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“WE’RE PAID TO TAKE CARE OF THE MOVEMENT. THE MOVEMENT AIN’T PAID TO  
TAKE CARE OF US”: THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGES OF WORKPLACE  
STRATEGIES OF BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

of the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

The University of Mississippi

by

Jazmine Walker

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## ABSTRACT

Reproductive justice is a social justice movement based on black feminist principles that is also a direct response to women of color's invisibility within white mainstream feminist organizations and workplaces. This ethnographic case study of WomenUnited, a woman of color reproductive justice organization, demonstrates that a key difference between black feminist and white feminist workplace cultures is black workplace's centralization of and emphasis on their intersectional identities in their definitions of work and the ways they enact emotional labor. I find that identity within black feminist workplaces is managed differently as the organizations: (1) embrace alternative standards of beauty through dress and presentation of self; (2) create a safe work environment where the stress of racialized and gendered impression management is limited; and (3) accept care and emotional labor as integral parts of their work. However, emotional suppression similar to mainstream organizations is still necessary in order to combat exogenous stereotypes about black women and their perceived inefficiency. These perceptions adversely impact the marketability and funding sources for WU. Though healthy emotional labor is central to the health and emotional well-being of the organization's workers, it does not fit well into foundations' and mainstream reproductive health actors' expectations for approaching reproductive health issues.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

RJ	Reproductive Justice
WU	WomenUnited
BMH	Big Mama's House
NOW	National Organization for Women
NARAL	National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The WomenUnited Reproductive Justice Collective is a coalition that aligns reproductive rights with social justice frameworks in order to champion reproductive health and sexual rights for women of color. Influenced by activism for gender equality, civil rights, and international human rights, WomenUnited was founded in 1997 with 16 organizations and currently has over 80 member and affiliate organizations and hundreds of individual members. These organizations are primarily based in the US and Puerto Rico with some links to international organizations. This network originally included larger organizations such as the National Asian Women's Health Organization as well as local organizations such as Project Azuka Women's AIDS Project, which served African American women. Later, WomenUnited added Middle Eastern/Arab American organizations, a caucus for white allies, and a caucus for men of color. These caucuses exist to support WomenUnited's primary focus of organizing around women of color's reproductive health concerns.

WomenUnited's network of organizations frames the concern around women's control of their bodies in terms of needing "reproductive justice" rather than only "reproductive health." Reproductive justice focuses on movement building, whereas reproductive rights addresses legal issues (Ross, 2004). This movement building includes "organizing women, girls, and their communities to challenge structural power inequalities" that surround control of their reproductive lives (Ross, 2004: 14). While previous white reproductive health movements have focused on legal access and individual choice, reproductive justice organizes and educates using



an intersectional analysis of structural constraints and stigmatization of female fertility and sexuality for women of color.

The reproductive justice model is also a direct response to women of color's invisibility within white mainstream feminist organizations. The foremothers of the movement sought to subvert the oppressive conditions of mainstream organizations and build a movement where issues that impact women of color could be a part of the reproductive movement's front stage. This belief led to the emergence of subcultures that resist the dominant culture of feminist organizations (Griswold, 2008). "Such subcultures and the stories they tell often reproduce social cleavages of class, ethnicity, and gender" (Griswold 2008, 139). These subcultures within the mainstream pro-choice movement led women of color to exit these movements and organizations and form their own.

Many of the founding members and board of directors of WU have taken their experiences both personally and within white feminist organization to shape the goals, vision, and organizational dynamics of WU. According to Ferree & Martin (1995), "organizational experiences can shape world views, politics, and a sense of self in relation to society... It is important not merely to see individuals as resources used by organizations... but to consider how individuals use the organizations they found or join, and how they employ the lessons learned in one group when they move to another" (p. 6). Being marginalized within these mainstream white movements often meant being marginalized within these white feminist social movement workplaces. Not only are black women leaving white feminist and white traditional labor markets, but they are creating social movement organizations whose workplace culture and identity directly counter the traditional white work environments.

Previous literature has focused on black women within white work spaces and white women working within feminist social movement organizations (McGuire, 2000; Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Tom, 1995; Acker, 1990). Few focus on how black women and other women of color create workplace culture and work dynamics that often challenge the model of traditional white workplaces and white gendered organizations. This gap forces us to ask several questions. How is black feminist organizational culture cultivated? How are the black feminist workplace cultures different from white feminist workplace cultures? How does emotional management function in a woman of color feminist organization? How does Self-Help affect employee dynamics in the organization? Is Self-Help an effective technique for accomplishing organizational goals? And how do employees reconcile their knowledge of normative rules of self presentation and emotional display in workplaces and the Self-Help expectations of an alternative work environment?

I spent eight-weeks in the summer of 2011 as an intern at WU headquarters in a large southern city. I observed and documented multiple aspects of WU workplace culture, including the manifestation of emotional labor and the practice of Self-Help, which is a process that seeks to facilitate healing through validating the lived experiences of people through group storytelling. Although WU positioned itself as a national woman of color organization, I approached and understood the work space as black as a consequence of both the demographic makeup of the organization and how the vision of the organization is mobilized. Comprised of seven African Americans, one Afro-Latina, and one Latina, 8 of the 9 people in the office identified as black. WU's location in a large metropolis with sizeable and diverse African American population makes it a ripe space for not only studying reproductive justice, but also for investigating black feminist workplaces.

This research demonstrates that black feminist organizations between white feminist and normative workplace cultures, in prior literature, is black workplace's centralization of and emphasis on their intersectional identities in their definitions of work and the ways they enact emotional labor. I find that identity within black feminist workplaces is managed differently as the organizations: (1) embrace alternative standards of beauty through dress and presentation of self; (2) create a safe work environment where the stress of racialized and gendered impression management are limited; and (3) accept care and emotional labor as integral parts of their work. However, emotional suppression similar to mainstream organizations is still necessary in order to combat exogenous stereotypes about black women and perceived inefficiency at work. These perceptions adversely impacts the marketability and funding sources for RJ organizations like WU. Though healthy emotional labor is central to the health and emotional well-being of the organization's workers and thus its overall sustainability, it does not fit well into foundations' and mainstream reproductive health actors' expectations for approaching reproductive health issues.

#### Understanding the Genesis of the RJ Movement

Access to reproductive health services includes not only the right to abortion, but the right to a broad range of reproductive health services, such as birth control and comprehensive sex education. With women being able to control their own reproduction, it is believed that sexism in the private institutions like families and public institutions like the workplace, media, and schools (Nelson, 2003). For many mainstream white organizations like National Organization for Women (NOW) and National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) saw reproductive rights and reproductive health as cornerstone of gender equality,

access to reproductive health services gives women the ability to control their bodies and their experiences with healthcare professionals.

However, reproductive health organizations face significant political challenges in meeting their goal of providing all women with equal access to reproductive health services. With anti-choice activists constructing reproductive health narrowly as access to abortion *only*, political conservatives constantly threaten to defund organizations like Planned Parenthood that provide low cost or free reproductive health resources and assistance for poor and communities of color. Limiting access to free birth control limits women's ability to exercise agency over their bodies and this has dire consequences for women's reproductive and sexual freedom.

