black feminists and other radical women and queer people of color who connected well-being and politics long before the term “intersectionality” was coined. We can see this understanding in hooks’ 1984 definition (above) and in works by

³ For a fuller exploration of the meaning and history of intersectionality, see Collins & Bilge (2016) and Hancock (2016).

Audre Lorde (1984), Alice Walker (1983), Toni Cade Bambara (1970), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Cherrie Moraga (2000), Victoria Brownworth & Susan Raffo (1999), Eli Clare (1999), Luisah Teish (1985), Leela Fernandes (2003), Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1996), Joanna Kadi (1994), Eveline Shen (1994), Diana Hayes (1995), Gloria Akasha Hull (2001), Beth Brant (1988), Paula Gunn Allen (1991), Mab Segrest (2002), and countless other intersectional feminist writers, artists, and activists. These writer-activists have insisted on attending to feelings, centering love and joy, connecting “thawing hearts and changing consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 1983, n.p.) and reflecting that “As deeply as I wanted safety or freedom, I wanted desire, hope, and joy. What, after all, was the worth of one without the other?” (Allison, 1994, p. 112).

Healing Justice

Healing justice is a framework and strategy developed by intersectional feminist activists that seeks to address needs left out of dominant forms of political organizing by explicitly connecting health and well-being to political and social change. The Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective (hereafter referred to as “Kindred Collective”) articulated the framework in 2005-2006 “for movements to address collective harm and trauma” and to “build community/survivor led responses rooted in southern traditions of resiliency to sustain our emotional/physical/spiritual/psychic and environmental well being.” Healing justice grows from the lived experience of those operating in the interstices of movement work. It begins with an understanding of health as tied to oppression, including historical traumas, and to community. Many groups are working with this framework, and many of them, like the Kindred Collective, are led by intersectional feminists, queer people, people with disabilities, and survivors of violence who view the health of body/mind/spirit as intertwined with community and environment and who refuse dominant political praxis that relegates health and well-being to the margins, leaving behind people whose bodies and needs don’t fit in. In all its manifestations, healing justice centers resistance to oppression and resilience as essential, collective practices for well-being.

The necessity of healing justice grows from an intersectional understanding of how oppression involves harm and trauma. Oppression, “the experience of repeated, widespread, systemic injustice” (Deutsch, 2006, p. 10), acts on and through the body, negatively impacting the physical and mental health of marginalized groups and limiting the humanity and wholeness of those in dominant social positions (McGibbon, 2012; Lion’s Roar Staff, 2014; Caldwell & Leighton, 2018; Haines, 2019). Healing justice responds specifically to histories of trauma caused by medical systems that abused, unethically experimented on, and forcibly sterilized people from all marginalized groups in the U.S. as well as the kidnapping, theft, abuse, and murder that separated Black and Indigenous people from land, traditions, and resources that support individual and community resilience (Kindred Collective).

Healing justice also grows out of experiences of intersectional activists suffering physically, mentally, and spiritually from overwork, stress, conflict, and abuse within under-resourced social movements. The ubiquity of trauma, combined with the passion for and urgency of the work, makes activist spaces and communities vulnerable to conflict, fatigue, and burnout. The pain of previous injury often produces anger that motivates social action but also raises the risk that people may react from a place of pain and anger in tense situations, which can lead to discomfort and deep-seated conflicts that can make activism emotionally draining.

Negative social and emotional dynamics within movements, combined with a lack of resources, takes a toll on the health of activists, especially those with disabilities. The Kindred

Collective connects lack of health insurance and community support, “overextended work cultures,” experiences of trauma, and lack of resources with “an increase of suicide, depression and long-term illnesses impacting organizers at much younger ages.” The culture of overwork and absence of community care within movements disproportionately impacts people with disabilities, who are often left out of movements, even ones aspiring to incorporate healing work, like the Black Lives Matter Movement/Movement for Black Lives (BLMM/M4BL⁴). Cyrée Jarelle Johnson and Carolyn Lazard (2020) explain how collective movements can be challenging for people with disabilities when “the desire to be part of a community leads us to neglect our accessibility needs [...] That pressure coupled with duty and responsibility to community members and organizations can run sick and disabled people ragged” (p. 54). People need the connection found in movement work, but without care built in, involvement can be unsustainable, particularly for those who hold multiple oppressed identities.

