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The Black Feminism Remix Lab: on Black feminist joy, ambivalence and futures

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ABSTRACT

We began to work together in 2016 as two of the co-organisers of the first Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Colour in Europe symposium at the University of Edinburgh in September 2016. Buoyed by the momentum that followed the Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Colour in Europe events in Amsterdam in 2017 and Berlin in 2018, we sought out different ways to critically consider, uphold, and archive Black feminist work. This culminated in our idea for the Black Feminism Remix Lab. Remixing is an open-ended and non-linear process that always involves both a nod to the past (what came before which is being remixed) and the development of something different that captures part of the present (the ongoing outcomes of the remixing process). An approach to co-creating a manifesto that is rooted in remixing is a rich way to reflect on the relationship between present-day Black feminist efforts, past Black feminist work and Black feminist futurities yet to be imagined. In this short article, we critically reflect on our desire to work with Black feminist activists across Europe to co-author a manifesto on Black feminist politics.

KEYWORDS

Black feminism; Black women; Europe; remix

What is the relationship between Black feminist joy, ambivalence and futures? How are Black feminists remixing political media, meanings and messages to co-create manifestos for change? In this short article, we critically reflect on our desire to work with Black feminist activists across Europe to co-author a manifesto on Black feminist politics.

We began to work together in 2016 as two of the co-organisers of the first Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Colour in Europe symposium at the University of Edinburgh in September 2016. Subsequently, we co-edited *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (Emejulu and Sobande 2019: 2), an edited collection which brings together

activists, artists, and scholars of colour to show how Black feminism and Afrofeminism are being practiced in Europe today, exploring their differing social positions in various countries, and exploring the ways in which they organise and mobilise to imagine a Black feminist Europe.

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Buoyed by the momentum that followed the Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Colour in Europe events in Amsterdam in 2017 and Berlin in 2018, we sought out different ways to critically consider, uphold, and archive Black feminist work. This culminated in our idea for the Black Feminism Remix Lab. By Black feminism, we follow the Combahee River Collective's (2014 [1978]: 272) definition: 'the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy'.

Although our plans were derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we originally aimed to host a two and a half day Remix Lab in Berlin in June 2020 and convene a group of Black women and non-binary folks, who are new or veteran activists, who are European citizens or migrants but who are all dedicated to a transnational, liberatory Black feminist practice. We envisioned our time together being dedicated to exchanging ideas and practices about Black feminist activism and working together to co-create a Manifesto for Black Feminism. However, by Spring of 2020, it was clear that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic would be a long-lasting one which resulted in us, ironically, remixing our original plans. As the months rolled on, we watched, experienced and learned from the different ways that Black feminists continued to care for each other and organise amidst multiple crises and across countries and continents.

Rather than rushing to reconfigure the Black Remix Lab we recognised the importance of pausing, resisting any impulses to 'push on', and carefully considered the contours of what would eventually become a digital Remix Lab taking place over one year in 2021. Manifestos are calls to action to radically break from the past and build new futures (Winkiel 2008). However, under the current conditions of the COVID-19 emergency, we have found reflection rather than action to be a critical mode of being in order to create the conditions to have fruitful conversations with a range of Black women and non-binary folks who have been differently impacted by past and current crises.

Both self and collective forms of reflection are central to any sincere and sustainable Black feminist action. In other words, despite reflection sometimes societally being positioned as the antithesis of action, we view continual forms of reflection and discussion about Black feminist interiority as a necessary part of collective work that builds towards visible action. Reflection is not a departure from action. Instead, it is a precursor, or, perhaps, it is even action by another name. There is a radical possibility in the moment of collective pause, particularly when faced with the *imperialist white supremacist* capitalist patriarchal pressure to constantly produce. While we recognise the importance of calls to action, we also affirm the vital nature of inward collective action in the form of a serious commitment to carefully reflect on and consider the different experiences and perspectives of people involved in such collective work. Action is not always about creating or doing something that is visible to others. As Perlow et al. (2018: 1) put it,

Black women from all walks of life have historically been freedom fighters and catalysts for societal, institutional, and individual change. However, discourse on Black women's contemporary resistance tends to focus on public political activity (i.e. protests), overlooking the countless and varied ways in which Black women engage in less visible, yet no less significant change-making efforts.

