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The Neoliberal Co-Optation of Identity Politics

Geo-Political Situatedness as a Decolonial Discussion Partner

Jorge Juan Rodríguez V.

Abstract in English

Responding to the 2016 United States Presidential election, this piece contests that the popularly deployed phrase "identity politics" is not Identity Politics as articulated by Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective but is rather a neoliberal co-optation of Identity Politics. By situating neoliberalism and the Black feminists that articulated Identity Politics as historical contemporaries, the piece argues that as the former spread to institutions like universities it co-opted, depoliticized, a-historicized, and misappropriated the latter. The piece concludes by offering "Geo-Political Situatedness" as a theoretical frame that undermines neoliberalism's co-optation of Identity Politics.

Key words: Neoliberalism, Identity Politics, Black feminism, Combahee River Collective

Abstract in Spanish

Respondiendo a las elecciones presidenciales E.E.U.U. del 2016, este proyecto argumenta que la frase "identity politics" en su uso popular no es la Política de Identidad originalmente articulada por las feministas Negras del Combahee River Collective pero es una cooptación neoliberal de la Política de Identidad. Situando el neoliberalismo y las feministas Negras que articularon la Política de Identidad como contemporáneos, este proyecto sugiere que cuando el neoliberalismo se expandió a instituciones como universidades pudo cooptar, de-politizar, mal-apropiar, y sacar de su contexto histórico la Política de Identidad. El proyecto concluye ofreciendo el concepto de "Geo-Political Situatedness" como un marco teórico que debilita la cooptación neoliberal de la Política de Identidad.

Key words: Neoliberalismo, Política de Identidad, Feminismo Negro, Combahee River Collective

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Abstract in Portuguese

Em resposta às eleições presidenciais dos Estados Unidos em 2016, este estudo argumenta que a expressão "identity politics", popularmente utilizada, não é a Política de Identidade originalmente articulada pelas feministas negras do Combahee River Collective, mas sim uma cooptação neoliberal da Política de Identidade. Colocando o neoliberalismo e as feministas negras que articularam a Identidade Política como contemporâneos, este estudo sugere que, quando o neoliberalismo se expandiu para instituições como universidades, foi capaz de cooptar, despolitizar, apropriar-se indevidamente e remover a Política de Identidade de seu contexto histórico. O estudo conclui oferecendo o conceito de "Geo-Political Situness" como referencial teórico que enfraquece a cooptação neoliberal da Política de Identidade.

Key words: Neoliberalism, política de identidade, Feminismo Negro, Combahee River Coletiva

Jorge Juan Rodríguez V is the son of two Puerto Rican migrants who came to the united states a year before he was born. Though his mother was raised in the tall, curvy mountains of Barranquitas and his father in the humid, bustling streets of Río Piedras, Jorge grew up with his parents, grandmother, and uncle in a small affordable housing community in urban Manchester, Connecticut. His story of diaspora, religion, translanguaging, gender, race, and dis/ability has propelled his academic journey, helping him receive a Bachelors of Arts in Biblical Studies and Social Thought from Gordon College and a Masters of Arts in Liberation Theologies from Union Theological Seminary. Jorge is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in the field of Modern Religious History at Union Theological Seminary where he explores the intersections of religion, (de/post)colonialism/coloniality, and social movements in the 19th and 20th century Americas. You can follow his work on twitter at @JJRodV and online at www.jjrodriguezv.com.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the term "identity politics" has been wielded with increasing fervor in United States public discourse.[1] While some have praised it as a cornerstone of progress and multiculturalism, and others—popular among them, Mark Lilla (2017)—have decried it as the very reason democracy is crumbling, in each the term has often meant *naming* social intersections of race, gender, and the like that individual subjects embody in order to ensure *representation in domains of power*.[2] We saw this most clearly in the 2016 Presidential Election where Hillary Clinton ran against Bernie Sanders and then Donald Trump. While many rallied for her because of her résumé, many too backed her candidacy solely because she was a woman (a marker of identity). Indeed, the prospect of the first-female President was compelling. Yet in rallying for Clinton simply because of her identity as 'woman,' many did not question (and even attacked those who did question) her role in international warfare, drone strikes, and her dependence on Wall Street. As a man of Puerto Rican descent, I myself raised concerns about how she and Democrat colleagues have actively continued the colonization of my ancestral island. Black women on social media challenged her so-called "progressive" claims through hashtags like #ImWithHerIGuess. Amidst such critique, her social identity as 'woman' was enough for some