Not taking care of individual and collective physical, mental, and spiritual health leads to activist fatigue, which ultimately leads to burnout. Activist fatigue, or social justice fatigue, compounds the harms of oppression with the physical and emotional demands of movement work, causing an array of negative health effects (Arteaga, 2020). When activists persist in highly stressful or toxic work situations without conscious attention to self-care, healthy boundaries, and resilience practices, they often reach burnout, which can lead to behavior that strays from their principles, impedes the group’s mission, and reproduces supremacy behavior, and which often leads to people temporarily or permanently disappearing from organized movement work (Ginwright, 2015; Chen & Gorski, 2015; Spade, 2020). Without conscious attention to healing the stress, mental illness, trauma, and heartbreak that lies at the root of aggressive behavior, activists can easily reproduce the harmful dynamics of power and aggression that they seek to change.

Nonetheless, as Harris’s (2019) work on Activist Sustainability Development theory demonstrates, many activists develop resilience practices that sustain them and enable them to continue in social justice work despite tremendous obstacles. Healing justice seeks to integrate such resilience practices into organizing work. Healing justice draws on a long-term and holistic view of liberation as grounded in everyday relationships and practices and in the intersectional feminist principle of radical inclusion.

Healing justice continues the work of healers who have always served their communities with the tools they have available. It builds on the work of Black healers such as Harriet Tubman, Sarah Parker Remond, and David Ruggles, who in their own ways centered healing justice in their pursuit of liberation (Falk, 1980). Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016) explains, “healers have been healing folks at kitchen tables and community clinics for a long time—from the acupuncture clinics run by Black Panthers like Mutulu Shakur in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, to our bone-deep Black, Indigenous, people of color and pre-Christian European traditions of healing with herbs, acupuncture, touch, prayer, and surgery.” Healing justice activists reclaim the value of these practices in defiance of the racist, patriarchal, capitalist institutions of what has become mainstream medical practice, which continues to malign them in order to promote their own businesses (Ehrenreich & English, 2010).

Healing justice enacts intersectional feminism by working to transform generational and contemporary trauma and violence through practices that resist oppression and promote holistic health and resilience. The Kindred Collective defines resistance as “the development of

⁴ Following Ransby (2018), we use “BLMM/M4BL” to refer to the broader movement for Black liberation, rather than particular organizations.

strategies that seek to redefine and rebuild our existences outside and in the face of oppression.” Resistance, in this usage, is what we usually think of when we think of explicitly political work: work that seeks to transform structures and systems that produce, support, and enforce oppression. The work of resisting and transforming structures must be accompanied by resilience practices—those focused on the growth and healing of people suffering from and responding to the trauma and heartbreak of oppression.⁵

Healing justice also aims specifically to keep the health and capacity of organizers in mind in order to sustain movements and make them genuinely inclusive. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016) explains the importance of “collective care” for well-being and inclusion in organizing:

Care means shifting our organizations to be ones where people feel fine if they get sick, cry, have needs, start late because the bus broke down, move slower; ones where there's food at meetings, people work from home, and it's not something we apologize for. It is the *way* we do the work [...] Where we actually care for each other and don't leave each other behind.

Healing justice prioritizes inclusion and care over efficiency and dominant notions of work as divorced from emotional, physical, and community/familial needs. Healing justice is distinct from individualized notions of well-being and is inseparable from activism. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016) explains that healing justice is “a fundamental—and anti-ableist—shift in how we think of movement work—to think of it as a place where many pauses, where building in healing as well as space for grief and trauma to be held, makes the movements more flexible and longer lasting.”

Kindred Collective co-founder Cara Page’s (2010) vision of well-being in movements similarly seeks “the kind of ‘wholeness’ that calls on whole communities and whole movements to be well, sustainable and resilient.” This emphasis on wholeness addresses the gaps that intersectional feminists have identified in movements with a single focus that exclude people with multiple oppressed identities. Whole communities and movements are built by centering those with the greatest needs; this understanding is central to intersectional feminism and healing justice praxis.