Active reflection is ripe with the potential to imagine everything differently and, in turn, to live in ways that contribute to moving closer towards Black feminist liberationist goals.

For us, a manifesto is a snapshot in a moment in time. It captures our hopes, worries and preoccupations. It articulates that which we most fear and our deepest desires. A manifesto is like a spell. Spell work is a craft, it is precise measures infused with desire. A manifesto is read as an incantation in order to make real our dreams. But, of course, our dreams might change, our circumstances might shift and we might begin to see the world differently and need to reevaluate our spell work. This is why we think a remixed manifesto is so important for our project. In trying to build transnational conversations between Black cis and trans women and non-binary folks, we are seeking to bridge languages, cultures, histories and philosophies. Inevitably, when confronted with the diversity of Black experiences in Europe, we must rethink our work and forge new desires, craft new dreams in ways that can speak with and through many minds and hearts. A successful manifesto will manage to work through many hands whilst holding fast to a collective desire. A remix will mean that individual and collective interests collide to make something new from the initial ideas and can be revised, rethought and reshaped through new knowledge and experiences. For us, this is an exciting prospect to work and rework text, images and sounds to consider the landscapes in which activists are working and to reflect their hearts' desires.

Although the work of collectively creating this manifesto involves imagining and feeling our way through and towards futurity, such work is just as much about the present and past as it is about the possibility in, and of, the future. Remixing is an open-ended and non-linear process that always involves both a nod to the past (what came before which is being remixed) and the development of something different that captures part of the present (the ongoing outcomes of the remixing process). Put differently, remixing, by nature, is a work-in-progress. Remixing can involve playing with the parameters of time (what parts of the past are perceptible in the remixed outcomes? Are they part of the past at all if they now take a new remixed form in the present?). An approach to co-creating a manifesto that is rooted in remixing is a rich way to reflect on the relationship between present-day Black feminist efforts, past Black feminist work and Black feminist futurities yet to be imagined.

Our plan is to draw on the creative, collaborative and conjuring possibilities of digital remix culture which involves the remixing and repurposing of digital media, meanings and messages (Sobande 2019, 2020) to co-create something that encompasses a Black feminist manifesto. Digital remix culture can involve 'bearing witness' (Jones 2019: 1079) and vital political, collective and self-making work, including expressions of defiance, pleasure, desire, kinship and intergenerational dialogue. Such digital remixing often takes shape due to the impactful blending of socio-political and popular culture references which speak to something about the wider society that these digital activities stem from. We affirm the benefits of '[d]eploying the Internet as a creative material' (Russell 2020: 9) and view digital remix culture as contributing to the sort of reflective and discursive ongoing work that Hall (2001) refers to as constituting an archive. To be precise, not every element of digital remix culture constitutes archival efforts, but such digital documenting, depicting, discussing and disrupting has the capacity to amount to

that moment when a relatively random collection of works, whose movement appears simply to be propelled from one creative production to the next, is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate. (Hall 2001: 89)

Although the Black Feminism Remix Lab is not a digital archival project, we imagine that provocations and considerations concerning Black feminist digital archiving may arise in the process of making the manifesto. Our Black Feminism Remix Lab goal to co-create a manifesto is inherently interconnected to the work of archiving and both the serendipity and intentionality that is alluded to by Hall (2001: 89) when referring to ‘that moment when a relatively random collection of works ... is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered’. However, our approach to collective manifesto building may involve playing with the notion of order, as the remixing process may entail productive forms of disordering that drastically differ from some archiving conventions. Remixing is not concerned with chronology in the same way that some archival approaches are. Therefore, an approach to manifesto making that is based on remixing may involve embracing a degree of disorder and work to disrupt restrictive expectations of what constitutes a manifesto.