Race and class exacerbate these consequences as poor women and women of color are negatively affected by stereotypes that cast them as welfare queens and jezebels reproducing irresponsibly or even intentionally having more children to receive increased welfare benefits. Regardless of how righteous, reasonable, or admirable their choices may be, black women continue to deal with stigma surrounding their sexual and reproductive choices. Their perceived moral depravity remains at the root of black social problems whether they choose to be mothers or not (Roberts, 1997). Many white feminists fail to recognize how perceived racial inferiority contributes to the social ills of women of color even as they are trying to escape sexism by gaining access to reproductive rights.

Because mainstream pro-choice feminist movements are comprised of mostly white-middle class women, they often skirt issues that directly affect the women of color who participate in these movements. For example, according to Jennifer Nelson (2003), the issue of sterilization caused strife when white feminists attempted to make sterilization a part of the reproductive choice discourse. Physicians would reject white middle class women's requests for

sterilization if they were young and without children. White feminist organizations like NARAL were frustrated because it further restricted women's choice to limit fertility. Yet, sterilization was more problematic for women of color simply because they were often stripped completely of their choice when many were sterilized without their knowledge or consent. The stereotyping of women of color as sexually promiscuous and too irresponsible to make their own reproductive decisions and be "good" (non-white) mothers was, and still is, the rationale for enacting and legitimizing discriminatory policies and practices. Even though choice was restricted for both white women and black women, it is clear that choice is not the only thing at work.

Additionally, pro-choice activists were concerned about the passage of *Roe vs. Wade* 1973 decision, but the passage of the Hyde Amendment, which prohibited federal funding for abortions, did not spark "large-scale response" from some of those same organizations (Silliman et al, 2004, p.30). The right to choose was the primary focus. These activists refused to acknowledge how race, class, and sexuality create differences among women's experiences and affect which experiences are considered relevant. Even when mainstream reproductive rights and women's health movements claimed to take on social injustice as it related to women's oppression, sexual agency, and body ownership, conflict stifled the possibilities of a more inclusive movement.

Reproductive justice (RJ) takes on an intersectional framework where women of color consider how race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality work to oppress women in ways that diverge from the oppression of white, middle class women. They recognize that women's interests differ and support each group as they advocate for the regulation of their fertility, bodies, and sexuality, without the threat of stigmatization. These issues involve more than just reproductive agency. The women of color reproductive justice framework lends itself to issues

such as unemployment, homelessness, chemical addiction, sexual violence, affordable and safe health care, the right to or not to parent, and providing culturally relevant information about sexuality (Shende, 1997). It is a framework that addresses problems outside wombs and within communities and serves as an alternative framework to the existing white middle class frameworks about reproduction. There is agency in “choice,” but it is also a marker of the constraints in which women of color navigate their reproductive lives and organizing.

### A Movement on the Margins

Reproductive justice was founded upon black feminist principles because traditional feminism does not address the multiple oppressions that women of color face. A separate women of color feminist movement was necessary. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) speaks to the unique space inhabited by black female activists because of their position within the matrix of domination. She writes:

Domination encompasses structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. These domains constitute specific sites where oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation mutually construct another. Understanding the complexity of Black women’s activism requires understanding not only the need to address more than one form of oppression, but the significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized (Collins, 2000, 203).

Despite black women escaping their marginalized status in the mainstream reproductive health movement, there remains a dominant narrative to addressing reproductive health issues, and that still ignores the multifaceted needs of women of color. WomenUnited celebrates multiple identities and histories because it sees reproductive rights as more than just an issue of gender inequality but a result of multiple simultaneous, intersecting oppressions.

RJ remains a movement on the margins because it is a social movement outside of the narrative of reproductive health that commonly addresses forms of oppression singularly. Within

traditional resource mobilization models, “demarcated outcomes that can be evaluated in terms of tangible gains” is a proponent of “successful” social movement (Jenkins, 1983, 529). RJ’s framework of addressing multiple forms of oppression and taking on an intersectional analysis toward collective action makes outcomes seem less tangible and less appealing than its mainstream counterparts. This lack of tangible outcomes makes mobilizing resources and gaining funding difficult.

The marginalization of black women in mainstream reproductive health movements and organizations parallels the marginalization of black women in the workplace. Like their experiences within white feminist movements, black women experience isolation, perceptions of racial inferiority, and institutional invisibility within the workplace that adversely impacts social mobility. A reproductive justice organization like WU is aware of this marginalization in white feminist organizations and normative work environments so they attempt to create a workplace environment that subverts both forms of marginalization.

#### Working the Movement: RJ in the Workplace

Though WU is a social movement organization, this research explores the everyday workplace dynamics that make reproductive justice happen. RJ is just part of what WU does. Daily obligations such as payroll, accounting, staffing, and defining and maintaining organizational infrastructure happening while staff do tasks that directly impact movement activity. This work includes: organizing conferences, national marches and protests, advocating for policy change and community outreach. Movement activities and programs cannot happen without administrative management such as daily correspondence with co-facilitators and participants, organizing travel logistics, writing memorandums, etc. Daily work tasks do not

always impact advocacy directly, but they are vital for maintaining the formal structure that moves the organization's goals forward. It is through these daily tasks that workplace dynamics and workplace cultures emerge.

### Race, Gender, and Workplace Cultures

Organizational culture depends on the processes and meanings that organizational members collectively accept and transmit through symbols and interactions (Pettigrew, 1979; Redskin and Padavic, 1995). Workplace cultures are constructed based on how organizational culture in relation to occupations within organizations. According to Kirsten Dellinger (2002), workplace culture is “a complex combination of both occupational culture (the ideologies and norms emerging from the job workers do) and organizational culture (the ideologies and norms emerging from the organization where workers do that job)” (4).

Dominant workplace environments typically are based on an idea of “functioning efficiently” where the central duties of the worker are to comply with his (gender neutrality does not exist) organization (Acker, 1995). Workers, preferably male, are expected to be rational and objective with little to no interferences from his personal life and no expression of emotions (Acker, 1995; Acker 1990). However, emotions are acceptable as long as they adhere to implicit organizational rules.

Hochschild (1983) says that emotional labor involves the induction or suppression of feeling in order to sustain an outward appearance that produces in others a sense of being cared for in a safe place. Hochschild's emotional labor points to ways in which new types of paid work and employer demands on women have commodified and commercialized caring labor, with expectations that women will only induce their emotions to maximize customer satisfaction and service delivery often conjured through feeling rules. Feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) are



socially accepted norms that dictate acceptable emotional responses for specific social interactions and environments. Even though feeling rules exist within the space to suppress emotional expression, they are also gendered, which means that the expression of anger by women has deviant connotations, in contrast to their male counterparts, where anger is available (Hochschild, 1983, Hercus. 1999). However, feminist organizations often subvert these feeling rules and emotions like anger in order to use them as motivation for collective action (Hercus, 1999).

A feminist organization is defined as a collective body that embraces non-hierarchical, group decision-making, while centralizing sexuality and emotions through empowerment among members with a political agenda that seeks to end the multiple oppressions of women (Ferree & Martin, 1995). They are pro-woman, often political, and socially transformational (Freeman 1979) with a formal legal status and structure that follows feminist ideology and goals that produces feminist outcomes (Martin, 1990). Feminist organizations often seek to demonstrate egalitarian workspaces that would exemplify non-patriarchal working relationships (Acker, 1990; Martin 1990) often by centralizing emotions and valuing emotional labor of women in the workplace in order to displace the model of the disembodied bureaucrat.