The centering of Black and Brown people with disabilities and LGBTQ people of color in healing justice activism is evident in the awareness of oppression and cultural appropriation and the value placed on diverse healing practices and non-normative bodies. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016) situates healing justice as developed by queer and trans people of color, and particularly “Black and brown disabled femme brilliance, in response to all that both mainstream western/biomedical and ‘alternative’ white/cis/abled spaces lack in terms of understanding how colonialism, ableism, cultural theft, and whorephobia affect healing systems.” Healing justice involves holistic practices that address physical, mental, and spiritual health for individuals, relationships, and communities and centers “working-class, poor, disabled and Southern/rural healers” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016). By incorporating altars, ritual, meditation, and other mindfulness/spiritual practices into personal, communal, and public spaces, activists attend to emotional and spiritual needs for grieving, resilience, marking transitions, and connecting with ancestors, a larger purpose or Spirit/God(dess), the earth/universe, and each other. Healing justice is not limited to spirituality and “alternative healing” but also includes access to allopathic

⁵ Currans (2021) connects the discourse of resilience emerging from communities with resistance, distinguishing it from policy discourses on resilience, which often fail to address systemic issues.

medicine and technology that can alleviate pain and other symptoms (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016). With its holistic and inclusive take on well-being, current healing justice work furthers the legacies of liberatory spiritual practice (Bartholomew, Harris, & Maglalang, 2018; James & Moore, 2006) and of intersectional feminist approaches to healing.

Healing Justice Work in the Movement: Sustaining Activists, Building Community, Transforming Consciousness

In this section, we provide examples of some common themes and approaches to healing in intersectional feminist organizing. There are many more examples to be discussed, and all of these deserve more time and attention than we can manage in this space.

Movement Work as Healing Work

Social change work itself is important healing work for those who recognize how oppression, discrimination, violence, environmental damage, and capitalism negatively impact their lives and their communities. By joining together and insisting on the worth of those whose bodies are treated as disposable by political and economic structures, and by calling out injustice, activists find freedom, joy, and energy for social change (Clare, 2018). Shelly P. Harrell (2000) points to this dynamic in identifying anti-racist work as a coping strategy for racism-related stress. By raising awareness of racism, affirming the value of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, connecting people with a larger community of activists, and providing a sense of meaning, antiracist social movements “can furnish the racism-resistant armor needed to build positive well-being” (Harrell, 2000, p. 51). Social movements connect people with in-person and imagined communities that provide direct support or just a feeling of connection to a larger group and history of people surviving difficulties—including horrific violence—and also loving, creating, and enjoying life. Reflecting on Southerners on New Ground’s (SONG) Black Mamas Bail Out campaign in Atlanta, Georgia, Serena Sebring expressed the emotional impact she felt ““doing street fund-raising and the power of seeing everyday people say yes to Black women’s freedom”” (in Carruthers, 2018, p. 77). Connecting with others who value the lives of Black and other oppressed people can lead organizers to feel supported and empowered. It is also necessary to reinvest our collective resources in healing and growth because of the violence and oppression entrenched in our systems. Elias Nosrati & Michael Marmot (2019) argue for the kind of holistic approach to reducing health disparities seen in abolition work, which seeks to end institutional violence by eliminating the existence of the police and prison industrial complex as a whole. Intersectional feminist movements for abolition are calling for the defunding and total abolition of police departments, immediate release of prisoners, and the closing of so-called correctional detention facilities (including immigrant detention facilities). These movements are working to reduce individual violence by transforming the political and material conditions in which we live through investments in education, healthy environments, economic opportunities, housing, and more (INCITE!; Norris, 2020). At the same time, activists realize that organizations must be transformative spaces for their people. Kandace Montgomery and Miski Noor include care as an integral part of movement building, explaining, “People need organizations. Organizations need people. We must build political homes, places where our communities can practice self-governance and ways of being with each other that bring into the now what we envision for our society in the future” (in Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. xix). Bringing care into movement work builds individual and collective resilience and sustained energy for change.