[1] I would like to thank Candace Simpson, Ashley Michelle Busone, James Howard Hill, Jr., Santiago Slabodsky, Jan Rehmann, Cláudio Carvalhaes, and the countless other individuals who helped make this article possible, its analysis sharp, and its commitment to justice, liberation, and freedom ever present.

[2] Nancy Fraser (2017) has called this phenomenon "progressive neoliberalism." Fraser's analysis is extremely instructive and yet I maintain that in popular discourse the term "identity politics" has more often been used to describe this phenomenon. In either case, Fraser's notion will be further discussed in footnotes below.

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to make a strong case for her candidacy,[3] especially within a domain of power that had never had a woman representative.[4]

Drawing from this context, this present work will advance three claims. First, the present manifestation of "identity politics" that was deployed during the U.S. presidential election is not Identity Politics as originally articulated by Black women in the 1970s, but is rather a neoliberal co-optation of Identity Politics. I will thus make a distinction throughout this paper between "Identity Politics" and "neoliberal identity politics." Second, I will show that Identity Politics and neoliberalism 1) were historically contemporaneous movements—and 2) both held/hold analysis that were/are subject-centered. I will show, as a result, that when neoliberalism became hegemonic by the late-20th century it was able to co-opt Identity Politics, depoliticize its liberative ends, and make invisible its history and origins through institutions including, but not limited to, colleges and universities. Viewing the destructive power of neoliberalism, I wish to, third, offer the conceptual frame of "Geo-Political Situatedness"—which centers politicized geographic space without erasing subject-identity—to present discussions seeking to combat neoliberalism's co-optation of Identity Politics.

The Genesis of Identity Politics

As early as the 1930s a proto-Civil Rights Period germinated. Individuals like Ella Baker organized in the North (Ransby,

[3] That Black women on social media started #ImWithHerIGuess to challenge the notion that one ought to uncritically vote for Clinton because, among other things, she was and is a woman perfectly exemplifies the prevalence of this perspective. Put differently, that a movement formed to challenge this perspective demonstrates its expanse.

[4] During Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns, his identity as 'Black man' legitimized, for some, his campaign, irrespective of his policies, viewpoints, or economic ties. A correlate reality to Clinton.

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2007; Payne, 2007), the NAACP launched Anti-Lynching campaigns (Janken, 2017), Puerto Rican *Independentistas* challenged U.S. colonialism (Ferrao, 1990), and other social movements bubbled around the country and its colonies. After World War II, these campaigns fed into the vibrant Civil Rights Period of the 1950s and 60s. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Dolores Huerta, Lolita Lebron, and others used civil disobedience and, among some, armed conflict to actively oppose systems of laws, policies, and beliefs that created inequity. As resistance grew across the country, laws and policies slowly shifted to open space for minoritized peoples in the United States.

By the late 1960s and early 70s—after many prominent figures of the period were assassinated or fell into ill-health (figures like Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Fannie Lou Hamer)—the Civil Rights Period was forced to evolve. United States imperialism in Vietnam and Latin America and the increased terror on minoritized communities by both civilians and the State required a different response among those seeking change. Out of this context grew new—at times more radical and often leftist—movements like The Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, The Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement who sought racial/ethnic and economic justice. Alongside these organizations flourished second wave feminism as women called the male-dominated society to account. Responding both to radical organizations who sought racial/ethnic and economic justice and this new feminist wave that was often dominated by white women, women of color activists across the country began articulating new anti-racist, anti-sexist, liberating politics (e.g. the Young Lords women's "revolution within the revolution").[5]

[5] Women of the Young Lords Party rejected what they saw as white feminism's individualism while maintaining a critical attack of patriarchy, leading to a "revolution within the revolution" in 1970 which placed women in leadership of the Party, required men to take political education classes on feminism, and widened space for LGBTQI+ inclusion.