This definition, however, becomes hard to achieve when structural and cultural forces such as racism, sexism, and classism is still experienced by members and organizational staff, thereby threatening feminist organizations' legitimacy and effectiveness. Despite their attempts to subvert bureaucratic workplace cultures that emphasize efficiency while maintaining systems of inequality, feminist organizations are still subject to the pressures that maintain the dominant culture (Acker, 1995), especially when many feminist organizations still universalize "women's issues." Universalizing these issues within these organizations implicitly marginalize the women

of color working in them. Therefore, “standard categories of feminist organizations...applied to Black women’s historical experiences [are] simply inadequate”(Barnett, 1995, 216). The traditional feminist framework fails to consider how the intersections of racism and classism frame the experiences of black women (Crenshaw, 1995).

Though black feminism organizations share many commonalities with white feminist organizations, black feminist organizations are not white feminist organizations in blackface. According to Patricia Hill Collins (1997), “Inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women” (13). Intersectionality is a core component of black feminism and transcends into black feminist organizations. Black feminist organizations seek to eradicate racial and gender discrimination by articulating their race, gender, and class identities as interconnected (Springer, 2005) while using emotional labor to create unique workplaces that honors the value of their lives.

Black feminist organizations, however, are not immune to structural constraints and can take on characteristics of normative workplace environments. In a climate where their institutional definitions of self directly conflict with a political climate that aims to suppress political speech and visibility of black women, black feminist organizations are threatening (Collins, 2000). Controlling images make these organizations perpetually susceptible to white perceptions and domination that frame these organizations as separatist, but also ineffective and useless. These external pressures cause black feminist organizations to take on normative workplace environmental characteristics in order to prove their legitimacy.

## Black Women in the Workplace

Organizations utilize different methods and processes to achieve its goals, but often reproduce class, gender and racial inequalities (Acker, 2006). One of the ways these inequalities are reproduced is through group interactional processes. Interaction requires anticipating and defining who people are in particular situations. This often means defining yourself and others in direct contrast to something else in order to categorize difference and/or similarities from self (Ridgeway, 1997; Turner, 1987). People utilize symbolic boundaries to make sense of their daily interactions (Goffman, 1959).

According to Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002), "Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, and even space and time" (168). In order to portray themselves positively, social groups differentiate themselves from each other through in-group/out-group comparisons, creating what seem like inherent differences (Taifel & Turner, 1985). Symbolic boundaries generate classifications by race and gender through stereotyping and perceived group boundaries (Fiske, 1998; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). These symbolic boundaries create racial frames and maintain systemic racism through symbolic violence, which Pierre Bourdieu (2001) defines as a "gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition..." (p.2) It is a form of social or cultural domination that seems so natural that it is unperceivable to the people experiencing it. However, symbolic violence is not as hard to detect as Bourdieu asserts. Marginalized people recognize modes of domination and resist them.

Women of color within organizations often counter these oppressive and dominant cultures in their work environments. According to Adia Harvey Wingfield (2008), racial frames used by whites to create and rationalize racial hierarchies are combated by black counterframes. She writes,

...black counterframes often incorporate close scrutiny of institutional structures that are used within dominant racial frames to legitimize inequality. Thus blacks may adopt a counterframe that allows them to critique messages of black inequality by focusing on the ways various institutions (media, schools, labor markets) facilitate blacks' unequal position in society (2008, 6).

WU utilizes counterframes to deconstruct symbolic boundaries that often categorize women of color as inherently different. Drawing upon prior experiences in white workplaces, these black women are able to create hospitable environments that legitimize their status as members of the in-group.

Wingfield argues that black women do not only have to counter systemic racism but also systemic gendered racism. Throughout history, racial ideologies were formed and perpetuated to justify the economic exploitation of black people and other minority groups. The tenets of systemic gendered racism argue that the oppressive nature of these institutions is structured by racist perceptions along gender roles. Race and gender are linked when observing negative stereotypes or controlling images. For Wingfield, understanding systemic gendered racism helps in understanding the entrepreneurial motives, decisions, and outcomes of racial groups in America. Recognizing systemic racism also helps us understand the cleavage from white feminist organizations and the founding of women of color feminist organizations. Wingfield's theory of systemic gendered racism is applicable to white feminist reproductive choice organizations because women of color are still subjected to racist and sexist stereotypes through the adamant denial of their existence as thinking and working partners within organizations like

Planned Parenthood rather than mere beneficiaries of their services. Despite being in “feminist spaces,” their activism was hindered because of the emotional upheaval taking place within these organizations.

Black professional women commonly report being forced to transform themselves within the workplace, a concept that has been called “dissemblance” by Darlene Clark Hine (1989) and “shifting” by Charisse Jones & Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2004). Black women feel judged based on their dress and communication skills and rely on racialized and gendered impression management in order to cope within these unwelcoming environments. Durr & Wingfield write, “The nature of social relationships in the office is dictated by historical customs, which have been traditionally a white male citadel” (2011, 558). Men created and maintain the standards of acceptable behavior, communication, skin color, style, and dress within the workplace, which negatively impacts on women of color who fail to “fit into gendered and racialized norms of these environments” (558). Organizations are not the gender-neutral spaces they claim to be (Acker, 1990; Durr & Wingfield, 2011); they perpetuate the unspoken rules of interaction that makes gender inequality possible (McGuire, 2000). These notions are complicated by race. Not only do women of color face the likely possibility of dead-end jobs and being tokenized, they must conform to mainstream standards of appearance and conversational content. Ultimately, this engenders weariness about their performative interactions with white colleagues that can produce stress and dissatisfaction.

In response to sexualized stereotypes and subtle racism, many women are leaving the formal labor market, as demonstrated by Forbes’ (2010) study on black women within formal work organizations. Forbes writes,

This commodification likely extends to contemporary organizations in which dominant social and organizational discourses about women are rooted in

patriarchal ideologies that contribute to the process of (con)scripting. (Con)scripting is the process of collectively writing or treating Black women as commodities and sexual beings.... Black women are both visible (physically and sexually) and invisible (organizationally, intellectually, and professionally (2010, 579).

These ideas make black women more susceptible to sexual harassment at higher rates than other ethnic groups (Forbes, 2010). Being hypersexualized and invisible, while experiencing the glass ceiling within traditional workplaces, makes alternative and informal entrepreneurial economies more attractive. By exiting these traditional white work environments, black women resist by refusing not to participate in them.

I contextualize WomenUnited as a response to that exodus. Not only are black women leaving the formal labor market and entering entrepreneurial ventures or the non-profit sector, but they are creating social movement organizations whose workplace culture and identity directly counter the traditional white male frame. In doing this, the creation of new symbolic boundaries and emotional labor in these social movement workspaces allow for higher levels of self-worth. My research is important because it demonstrates a different perspective of how black women and other women of color counter and resist hostile work environments by simply creating not only entrepreneurial spaces, but also their social movement organizations spaces.