Integrating Healing Work in Protests and Organizing

Despite the recognition of how oppression affects health and how trauma creates conflict in movement spaces, for many activists, it is still challenging to dedicate the time for individual self-care. This practical consideration combined with the recognition that healing happens in community is why building healing into activist work (and into community spaces, workplaces, institutions, etc.) is so important for inclusion. In addition to incorporating varied spiritual traditions and practices (Carruthers, 2018), intersectional feminist organizers welcome many modes of healthcare and healing practices. Charlene Carruthers (2018) insists that healing is as important to activism as organizing: “Our movement must invest time and money in healers at least as much as we invest in field organizing” (p. 75). Groups like Harriet’s Apothecary have formed to address that need, offering healing villages, training, consulting, listening circles, and support for Black-led organizations and Black healers. Healing justice activists have created practice spaces in and around organizing work, such as at the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan (Page, 2010; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016), to build resilience practices and affirm the importance of healing work within social movements (Bartholomew, Harris, & Maglalang, 2018). In addition to utilizing practice spaces, circles, training, retreats, and other support alongside direct actions, organizers have integrated healing practices before, during, and after direct actions and protests across the country. Before actions, organizers use practices for centering themselves and grounding their work in a vision that aims “for a whole experience that is thinking about people’s emotional well-being and physical well-being” (Irresistible, 2020). During actions, organizers designate point people for intervention and support. They attend to immediate emotional and physical needs and provide jail and legal support (Irresistible, 2020; Welch, 2020; BALT). Organizers also harness the power of spiritual and creative approaches, such as altars and artistic expression, for working with the grief and anger that often lead people to political action. After protests, organizers promote healing justice by providing places to debrief and process emotions, tensions, and conflicts; sharing resources for support; meeting immediate physical, emotional, and spiritual needs; and celebrating the work that was done (Irresistible, 2020; brown et al.). Such restorative practices promote individual and community resilience and lessen the likelihood of collective burnout (Brown & Mitchell-Brody, 2014; Harris, 2019). By integrating care and healing in multiple modalities before, during, and after actions, organizers create a sustainable structure to keep people practicing healthy communication, connecting to internal and communal sources of wisdom, and focusing on broader visions of collective liberation in order to create radically inclusive movements for social change.

Healing through Art, Culture, and Ritual

In addition to drawing on a range of healthcare and spiritual practices, healing justice organizers use a variety of artistic and cultural practices to support healing, well-being, and social and political transformation. Countering oppression at the community level has gone hand-in-hand with asserting the value of those who have been oppressed, seen explicitly in the Black Arts and body positivity movements and the recent work to build a monument to the Mothers of Gynecology in Alabama (see Fig. 1) (The More Up Campus, 2020; Race Capitol, 2020). Valuing of non-normative bodies happens through messaging and representation, through how work and conversations are structured, and through deeply personal healing work, such as therapy, yoga, mindfulness, dance, singing, and telling stories. Storytelling plays a central role in the healing justice work of the Mirror Memoirs project, which centers trans and

gender-nonconforming people of color who have survived childhood sexual abuse. In addition to promoting healing for survivors, Amita Swadhin (2020) sees how sharing stories can strengthen movements by encouraging compassion and mutual support. Much of the storytelling work in *Mirror Memoirs* takes place through theater games and performance, a tool that many organizers have found useful for healing and community building, as giving each person time and space on a stage is a way of conveying value. Page sees theater as spiritual, as a healing practice that is “about how we transform the frequencies we’re living inside” (in brown, 2019, p. 45). Arts, ritual, and cultural work is central to the grassroots abolitionist and transformative work of North Carolina-based SpiritHouse. They incorporate ritual, resilience practices, and cultural traditions, connecting with ancestral indigenous and diasporic traditions and viewing culture as “the catalyst for our social, spiritual and political transformation. It is the roadmap to the liberation already living in our bones” (SpiritHouse). Members of the Association of Black Psychologists and Connecticut-based Community Healing Network use the ancient tradition of circles for healing and “emotional emancipation” for Black people (Caiola & Bandlamudi, 2018; Community Healing Network, 2021). Engaging bodies in play, art, and ritual in community empowers, connects, and heals those living at the intersections of multiple oppressions.