Our interest in digital remixing should not be misunderstood as indicating an uncritical perspective of digital culture. Rather, our understandings and experiences of digital remix culture are attuned to some of the limitations of such co-creating and communicating, including the risk of promoting Black feminist praxis that is so dependent on digital technology that Black feminists who lack access to these resources are excluded. Still, we recognise the power of Black feminist meme practices and enriching theorising related to Black GIF-making (Jones 2019) and digital alchemy (Bailey 2021). Also, instead of fearing the potential impermanence of digital remix culture and the prospect of digital co-creations disappearing from sites and platforms that they once featured on, we see beauty in digital remix culture’s uncapturable qualities. Our unwavering awareness and critique of utopian perspectives of digital culture spurs on our intention to play with the online, the offline and their interconnections when dreaming about and remixing Black feminist futures. In other words, our digital Remix Lab will involve making use of digital tools and technology but will not be exclusively defined by its digital dimensions. We hesitate to say more about the shape and scope of our manifesto as this article is merely a speculation of what we hope to achieve, an exercise in our desire to work with Black women and non-binary folks in radically democratic ways, both online and offline, to create something meaningful together.

Whilst we do not wish to preempt the work we will do with the participants in our Remix Lab, we think that three key concepts – joy, ambivalence and futurity – form the background to any manifesto we might collectively construct. Although these terms feature as part of many current debates in Black feminist theory, practice and activism, the rich and varied meanings associated with them span centuries and are shaped by the specifics of certain geo-cultural contexts. What does Black feminist joy and ambivalence in Europe feel like? How might Black feminist futures in Europe depart from reductive assumptions about what it means to be a Black feminist? In what ways do the digitally mediated dimensions of Black feminist organising impact such work and its reach? These are the issues we hope to explore with activists in our Remix Lab.

We do not regard joy, ambivalence and futurity as being entirely separate concepts. Instead, we play around with the possibility of understanding each as being in orbit around the others. Our starting point is joy; we understand it as both a shield and a mirror. Insisting on joy is resisting Black debasement. We invoke joy, a slippery, fleeting emotion, precisely because of its ephemeral qualities. It is delicate, random and precious. Joy always creeps up on you, you never quite know when you will be struck by it but when you are, you pause and look again at the world with new eyes. In this way, joy is a shield, a protection against all that would rob us of our sense of self. Joy is a kind of protection magic against those forces that celebrate our destruction and death. Joy refuses death and it refuses the narrative of misery that so many wish to construct about the nature of Black life generally and Black womanhood, specifically. Joy is also a mirror. It is a way in which we can reflect and reconstruct different kinds of stories about Black women and non-binary femmes across Europe. Joy is a way to re-vision ourselves in ways that are meaningful and important to us – not in ways that conform to and aid our capture through the white gaze. Joy is not necessarily something that comes naturally. Joy takes practice. We have to learn how to feel light and see what the world might offer to us in spite of what the world presents to us.

If joy is a practice then its teacher is ambivalence. Moving away from understandings of ambivalence that associate the concept with a state of fickleness and paralysis, we use the term in relation to the generative, informed and intuitive hesitation and dislocation which many activists experience in this ongoing moment of multiple crises (Emejulu 2022). Contrary to perspectives of ambivalence that position it as being a form of passivity, we see ambivalence as an active state, one of intentionality in refusal to expend energy in some circumstances deemed hopeless or harmful to Black joy and Black existence. We can learn a lot about life through hesitation. Ambivalence is a way of hesitating, of identifying and seeking to understand the contradictions in life. Not wishing the contradictions away, not ignoring them but embracing the reality that Black life is underpinned by violent contradictions that can never truly be reconciled. Take for instance, the nature of death during the COVID-19 pandemic. Black British workers, once toiling invisibly to keep the country moving as cleaners, bus drivers, delivery drivers, factory workers, became ‘essential workers’ practically overnight as the government implemented stringent lockdown measures. In order to keep middle class professionals alive, these essential workers were disproportionately sickened and killed by a virus which was allowed to run rampant in workplaces (British Academy 2021). Looking at how Black people die is a way of understanding the contradictions of Black life. In this way, we come to embrace ambivalence as a process by which we reflect and refuse. Watching activists mobilise during this moment is to see them refuse the dynamics of Black suffering and death. Mutual aid groups, community be-friending groups and pop-up libraries and kitchens all speak to ambivalence in the face of the violent contradictions of Black life.