Racism and oppression in past movements, workplaces, and their communities, contribute to WomenUnited's strategic choice to create a counter feminist organization workplace environment. WomenUnited acknowledges that women of color's marginalization within the mainstream pro-choice movement directly influence how it frames its mission, purpose, theoretical approach, and workplace culture. In particular, WU recognizes the role this broader marginalization plays in the movement and how it affects how its workers enact emotional labor.

In thinking about counterframing as a means to constructing a women of color feminist organization, this research analyzes the organizational culture of WomenUnited, where women of color, in response to multiple oppressions, seek to enhance social relationships within the movement and increase worker morale, loyalty, and efficiency. First, I present an ethnographic analysis of day-to-day tasks and workplace culture at WomenUnited. I detail my work as an intern, my integration, and navigation of the workspace. Then, I will introduce and set the ground rules of Self-Help within the organization. Self-Help is a framework used within WomenUnited in order to perform the multifaceted emotional labor necessary to promote organizational goals in the face of limited financial and social resources. Lastly, I will investigate the usefulness of Self-Help and think about the broader implications of emotional management and how a black feminist organization challenges and reaffirms workplace norms. Additionally, I highlight how patterns of behavior that decrease worker morale, (e.g., rigid work schedules, increased workloads without increased pay) still emerge in a feminist organization that defines itself as an alternative to normative work environments.

Through this research, I demonstrate how workplace cultures are constructed across race and gender where counterframing serves as a significant part of workplace culture to subvert normative workplace environments. These women simultaneously draw upon normative workplace strategies as they are confronted with everyday challenges like organizational survival and responding to exogenous racist and sexist pressures.

There is also the notion of being able to “bring their whole selves” into their work, where identity suppression is not a strategy for workplace survival and it is evident they do this through dress, interaction and relationship dynamics, and also through Self-Help. Ultimately, I endeavor

to think about black women's relationship to work when they choose not to work in a traditional and hostile environment.



## II. METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic case study of WomenUnited, which is located in a southern metropolis. It primarily took place at the WomenUnited's national office, affectionately referred to as "Big Mama's House" by employees, during an eight week period over the summer of 2011. I used multiple methods to collect the data for this study, including seven in-depth interviews, participant observation, and archival research. I chose WomenUnited for this case study because it is the flagship reproductive justice organization in the South. Its unique intersectional framework to approaching social movements initially attracted me, but upon arrival, it became clear that the organization was atypical—all women and all black with one Latina.

I gained a position as an unpaid intern, but living costs and expenses were defrayed by a grant from The University of Mississippi. During the internship, I ran occasional errands for staff, such as picking up lunch orders and picking up shipping supplies from the post office. I filed paperwork, placed postage on a number of mailings sent to its members, and typed notes from training sessions, and meetings with organizational partners. I also helped WU staff prepare for their national conference by editing plenary overviews, preparing conference information packets and bags, and confirming travel arrangements for invited guests and speakers. The national conference was a four-day event that included workshops and plenary sessions on topics such as birth control, senior sexuality, STDs, gynecological health and wellness, erotica, militarism, and youth sexuality through a reproductive justice lens.

I interviewed seven of WomenUnited's nine employees, with interviews ranging in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours. I observed and took notes during organizational bi-weekly

meetings, reproductive justice meetings, and workdays. In between daily tasks, my field notes consisted of observations about dress, casual conversations between employees, descriptions of the space itself, and most notably, the utilization of Self-Help.

### III. RESULTS

Welcome to WomenUnited

Big Mama's House (BMH) is situated in a poor and racially segregated neighborhood. Though it is 100 years old, it was remodeled as an historic property and became the home of WomenUnited in 2007. BMH is a two story house with green paneling that is equipped with security bars on the windows and doors. WomenUnited consists of three main offices, which two or three employees share, a conference room, a kitchen, a small corridor equipped with a filing cabinet, fax, and printer, and one office for the executive director. It is an unassuming building that allows them to be largely unnoticed by passersby, despite being vanguard of the RJ movement. All visitors must ring the doorbell and announce themselves before they are let in.

Upon entering Big Mama's House, on my first day, I was greeted with a hug and kiss on the cheek from one of the staff members, CeeCee, and received one almost every day, thereafter. I was shocked mainly because I had not fully considered what kind of work environment I was going into. Entering a workspace on the first day and being shown affection was jarring because I assumed that affection (outside of the occasional handshake) does not belong in the workplace. However, showing physical affection and emotional intimacy felt natural after a few weeks at WomensUnited. Not everyone in the office was as affectionate as CeeCee, but there was emotional intimacy among staffers where they would openly talk about their insecurities and personal challenges while others provided emotional support. This affection gave meaning to the name "Big Mama's House;" it is a space meant to foster nurturing and warmth.

The door locked behind me, indicating that I was in a safe space both figuratively and literally, emotionally and physically. But that safety was only for those who had business or belonged there. There was a sizeable homeless population in the neighborhood in which BHM was situated and petty theft would happen on occasion. Having been robbed a year prior, the women of WU would screen unannounced visitors before welcoming them into the house. However, the definition of a potential intruder was more nuanced than someone stealing property. WU had to protect themselves from anti-choice zealots. There were two anti-choice billboards on the same street as BMH that targeted black communities, each within walking distance of one another and the office. Each read, “The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment Freed Us, Abortion Enslaves Us,” to imply that black women exercising their right to reproductive freedom was somehow tied to this black community’s lack of upward mobility. Within the confines of BHM, there was a sense of being safe from whiteness and from the microaggressions represented by these billboards, which culminated in being safe from physical and metaphysical intrusion.

Creating safe spaces, according to Wingfield (2008), is how black women challenge systemic gendered racism. Safe spaces are where black women can affirm, cope, and resist white racial and male dominated spaces (hooks 1992; Wingfield 2008), while enhancing black women’s ability to be a part of social justice projects (Collins, 2000). Much like the salon owners in Wingfield’s work, WU is conceived as a way to escape the stresses of multiple oppressions. This is thought to be a necessary component for WU employees while they address these underlying oppressions within their daily work.

Being a part of such a close knit organization was an adjustment. Though the staff had already fostered close relationships with one another through working together, it took a little

while for most of the staff to become comfortable with me as a participant observer. It was not uncommon to laugh for hours on end about pop culture and have impromptu potluck lunches where a few staff members would coincidentally bring dishes from their homes to share. Despite feeling welcome among daily interactions, people often whispered and specifically instruct me not to write certain things down. I felt a part of the staff, but there were boundaries being drawn where my identity as a participant observer threatened the sanctity of this safe space. However, I was welcome to the staff and received a nickname within the first week—Mississippi Molasses. But after a few weeks, staff were able to reconcile my role as an intern and participant observer, and we have built such a strong rapport that I talk to at least one of the staff once a month.

By the end of my first day, I noticed that despite identifying as a “woman of color” organization, the staff was predominately black. And by the end of the first week, I noticed that many of the RJ issues, outside of a meeting with outside partners, centered black women and catered to black women in the South. Because WU stressed bringing your own experiences to the table, and the majority of the women at the table were black women, the conversations would center black women’s issues, specifically around the billboards. When I asked the executive director Shirley about this, she answered,

[WomenUnited] is not a black organization. That’s one of those stereotypes of [WomenUnited]. We’re a women of color organization led by black women. And people always assume that when we say the term “women of color” we only mean African-Americans, which is absolutely not true. I don’t think that-, I think [WomenUnited] should always represent the voices of indigenous and women of color because we try to have them at the table representing themselves in their own voices. Our job isn’t to represent the voices; our job is to organization the voices for people to speak up for themselves.