Figure 1: The Mothers of Gynecology Monument in Montgomery, Alabama



Source: <http://kenmarch.com/2022/04/mothers-of-gynecology-monument/>

Embodied Mindfulness Practices

Embodied mindfulness practices like breathwork, meditation, yoga, and somatics support the self-awareness, resilience, and compassion that can free people from the grip of powerful emotions, strengthen communities, and support direct action and protest. Carla Sherrell writes of the body as a site of connection to ancestors, where trauma, resilience, and joy are passed down and sensed, even when historical records are absent (in Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). Clare also conveys the importance of working with our bodies for liberation (in Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). Developing awareness of how oppression affects embodiment and working directly with the body through attention to sensation, breathing, and movement “may help us not only resist body oppression but also enrich and enliven our time here on the earth,” as Christine Caldwell notes (in Caldwell & Leighton, 2018, p. 46). Through experiencing how our bodies feel, we develop understanding and resilience that is deeper than intellectual awareness. Ruth King (2018) distinguishes the effects of intellectual understanding of oppression and discrimination from the effects of the awareness gained through mindful meditation. The former aids analysis, while the latter enables healing. As a way to get to know and to honor our pain and understand our emotions, meditation transforms how we relate to our emotions and to each other and enables us to access the wisdom and energy of anger (see also Lorde, 1984) for personal and social transformation (Owens, 2020). By practicing accepting ourselves and taking care of ourselves through embodied mindfulness practices, we grow our skills for being uncomfortable and asserting ourselves, rather than turning anger inward or toward those who are accessible or into passive aggressiveness. King (2018), Rod Owens (2020), and angel Kyodo williams (williams & Owens, 2016) offer mindfulness teachings designed for this work and informed by intersectionality. Through developing awareness of self, other, and environment, and by recognizing the complexity of individual experience and the effects of oppression and privilege, embodied mindfulness practice fosters the clarity and wisdom necessary for principled social change work.

Community Care and Mutual Aid

Caring communities are essential to healing and interrupting the cycles of violence within and outside movement spaces. Intersectional feminist activists seek to build communities that provide support outside of the state, moving beyond policing and carceral systems. One way that activists work to structure community care is through mutual aid organizations and efforts, such as La ColectiVA and Richmond Mutual Aid, in Virginia, and Mutual Aid NYC, in New York. Mutual aid is a historically Black and Indigenous anti-capitalist practice that involves a long-term commitment to the community (De Loggans, 2020). Organizers emphasize that mutual aid is a practice of “Solidarity Not Charity!” (Spade, 2020, p. 21). Dean Spade (2020) outlines three key elements of mutual aid projects. First, they seek to help people survive while developing “shared understanding about why people do not have what they need” (p. 9). Second, they are active, movement-building projects that “expand solidarity” (p. 12). Third, they engage people in collective problem solving, “rather than waiting for saviors” (p. 16). Mutual aid organizations’ activities vary according to the needs of their community members. In addition to organizing for abolition of policing, prisons, and migrant detention centers, La ColectiVA raises funds to support community members in need of assistance for rent, bonds, and emergency assistance (La ColectiVA, n.d.). Richmond Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADRVA) formed in response to needs from the public housing community in 2018, aims to “create a support system in response to COVID-19 and its effects on Richmonders including food and supply shortage,

job losses, and long-term quarantine” (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief RVA, 2020, p. 1). Mutual Aid NYC (2021) was formed in response to the COVID-19 crisis to support and connect neighborhood-based groups, identify gaps in governmental responses, and build a structure to promote resource sharing and to support long-term work to change systems. Community care is happening on the local level, from groups of friends to neighborhoods, cities, and organizations. Importantly, community care is also happening at broader levels, where individuals and organizations work together to create infrastructure and provide training and mentoring to support organizers like those in BLMM/M4BL and other intersectional feminist movements. Barbara Ransby (2018) calls Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD), Blackbird, and the BlackOUT Collective “political quilters”: groups that “provide the support, resources, and connective tissue needed to bind together different pieces of the whole, and bolster individual organizations and the movement overall” (p. 156). Highlander Research and Education Center, one of BOLD’s sponsors, continues to support and connect organizers across the South and Appalachia and from immigrant communities, and Project South has increased its political education efforts, offering more workshops and a cohort development model. Such community care efforts work towards a sustainable movement ecosystem that supports and enables diverse individuals and groups engaging in transformative struggle and seeks to avoid the splintering that prompted the articulation of intersectional feminism.