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Though all these movements since at least the 1930s[6] dealt with issues of "identity," it wasn't until the late 1970s that the term "Identity Politics" emerged as an explicit analytic frame. In 1974, a group of Black feminists—among them Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier[7]—formed the Combahee River Collective (CRC) in Boston. This group created space for Black women to 1) discuss their experiences, 2) engage in consciousness raising, and 3) organize for socio-political change.[8] Women brought to the Collective a wealth of activist experience: many having participated in efforts against forced sterilization and the Vietnam War as well as organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and the Black

[6] Though I am historicizing the Civil Rights Movement back to around the 1930s, many could argue that the impetus for what became the Civil Rights Movement reaches back much farther. As related to the Black feminist movement in particular, Taylor (2017: 5) notes that figures like Anna Julia Cooper objected to the racism and sexism faced by Black women as far back as 1892. Nonetheless I begin my historical analysis in the 1930s for this present work positing that a specific kind of activism was occurring in that period that was distinct from the decades prior. Examining this more deeply is, however, beyond the scope of this current project.

[7] Other women included Sharon Page Ritchie, Margo Okazawa Rey, Chirlane McCray, Eleanor Johnson, Gloria Akasha Hull, Cheryl Clarke, Cessie Alfonso. Yet, it should be noted, membership of the Collective was fluid.

[8] Though written about the Young Lords, I echo the sentiment shared here by Wanzer-Serrano (2015: 93) as I myself write, as a man, about a women-centered movement. "In being a loving listener, however, my role is suspect. *I am suspect*. I am a man trying to give voice to women in [an] organization about things that men. . .refuse generally to discuss. I am fundamentally torn between wanting to let the women's voices speak for themselves and knowing (a) that such a disinterested research position is never possible and (b) that such a standing aside is the very strategy used by men to excuse their own culpability in machismo's structures of domination (and to marginalize the already marginal voices of women). Although this should not be about me. . .I need to take ownership of my voice."

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Panthers. Such activism, however, convinced them of the need for a distinct space that congregated and organized radical Black women.

Before the Collective formed, some of the women thought they might find this space in the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Founded in 1973, the NBFO sought to create room in the feminist movement for Black women to engage with questions of gender and race together. As the women of the CRC later articulated, such a sensibility was appealing for they felt second wave feminism had erased "Black, other Third World, and working women" and they were disillusioned with Black and Leftist-White men's unwillingness to engage in anti-sexist work in liberation struggles (Combahee River Collective, 1977).[9] Yet the women who later founded the CRC felt that bourgeoise sensibilities within the NBFO limited its liberative potential. Four decades after the founding of the Combahee River Collective, Demita Frazer reflected,

> One of the things that really stood out was that we had an analysis that NBFO did not. We had an economic analysis. Because we were all nascent or just fully blown out-and-about socialists. And whether we were democratic socialists—whatever flavor you choose to apply to it—we were very clear that taking collective action was important, having an economic analysis was important (Taylor, 2017: 127).

Not finding the space they needed in the NBFO, these women created the Combahee River Collective. Over the next

[9] There are many interesting similarities between the views of the women of the Young Lords and the River Collective. A future comparison of their respective statements would be fascinating, illuminating the ways women of color responded to second wave feminism and the radical politics of the period. See the "Young Lords Party Position Paper on Women" (in Enck-Wanzer, 2010: 169–174).

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three years the group met, often on retreats, and clarified their political vision. Finally, in April of 1977, the Combahee River Collective issued a statement of their genesis, political vision, and analytical frame.[10] In this statement "Identity Politics" was first coined as a validation of Black women's experience and tool for socio-political analysis.