Shirley acknowledges that WU “should” represent the other women of color’s issues, but her emphasis on “try[ing]” to have them represent themselves implies that they are not always successful. Their goal to be a woman of color organization that represents a broad range of woman of color issues is complicated by the lack of staff to reflect the voices they seek to amplify. Further, WU’s location in the South impacts its ability to attract a pool of racially and ethnically diverse applicants as Shirley explains,

What I find in the South, in general...is that my hiring pool for non-black women is very small. Very, very small. Because there’s just a lack of women of color that aren’t black or Latina doing this work in the South... And so every time we have a job opening I really, really work to diversify the staff. But I mean I’ve even hired a white woman in the past. But it is very, very hard to find an Asian American, or an indigenous woman, or an Arab American, a Middle Eastern woman, here, in [the South], or nationally who would relocate to [the South].

Shirley makes an interesting point about how the organization is less attractive to other women of color in the nation because of the possibility of being isolated. RJ typically happens within large, metropolitan cities, like Washington, DC, Oakland, and New York City. These cities are distinguished for having a history of housing diverse immigrant populations. A growing southern metropolis, however, may not seem appealing because of the black-white legacy, despite multiple groups moving and living there. The South is attracting diverse racial groups, but perceptions of it being overwhelmingly white remain salient. This “Imagined South” silences alternative Southern identities, while protecting white ones, so that alternative Souths are forgotten (McPherson, 2003).

While I think conversations around place and its symbolic meanings is important, being isolated within a black organization has negative connotations. There are already tensions among other women of color and black women within RJ and Shirley briefly points this out when she says, “...[Black women] are constantly told that [we] are too angry, we intimidate

other women of color, we dominate them, we terrify them...” With WU happening within the context of RJ, these attitudes would translate into other women of color not wanting to be isolated in a black dominated space. Similar to the perceptions of white dominant groups, other women of color perceive black safe spaces as “separatist” or “anti-democratic” (Collins, 2000). Women of color are just as likely to internalize anti-black racism and stereotypes about black women just as white people do (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Those attitudes often disparage the significance of an organization like WU because of the underlying notions about the deviance and inferiority of the black women leading and working there. WU is still susceptible to these stereotypes externally. This leads to internal insecurity about how WU is operating. Sunny, a program manager feels that a lack of diversity in management puts other women of color at a disadvantage. She says,

I don't know how other organizations of color handle leadership transition, leadership roles, how long you would stay in roles, whether it's on the Board or whether it's within the organization. I think if more careful and intentional consideration had been given to that piece, and how they would work through and alternate leadership styles and leadership from various cultures, I think they would have a different impact on how the organization is run...the organization is behaving as if it's a certain culture, certain ethnic culture. How that has translated is, everyone sees that. So instead of it being a Woman of Color organization, it has become an organization of one particular ethnic group.

While the geographic location impacts the nature of workplace culture due to the availability, or lack of availability, of diverse staff members, Sunny suggests that if the Board alternated the organization's leadership and was intentional about who led at specific times, the organization would look different and presumably change the attitudes of other women of color. Leadership reflecting different racial groups would shift the goals and possible programs of the organization. For example, with an Asian woman as a leader, Sunny assumes that more Asian women would be hired, and programs would possibly reflect the sensibilities of Asian women, which would

also change the organizational culture. Since WU is predominately black, it “behaves” as a black organization.

Systemic gendered racism is so salient that WU cannot fully function as a safe space. Black women still have to deal with the demands from other movement actors and abroad that reproduce stereotypes about black women’s inadequacy and inability to properly lead. Black women’s safe spaces can be compromised, but are done so because the multiple oppressions that black women face are so entrenched that even their safe spaces warrant intrusion. Despite this being one intra-movement (making it intra-organizational) tension, there are still positive impacts for the black women working in this space.

“...But Here, I Get to be Myself...”: Transitioning into a Black Feminist Space

Many of the workplace dynamics were introduced informally. I did not have an employee orientation or given an employee handbook, but I was given readings about the RJ framework, intersectionality, and book assignments like Dorothy Roberts’ *Killing the Black Body*. There was less of an emphasis on rules, like how long my lunch break should be, and more of an emphasis on understanding what RJ was. Despite being acquainted with RJ fairly quickly, I was introduced to the workplace norms just by observing and asking occasional questions, including what time and how to start my work day.

The work day would start around 10 a.m. After arriving the first day at 8 am, to find no one was there I was told by an employee when I came back at 9:30, “No one is ever here that early,” For the first few weeks, I noticed a pattern with arrivals. Three of the nine employees would arrive at 9 am. Two of those three, the deputy director and program manager, had children (one married, one divorced) and had coordinated a schedule where they could drop their



children off at summer programs, and leave around 5:00 to be with them in the evenings. The third, the administrative assistant, was trying to earn her BA and had to leave at 5:00 in order to make evening classes. The rest of the staff was not married, had no kids, and typically did not have outside obligations after work. They tended to work 10 am to 6 pm. If anyone was going to be late, they would call or text someone else in the office on their cell phone and that person's message about being tardy would be relayed by word of mouth. The executive director would come in around 11 because she, as she often would talk about, would be awake until about 3 am. She spent her nights reading, preparing conference papers, and articles. But everyone typically works 8 hours a day, sometimes more, within the office..

The work day would casually begin in one of the three main offices, where employees would gather in one of these rooms and talk about the night before, plans after work, compare natural hair care techniques, and share personal anecdotes about lovers and children. They would also start the day by complimenting one another's dress. Because there was no formal dress code, workplace attire varied widely. African garb & prints, bright colors, low cut shirts, high heels & wedges, short skirts, bandannas, relaxed fit linens, and t-shirts were common. Dellinger (2002) refers to these relationships among women in the workplace as "dorm room culture, where close relationships, sharing personal beliefs are not only welcome, but expected and a part of flattening organizational hierarchy." However, this "dorm room culture" has larger implications for black women. Upon entering the labor market, black women often alter their appearance—hair and dress as well as their conversational content (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), and are weary and hyper-vigilant about their communication skills, decorum, and emotional management (Durr & Wingfield, 2011). Black women's participation in dorm room culture is political because it facilitates positive experiences for black women at work by

counterframing white normative workplace rules. When asked about the benefits of working at WomenUnited, the communications coordinator, CeeCee responded,

I love, I mean, I get excited when I'm comin' to work. Not every day, like when I'm tired, or I've got some physical thing happening or whatever, or emotional whatever, but that's different. For the most part, I wake up like, "I'm going to WomenUnited!" You know, I feel pleasant, which is different, I'm not used to that, I'm used to going "oh my God, I gotta go to work, oh, my stomach hurts, oh!" you know [laughter] ...but here, I feel like I get to be myself, you know, from attire to the way that I speak.