Transformative Justice and Community Accountability

Strategies for community accountability and transformative justice pre-date policing and continue to be developed to address violence within communities of color, for whom calling the police often results in less safety and more violence. These strategies are multiple and creative as people seek and find ways to educate and prevent violence, care for survivors of violence, intervene to stop harm, hold people accountable, and create safe communities without policing and prisons (INCITE!). Janae E. Bonsu views such communities as part of “our dreams of collective freedom” and a continuation of work that Black women have done in past (in Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020, p. 49). She cites North Carolina’s UBUNTU and the Audre Lorde Project’s Safe OUTside the System (SOS) program in Brooklyn, New York, as examples of community work based in Queer Black feminist principles that supports survivors of violence and, in the case of SOS, trains community members to interrupt violence. Other organizations like Philly Stands Up (PSU), in Pennsylvania, also engage perpetrators of violence based on the demands of survivors (in Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Malkia Devich Cyril defines accountability, in this context, as “something we can help each other be, within boundaries that keep us secure” (in brown, 2020, p. 82), part of both the political and “spiritual alignment” of social movements: “It correlates principle and purpose to process and outcomes” (in brown, 2020, p. 82). adrienne maree brown (2020) emphasizes mutual responsibility: “I want to feel like we are responsible for each other’s transformation [...] from broken people and communities to whole ones” (p. 74). Bonsu writes of her experience with BYP100, which created a Healing and Safety Council (HSC) to address harm caused by members of the organization and “to provide support, training, and resources to BYP100 members and our contingent communities” (in Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020, p. 52). She connects community accountability with healing justice, emphasizing the importance of proactive attention to well-being to support long-term commitment to the organization and to the work of community accountability, which is incredibly difficult work that requires honesty and the desire to heal. Transformative justice involves building trust – trust in survivors to determine their own needs and trust in the humanity

of those who cause harm. In movements, this often means developing processes to address conflicts and hold people accountable for harm they have caused. It also involves work to clarify what is conflict, what is harm, and what is abuse and to transform and let go of habits of drama and desires for punishment (brown, 2020). With its acceptance of humans as flawed and with trust in our ability to grow, transformative justice responds to the healing needed at a larger level (brown, 2019) and develops practices that are essential for truly inclusive movements.

Envisioning Transformation

In addition to making movements genuinely inclusive, promoting healing in movement spaces, and sustaining activists, healing justice makes possible creative visions for the future. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2016) describes healing justice practice spaces as “places where healing shifts the ways we imagine movement organizing to be.” These ideas about the potential of healing justice practices and spaces are consistent with research on mindfulness that shows the importance of resting the mind for creativity and resilience (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2020). Organizing through a healing justice framework also supports liberatory vision by enacting the care and support that intersectional feminist activists want to see in the world (Irresistible, 2020). Transformative vision is, thus, both the foundation for and a result of healing justice approaches to social change.

Transformative vision connects past and future through actions in the present that seek radical transformation. Black Visions Collective, based in Minnesota, centers transformative vision within their organizational values, defining vision as “Casting forward the dreams of our Black radical Ancestors we weave them with the imaginations of future generations. From our visions, we grow Black futurities that are healing and liberated.” Speaking of efforts to defund the police in Minnesota, Rose Brewer explains, “We need to imagine something beyond piecemeal changes. If we defend the community, if people are fed, if we have access to education, if we feel safe, that’s a transformative vision. That will lead to a different world” (in Tarala, 2020). Indeed, we can, along with Ransby, view BLMM/M4BL’s holistic policy initiatives, which seek to promote sustainable, healthy communities without policing and prisons, as evidence that “Black liberation movements over time and in this moment are also the hopeful visionary movements for the entire planet, not just for Black people” (in Bourne, 2020, p. 17).