Joy and ambivalence are the emotional registers that we bring to the collective creation of our proposed manifesto. And, like all manifestos, we seek to travel across time and space by breaking from the violently imagined white-only, European past and present to build new Black feminist European futures. Our interest in Black futures is shaped by Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturist thought, especially the most recent work of Drew and Wortham (2020) in which they invite the reader to ‘create Black futures alongside us’. Black futures must be a collective endeavour. We use our emotional

tools – joy and ambivalence – to help build the material and discursive realities of Black futures. The foundation of activism is optimism about the future. Understanding that, without these particular interventions in the social world, the future would be bleak. The future then, must be met with optimism and confidence that the work we do in the present has a purpose, a broader meaning for our lives. That we struggle now to build a world that we might not see but others will. As good ancestors, the future is our gift to ourselves and to the next generation. The future is a possibility that we can shape by our actions right now to make the world peaceable for Black life. In order to build these futures, joyful work must be employed. But we are ambivalent in this labour because we must be humble about our understandings and interpretations of the past and the kinds of futures we wish to create for ourselves and our descendants.

Influenced by Katherine McKittrick's work (2021: 3) on 'black livingness and ways of knowing', our hope is that the always unfinished process of remixing a Black feminist manifesto will involve us collectively thinking about different ways and forms of Black feminist knowing and knowledge. What are the textures and tactile qualities of Black feminist knowledge? How does Black feminist knowing inform ambivalence and joy? What is the relationship between such knowing and futures that some, but not all of us, will experience? Though we are reflecting on such questions now, we remain open to the prospect of the manifesto remixing process being one that prompts many different considerations. Despite manifestos often being regarded as public declarations of political aims, when collectively remixing this Black feminist manifesto we anticipate doing so in ways that push against the parameters of perceived 'private' and 'public' spaces. In other words, while we seek to publicly share an iteration of the ever in-process manifesto, we also hope to preserve the privacy of some of the co-making, meandering and remixing that occurs along the way. What might it mean to approach a manifesto in a way that does not involve a preoccupation with public perception, but instead entails an emphasis on private moments of connection, conspiring and co-creating?

Public declarations are often assumed to be based on a sense of certainty felt by those who have decided to declare something. While we maintain the aim of co-creating and remixing a manifesto that is buttressed by some shared commitments and convictions, we do not confuse conviction for certainty, nor do we uncritically valorise certainty. Our interest in hesitation and ambivalence includes an interest in approaching the collective work of remixing a Black feminist manifesto in a manner that makes space for sitting with ever-present feelings of uncertainty, rather than attempting to outrun them. For these reasons, we envision the art and actions involved in remixing the manifesto as never being bound by an expectation that anyone arrives at a state of complete certainty. The very nature of remixing requires an openness to continually reflect, alter, adapt and make anew. The practice of remixing should not be mistaken for a disinterest in, or disdain for, what came before. Rather, there is a reverence to the previous (people, ideas, creativity) in the 'care-full' work that makes remixing happen, without allowing nostalgia to prevent possible futures from being imagined and manifested.

Manifestos are often presented as being an end-product or a fixed articulation of a particular agenda and moment in time. Furthermore, manifestos are frequently associated with political parties jostling for attention during elections and periods of political upheaval. However, our understanding of what manifestos can be drastically differs to such stifling perceptions of them. Manifestos are not merely words on a page. Manifestos

can be embodied, on the move, a reflection of lived experiences. After all, as Mwasi Collectif (2019: 61) remind us, ‘Women of the African diaspora have carried Black feminism(s) everywhere colonialism and patriarchy have operated’. Manifestos are sometimes dreamt or felt, but not spoken and not written. In other cases, manifestos may be visible, read, engaged with, but never truly known.

While planning the digital Black Feminism Remix Lab we have thought about our desire to make such work public, but without performing for the white gaze. To return to the words of McKittrick (2021: 3), in approaching the manifesto remixing process we hope for an ongoing outcome ‘that does not itemize-commodify Black liberation and Black embodied knowledge’. What we collectively choose to publicly share and make visible during the manifesto remixing process is still very much up for discussion. We plan to ‘launch’ the manifesto in some capacity but seek to carefully consider how to do so in a way that honours its collective spirit, which may include a refusal to make everything legible and knowable to all.

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