Sarah, the policy coordinator, who had previous experience with mainstream reproductive health organizations responded,

To be able to do the work without having to dilute my experience was intriguing. I think when you work for a mainstream organization you get used to that. You get used to sort of downplaying women of color and poor women because you want to appeal to the mass audience, which is often middle class white women and so I was really intrigued about doing the work professionally... Getting paid to do something that was so close to home to me and then also doing it from the perspective of our lived experience where that guided the work was something interesting to me and I wanted to see what that was like, you know, if work can get done just as effectively and starting from that place, rather than just professional—from this other place of—a lot of your mainstream movement starts from a place of either funding or policy and then they back track and hire people they feel that can best do that without anyone adulterating the process and what {WomenUnited} bring to the table is women of color doing the work from their lived experiences and that being where you start and not necessarily worrying what the final outcome is and funders hate that shit, but it does impact how the work gets done...

Both CeeCee and Sarah are articulating how prior working experiences influence their greater appreciation for WU. Employment at WU is not hinged upon being on guard about dress, speech, or presentation of self. As Sarah points out, this is not favored by mainstream reproductive health organizations, or by the people that fund them. White organizations feel that undiluted black identities cause too much dissention in their organizational strategies, while funders feel that this approach is not objective enough to reach tangible end goals. Both, funders and

mainstream organizations, feel that black women identities pose some kind of threat and a hindrance to progress. The executive director, Shirley, a founding member of the organization, sought to actively create a workplace that challenged these notions and the nature of the work.

She recalls,

The ability to bring one's whole self to the work. In so many working environments, you have to check your personal stuff at the door and pretend to be a one-dimensional worker there for output for your paycheck. You're not allowed to actually be there as a whole human being with your good days, your bad days, your challenges, your triumphs. To me, creating as the director, national coordinator of WomenUnited, it's been very important to me to not only talk the talk of human rights, but make that part of our personnel policies, how we actually be with each other... Being a human rights violator should be the part that sucks, versus one trying to uphold and defend. And that doesn't mean we don't acknowledge and pay careful attention to human rights violations, but we have to make sure they don't steal our joy.

Forging this kind of workplace culture was deliberate, according to Shirley. Creating a workplace culture that centers identity politics is important because said identity politics are a key element to the RJ framework. Though daily work does not always move goals of RJ forward, the RJ framework influences how employees approach their work. Shirley is aware of the external pressures that the organizations faces and by being in a relative position of power, she is responsible for influencing how employees interpret themselves within WU and how they interact among each other. In the spirit of the black feminist tradition, mutual support and care is essential so that work toward social justice can be done. CeeCee calls everyone in the office "sisters." When I asked her why this was so, she responded,

I think sisterhood is when women come together and they support each other, you know, collective, on a collective vibe, lookin' out for each other...and because I'm now working in this movement, I think I've used the word 'sisters' a lot more...I do have sister friends out in the world, and I'll refer to them as sisters, you know. I like having sisters, because I feel supported, I feel safe, I feel like, "oh, man, you know, I've got family," and, so I use it kind of loosely because, I, I, I'm just identifying with it at this moment.

Through interpersonal relationships, black women are able to reaffirm and nurture each other's value and one another's "right to exist" (Collins, 2000, 102). Creating these kinds of spaces where their identities are beneficiary to work, rather than a hindrance creates positive attitudes toward work, but also among themselves. It is through these close interpersonal relationships that people within the organizations are comfortable enough to make Self-Help possible.

What is Self-Help?

Self-Help is a process used to connect the personal to the political in order to challenge structural inequalities that impact women and girls of color. The process allows people to be experts by speaking through personal experiences and having the necessary information to start thinking through systemic solutions that will not stigmatize those adversely impacted by these issues. It presents problems on the micro level to illustrate how macro level processes affect individuals.

It entails the creation of a safe space for people to discuss their own stories in groups of two or more. The counselors, or "listeners," are trained in peer counseling techniques which assist the storyteller in discharging or releasing emotions related to the story. This release of emotions can take many forms, including crying, expressing anger or joy, trembling, etc. Each person gets her own time, typically around 10 minutes. Participants can refuse to share stories, but they must utilize the time, so the person can opt to be silent during her time. This process is to help empower women and girls through acknowledging and embracing emotions that are framed in mainstream workplaces as inappropriate. Self-Help is not simply a strategy for navigating the workplace; it is also a strategy for navigating life.

The origins of Self-Help are a counterframe to the original concept of Re-evaluation Counseling or RC. RC, like Self-Help, is “a process of dialogue and active listening in which the participants work through difficult emotional issues to that they can...address their problems” where discharging emotions is also a part of the process (Silliman et al, 2004:68). However, because it was utilized in predominantly white spaces, where conversations related to racism, especially where they concerned people in the organization, were often ignored. RC was eventually modified and coined “Self-Help.” The difference between RC and Self-Help is that Self-Help became a site of working through internalized oppressions and racialized tensions that prevent people from working with others because of an inability to recognize the personhood of co-organizers while reclaiming value among themselves and within individual families, communities, and society through healing. By demystifying problems like domestic violence, rape, drug use, etc., participants are able to find solutions to challenges facing their communities.

I was introduced to a piece of Self-Help framework during my first week at WU, at the beginning of a bi-weekly staff meeting where we were asked to “check-in” before the meeting got started. While I was puzzled by this request, staff members, one by one, would spare little detail about how they were doing emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sometimes sexually. They freely shared stories about their current temperament and its causes. If one did not want to share, she would simply pass, but I later noticed that someone “passing” often meant that her issue revolved around someone else in the organization. This shed light on what was and was not appropriate for a check-in. Check-ins are typically energetic and positive. They lasted about 15 minutes and were used to open or close a meeting where other business had to take place. Although a flat tire, a broken alarm clock, or other non-work related situation were allowed to sully one’s mood. A problem with someone at WU or the organization itself usually was not

articulated during a check-in. A check-in was utilized to orient workers into the meeting space to potentially diffuse misunderstandings between co-workers that could occur because someone's temperament was misinterpreted by the group. For example, someone's silence could be misinterpreted as being indifferent to the discussion as opposed to being upset about an argument with a spouse. Though the two instances are not mutually exclusive, it gives other co-workers context for how to properly provide support for that employee as opposed to responding negatively.

Organizational conflict was not addressed during Self-Help sessions either, but they would be more somber and serious because there was more time dedicated to them. These would happen during work hours and could last anywhere from one hour to three hours, during work hours for that session. As transgressive as Self-Help is, it presents certain problems and liabilities especially because of the kind of work environment that it happens in where the self-interests of the organization is complicated by obligations that the organization has to its constituency and funders.

#### Limitations of Self-Help

Self-Help allows for the introduction of emotions into the workplace, but it is still a form of emotional management in that certain emotions and the "discharge" of certain emotions are confined to the space of the Self-Help session and among the people involved in the session. Personal feelings are elicited in order to accomplish organizational goals without interfering with day to day tasks. Because all Self-Help sessions are confidential referring to each other's sessions outside of the session is not allowed unless that person has permission from other participants. By placing constraints on emotions though explicit "feeling rules" that delineate where emotions start and end within the confines of the organization, expectations are created for

what emotions are and are not appropriate in the space (Hoschild, 1983). That means that once a session is over, employees are expected to go back to work. However, the construction of emotions is critical to social regulation and the orientation of interactions (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1998). Emotions are utilized through Self-help to create solidarity by bonding women through their mutual traumatic experiences. However, Self-Help actually limits the ranges of experiences for women of color, even perpetuating a narrow set of ideas about what experiences are vital to women of color.. Maria, Deputy Director, speaks to this idea of “normal.”