Healing is an essential part of liberation, and taking time to focus on the vision of transformation is part of healing justice work. SONG has vision workshops in which they ask members to consider their relationships with “LAND / BODY / WORK / SPIRIT” and each other as part of developing a collective vision “to offer concrete ways in which we envision our lives, but also hold ourselves accountable for the whole of our ideology.” brown (2019) connects broad vision with love, saying, “what we need right now is a radical, global love that grows from deep within us to encompass all life” (p. 61). Such a radical love, so different from what most of us learn by growing up in a culture with stark inequalities and systemic oppression, requires constant and conscious effort and practice. As part of healing justice practice, Ransby (2018) locates Black Feminist Futures’ “visioning salons,” which seek “to imagine alternative futures and create space for Black joy and healing amid a movement born of pain and trauma” (p. 90). Black Visions Collective also emphasizes the importance of joy—“the heart of how we transform, build Black power, and stay true to our visions.” Creating spaces for visioning and working to create a culture of care, intersectional feminist activists support the imagination, love, and joy required to maintain and enact their transformative vision.

Conclusion

Visioning salons, healing justice spaces, and incorporating spiritual and healing practices into the work of organizing and everyday life are all part of how intersectional activists are “creating a culture of care” (Carruthers, 2018, p. 73-4) in order to work for change without reproducing the dynamics of oppression. By building care into the work and creating caring communities, intersectional feminist organizers work to create communities that enact radical love for all by centering the bodies and experiences of those affected by multiple oppressions and by accepting people as flawed, in need of healing, and capable of working with others for collective healing and liberation. Ai-Jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers Alliance says of their healing justice work, which includes trauma-informed leadership programs and practices to help people connect and stay centered, “it’s made all the difference in our ability to be powerful together” (in Haines, 2019, p. xi).

In order to act in alignment with our values and relate to others with deep acceptance—even amidst conflict and stress—we need expanded capacity. Social movements have seen so much splintering and burnout from divisiveness that comes from deliberate provocation (COINTELPRO, surveillance and criminalization of activism, foreign bots, etc.) and/or activists’ own habits and prejudices. Resisting the state is difficult, oftentimes dangerous work that requires a long-term commitment to upholding our core values. Healing justice works to develop activists’ wisdom, connections, and ways of communicating so that movements are not derailed, stagnated, or destroyed by difference and conflict.

The split between depoliticized healing spaces and movements with no resources for healing perpetuates oppression (Generative Somatics, 2018). From this recognition, passed down through generations of intersectional feminists, 21st century activists are healing generational trauma through participation in movement work and through intentionally incorporating healing in activist spaces. Speaking out against violence and oppression works at both individual and community levels to acknowledge that racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression are not acceptable, to heal individually and collectively, and to change the discourse. Building healing practices into protests is important for making those actions effective and keeping people energized and committed to the work and to each other. By helping people develop trust in themselves and each other, healing justice enables intersectional feminist activism that can be deeply transformative for its participants and for social systems. Through healing justice, activists center the material and metaphysical needs of those caught in the gaps between earlier movements, showing what intersectional feminism looks like in praxis.

Recommendations for Researchers

There is little research done on intersectional feminist activism and the integration of well-being into social movement spaces, despite its lengthy presence there. Indeed, much of the academic work on intersectionality focuses on its analytical usefulness, rather than how intersectionality is practiced, and much of the discourse on well-being overlooks how inequality, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of oppression affect physical, mental, and spiritual health. There is much in this subject area ripe for researchers across disciplines, particularly in community health, conflict analysis and resolution, social movement studies, history, philosophy, economics and policy studies, women, gender, and sexuality studies, race and ethnic studies, LGBTQ studies, and disability studies.

Those of us in the academy who incorporate intersectionality into our work can focus more on studying and integrating the healing aspects along with the analytical tools of

intersectional feminism. Researchers focused on health and well-being practices can do more to understand how systemic oppression affects health and to integrate decolonizing feminist language and practices into interventions and assessments.

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