Even though I haven't had the experience myself, like I said, when I was in college, I had the experience, when I was an undergrad... There were about ten of us that were constantly together, you know, like we lived in about two or three houses... and I had a period of time where about six to eight of, you know, maybe ten women disclosed their own sexual abuse within about three months, right? I found out about all of them having their own sexual abuse experience, and that's not my experience, but it became clear to me that while we talk about, you know, one in four women will experience rape...that doesn't actually seem to me to be the case. It seems to me to be the other way around, whereas I was the one woman in eight or six or ten, I don't know, however many, there were that didn't have that experience...the normal wasn't my experience. Normal was their experience, and that's a problem. That's “normal.” And so yeah, I mean I feel dedicated to that, and to me, that's about healing in the communities, you know we're suffering from historical trauma that causes our communities to commit...to commit these kinds of abuses and for the community at large to not want to talk about it and that makes for unhealthy environments for children.

While exercising compassion for her friends, Maria gives their experiences validity by disqualifying her own. Instead of acknowledging the experiences of women of color as varied and multi-faceted, struggle becomes synonymous with “authenticity” and may create conflict. When asked if conflict arises between people who have traumatic experiences and people who do not, Sunny responds,

Yes, I do. I believe, again, even if it's unconscious, there are assumptions and biases that are held on. If I have an experience and you didn't, that I'm better prepared for the movement, or I make a better activist in the movement than you do. I just-I disagree, because I think there are people who had traumatic

experiences, but that's not what they-that doesn't define who they are, and they don't have to use that to be a great activist...

Sunny is expressing that a certain kind of traumatic experience is needed to be articulated. If people do not have them, there is an implicit understanding that their narrative does not fit into the discourse for eradicating the historical traumas that Maria is talking about. Further, Sunny is articulating that even when women have those experiences, they are faced with a form of symbolic violence where their activist identity is primarily defined by that trauma, as opposed to other qualities that they may have. And they may feel pressured to cling to that particular part of that identity in order to be respected as a "great activist."

Self-Help does not resolve people's outside issues, and it's unclear how "healing" impacts worker morale. When asked about challenges of working at WU, Executive Director Shirley says,

The fact that people, despite all of our great effort, people still bring their issues and isms to the table, with which we could easily brutalize each other. The first step of dealing with internalized oppression is that people strike out at the people closest and most accessible to them. Not the people who made them feel bad, but the people who are accessible to them. They actually transfer their anger at some remembered oppression to the accessible person. And so since I'm at the top, I tend to get a lot of what I call the 'sister sucker punches...' It can be very complicated and that's the part of the job I most dislike. Because I'm really focused on ideas, not emotional management. My job is to try to keep people in integrity with a paycheck. That's what the board expects of me. And I like that expectation. I chose this, so I'm not crying victim or anything. But sometimes people think that I'm supposed to be their emotional caretaker when I'm actually the caretaker of the institution, and they're supposed to serve WomenUnited. WomenUnited is not supposed to serve them...

Though Self-Help has its benefits, it does not eradicate the damage that these women bring with them from prior work experiences and troubles within their personal lives. Self-Help can also be a place to increase tensions between employees and employers, mainly because Self-Help is limited to addressing external personal issues, as opposed to internal organizational issues.



Shirley reinforces the separation of individuals' work identity and their personal identity. Self-Help implicitly creates boundaries for where it is appropriate to utilize "personal trauma" and where it is inappropriate and has little value. Though Self-Help, ideally, creates an egalitarian environment for employees, responsibilities that Shirley has to the Board disallow her from interrogating how her actions, or even the board's actions, may trigger these women to continue to "bring their issues" to work. Instead, she expects them to suppress those emotions, similar to bosses in normative work environments, so that they can do the work that earns them a paycheck.

Because an organization is feminist does not mean people are paid for the emotional labor they perform; tangible results are still the goal. Shirley continues,

... We're paid to take care of the movement. The movement ain't paid to take care of us. That's the deal you cut when you accept a job with the non-profit world. You're privileged to get a paycheck to take care of others; not to have others take care of you. And so that can be confusing to people because we have the Self-Help ethos, where you are supposed to get to the system so your sisters can take care of self. But at the same time, that's not why you're getting a paycheck. You're not getting paid to take care of yourself. And people get confused about that sometimes.

Much like the labor conducted by women in the home, being nurturing and caring is naturalized and required (Messing, 1997). Structural processes are still gendered, and despite Shirley's preference for ideas, a masculine preference, she is still faced with doing care work that is usually regulated to women. And in the tradition of female dominated care labor, both paid and unpaid, women must be holistically devoted to others and substantially less attention to themselves (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010). Even more notable is her attention to why they are paid without mention of who puts these kinds of implicit demands in order to be paid. She is saying that when working in a non-profit setting that relies on certain kinds of donors, you must adhere to their agenda(s). That agenda, as Shirley implies, means that funders are not interested

in the well-being of its employees, but are literally invested into employees securing the well-being of the communities they work for.

Within the non-profit sector, funding levels are lower and less predictable and come with outcome reporting requirements (Miller, 1998). Emotional labor is not a part of outcome, nor does it have a place in outcome reporting. According to Kosy & MacEachen (2010), “Expectations that funders impose on [non-profit organizations] that are designed to render the work accountable often fail to recognize the workers [emotional] labor and its important contribution to organizational sustainability and effective service delivery” (365). When Sarah was asked about the challenges of working at WU, she replied,

...challenging mastering all the oppressions that everyone has while honoring who they are at the table and really bring people together working past that to get to the business of creating RJ for women of color. So, a lot of times, I go to staff meetings or [board] meetings where it feels like a 3-day self help session because people are trying to unpack the baggage while trying to think through strategies for building the organization and the movement and I find that incredibly frustrating because in my mind, they need to be separate conversations. If you are going to be doing self help and do the therapy so that you can be clear enough to focus on the work, I feel that needs to be separate and it be given its due so people can process Building an organization is very different from building a movement and often times that’s conflated and so you end up having people—in many instances you end up starting by asking a very big question at the very beginning and starting off a meeting where people have only agree to sit there for 6 hours or 12 hours, asking very big questions [while] there is immediate issues to maintain a sustainable organization that need to be answered and all of that gets pushed to the back because we are sitting here asking these lofty...kinds of questions. While it may be answering a question about building a movement, it’s not necessarily supporting the action of keeping the doors of the organization open and I find that very frustrating.

Sarah frames Self-Help as antithetical to work. She recognizes that the focus on validating experiences through Self-Help has dire consequences for the sustainability of the organization. Self-Help undermines the perceived effectiveness of the organization and does little to meet their obligations to continue to receive the funding necessary to keep their doors open. Though the

women are able to achieve their goal of subverting the culture of silence among women of color, these conversations do not help the organization reach a particular “bottom-line” that will satisfy funders. When asked about the goals for the organization CeeCee responded,

...a goal is to simply survive, you know, to make sure that the organization’s doors are still open, you know...It’s a, to me, it’s a big goal right now, which is a flexible goal, because as the economy changes and funding changes, that situation will change as well, but I can see that as a major goal right now, just to simply survive what’s happening out here environmentally and economically and, you know, socially, making sure that people see our relevance, that’s a major goal. [laughter]

If survival is a goal of the organization and staffers are “not paid to care for [themselves],” then the Self-Help model does not help WomenUnited to achieve that particular goal. Additionally, because of the work that WU does, Self-Help often is an after-thought for many of the organization’s staff. Maria says,

I think the most difficult aspect of being part of this organization is while we want to really talk about, well I think we really want to integrate the concept of healing the healer, I think a lot of people don’t know how to do that. We have people that have learned to do the work by just working non-stop, and not taking care of ourselves, and not being in healthy relationships with each other, either outside of work, inside of work, and we do have some people that, no I won’t say some people. I think everyone is committed to the idea or, you know, is committed to the idea of taking care of ourselves because we are a part of the communities that we’re “serving” or working for or working with, but I think that there’s always a sense of urgency, and that makes sense, right? It makes sense if we’re talking about, you know, wanting to teach women and girls how to protect themselves, there is a sense of urgency because women are dying every day, right, from violations, from HIV and AIDS, from childbirth, from, you know, all kinds of things. So there is urgency, but what are we doing to ourselves in the process of doing the work in that way? So I think being healthy in the movement is one of the biggest challenges.

Having to meet administrative obligations while advocating for policy change, and applying for potential foundation money can make self care and emotional health less important. People are having a hard time reconciling their obligations of caring for one another because there is an on-going pressure to be efficient. The employees are committed to the ideas of RJ where self-care is

integral for making the work in their communities more meaningful, but their service to their funding obligations must come first. Without funding, they cannot do any of the work they seek to do. This means they must regulate how much of themselves they can really bring into the work.

In this way, WU mirrors normative work environments because emotional management is required in order to be efficient when addressing the many intersecting issues that they seek to address. WU must incorporate a more pragmatic approach to be in the running for competitive funding, which is antithetical to many of RJ's founding principles. Despite attempting to construct an unconventional environment where black women and women of color have value, this principle becomes mostly relegated to the women that do not work there. If the workers do find satisfaction from their participation in WU it is primarily up to employees assert their value by creating spaces where "WomenUnited can serve them" in opposition to their obligations to solely "serve WomenUnited."

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The experiences of black women in workplaces vary and continuing to investigate how they resist oppressive environments by creating their own is crucial. These experiences are distinct workplace cultures that need to be investigated. They are unique in that their very existence combats the oppression and marginalization that members have experienced inside reproductive health movements while simultaneously attempting to combat it in the outside world. Black feminist organizations are cultivated intentionally by taking on issues that center black women while also challenging white organizations and working environments. Though black women are no longer forced to transform their physical appearance, dress, and speech while in a black feminist space, those prior experiences shape how black women experience the black feminist workplace they inhabit. The experiences within predominately white workplaces are used to counterframe traditional work environments so that they can create their own safe spaces. By creating safe spaces, black women are symbolically eradicating systemic gendered racism. They are able to accentuate their intersectional identities and emotions through the formation of work spaces where black women are the in-group.

Similar to traditional feminist organizations, emotions have value and are central to the lived experiences of people in black feminist organizations, even within the workplace. However, emotions within WU are used as a strategy to combat stereotypes of black women being deviant and inferior. Though practices like Self-Help are enacted to empower women and create healing spaces, WU is still primarily considered a place for work. In an organization that depends primarily on foundational funding, this kind of emotional labor does not produce

tangible results that can be marketed as a “success.” Thus institutionalizing a space for work and healing further stigmatizes their identities and activism, which jeopardizes their potential for funding.

These dynamics reproduce similar patterns of power as in normative workplace cultures and emotional labor is undervalued and remains uncompensated. WU limits its use of Self-Help, but still utilizes it as a form of emotional management. There are still informal rules or “feeling rules” in place that dictate how often and what emotions can be decompressed as well as where complaints about the organization can take place. This is because emotional management must be used to insure that WU is meeting the basic organizational goal of survival.

WU’s responsibility to prove its relevance to funders and mainstream reproductive health organizations, while being perceived as a black organization among other women of color, causes them to take on many normative workplace characteristics. While quietly managing the emotions of its employees, WU also limits employee flexibility and requires workers to be inside of the office 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, while allowing workers to stagger their schedule so that it better accommodates their other obligations.

Self-Help has the potential affect organizations in that it could help foster “safe” spaces among employees, as long as said safety is not just for the people who create them. Safe spaces create symbolic boundaries where black women’s existence, in relation to work, can have value rather being seen as a liability. In order for these safe spaces to come into fruition, however, employees must learn that all emotions are valuable within a safe space. A broader analysis for Self-Help must be instituted in order to a broader range of emotions and feelings to happen. This will have to include acknowledging issues with the organization itself. Like Self-Help, safe spaces, cannot be limited to being a reprieve from the racial and gendered domination in the

world but also should be open to critique from its workers. Otherwise, Self-Help will continue to be viewed with trepidation from some workers and never reach its full potential.

External pressures from foundations can also undermine the potential of safe spaces in which social justice work happens. Foundations must be willing to invest in the potential emotional wellbeing of their beneficiaries as well as be willing to meet these kinds of organizations at the margins. This will allow them to gain a deeper understanding for the communities that black feminists and other women of color are advocating for and how their work environments resist the multiple injustices that are present within those said communities. Making safe spaces normative in these alternative environments coupled with flexible work hours can create healthy environments that can have long term and sustainable results. In order for this to happen, foundations have to change the ways they perceive social change, think about work and employees. A first step would be to acknowledge how they reproduce systemic gendered racism.

Mainstream reproductive health organizations must acknowledge how they reproduce systemic gendered racism, also. Giving lip service to wanting diversity within their organization, without creating spaces for critical thinking and meaningful partnership with them, continues to make the complexities of their reproductive health remain invisible and unnoticed in the mainstream. White feminist reproductive health organizations must be willing to take criticism from these groups about how they can better work alongside with them, while creating meaningful leadership that is not tokenized. These mainstream organizations, in coalition with RJ, must use their influence to change the ways that funders think is the “appropriate” way to approach reproductive health issues. Advocating for single issues do not properly address the

matrix of domination in which many communities find themselves. Continuing to do so will remain an unsustainable disservice for the communities they provide services for.

Further research should continue to investigate how women of color, particularly black women, resist normative white work spaces by creating their own, outside of entrepreneurial enclaves (Wingfield, 2008) and how these tactics foster emotional health in the workplace for these women. I could not conduct follow-up interviews because WU was facing internal issues with funding and staff transition shortly after my internship ended. Though no one spoke directly to these issues, in interview or in casual conversation, the employees hint at the internal strife that foreshadowed the organizations' potential demise. Black women's organizations and work dynamics, despite their importance for black women, seem to have little value among funders. Black feminist organizations are faced with devaluation when their issues continue to be marginalized within mainstream discourse. Organizations like WU struggle with maintaining feminist principles while having to deal with external pressures that deem them exclusionary and unimportant. Although these external pressures may influence how these organizations operate, they continue to resist by being unapologetic about their identities, their goals, and worldview by continuing to challenge white mainstream foundations and organizations by simply existing.



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