The CRC Statement boldly opened by declaring the basis of their politics: "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Such a political vision did not stem from abstract analysis. Rather it stemmed from their lived experience. As they noted, it is precisely the "synthesis of these oppressions [that] creates the conditions of [their] lives" as Black women (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The experiences they theorize from extended further back into history than their present moment. In the first section of their Statement they wrote that their particular work as Black feminists "is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by [their] mothers and sisters" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Women like "Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown" Black women who had an awareness of "how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique" (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

[10] According to Beverly Smith, Zilla Eisenstein, a faculty member at Ithaca College, had asked Barbara Smith if the women of the CRC would write a statement about their politics to help distinguish their vision from that of other socialist feminist organizations at the time. Out of this prompting Beverly, Barbara, and Demita Frazer began articulating what became the CRC statement (Taylor, 2017: 99).

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Out of "the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives" (Combahee River Collective, 1977), which exist at the "nexus of race, gender, sexual, and class oppressions" (Denzel Smith, 2017), the Combahee River Collective developed the notion of Identity Politics. They wrote,

> This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity. . . In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

Identity Politics, then, was a declaration of Black women's worth and liberative potential *as well as* an analytic tool. Put differently, Identity Politics undermined systemic oppression by validating and then wielding the multiplicity of Black women's experience. Out of that identity came an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, queer-inclusive vision of liberation for combatting oppressive systems.

Within the context of the larger statement, Identity Politics functioned as a validation of the countless Black women who had struggled against a racist, sexist, empire whom the Collective identified in the first section of their piece. Yet it also served as the basis for the CRC's broader political vision which they went on to describe. This vision radically called for "the destruction of all the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy," without which liberation of all oppressed people is not possible (Combahee

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River Collective, 1977). Precisely because their experience as Black women struggled against the interlocking oppressions of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and classism, the women of the CRC posited that "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

Reflecting on the statement decades later, Barbara Smith stated,

> What we were saying [by Identity Politics] is that we have a right as people who are not just female, who are not solely Black, who are not just lesbians, who are not just working class, or workers—that we are people who embody all these identities, and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality (Taylor, 2017: 61).

At a time when Black women were carving their particular space among multiple social movements, this declaration was radical. Smith continued, noting it was a powerful assertion that centered Black women "at a time when Black women had no voice. At a time when Black women were being told to walk seven steps behind and have babies for the nation" (Taylor, 2017: 63).

Contextually, then, Identity Politics served as a radical claim that Black women's experience was not only important, but central to developing a liberative socio-political analysis and praxis. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes, Identity Politics for the CRC "was not just about who you were; it was also about what you could do to confront the oppression you were facing" (Taylor, 2017: 8–9). As the Collective grew, this lens was applied to their work within and outside of Boston as they continued to organize for reproductive rights, against forced sterilization, against the abuse of women, all while building coalition and collective action with other activist groups.

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In the two decades following the publication of the CRC Statement, Black women and women of color expanded and applied Identity Politics. Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Gender" (1991) best exemplifies this expansion. In it, Crenshaw coined the famous term "intersectionality" as she argued that Black women are marginalized in the legal system because the system itself does not account for the intersectional difference of their experience which includes being Black *plus* woman (1991: 3). Though Crenshaw coined the term, "intersectionality," Taylor notes that "the CRC did articulate the analysis that animates the meaning of intersectionality, the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering" (2017: 4).[11] Like Crenshaw, many Black feminists were deeply influenced and shaped by the analytic frame of the CRC. Indeed, even in the theological academy the Womanist tradition of Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, and others calls upon this tradition. In all these, examining intersecting "identities" served and serves the explicit purpose of undoing systems that create oppression—whether they be legal, social, or even theological.[12] Yet the way the term "identity politics" has been wielded in recent times has sought quite the opposite end.

As opposed to challenging systems, identities have been wielded in contemporary discourse to enter systems of power. "Diversity Initiatives" arising in the 1990s and early 2000s epitomize this shift. In them, flattened identities (e.g. Latinx, Black, Queer, Woman) are named to ensure "equal representation" in places of privilege—whether they be university campuses or

[11] See also King (2015: 128).

[12] In this way, they seek to address issues of mis-recognition, economic mal-distribution, and mis-representation. See the work of Nancy Fraser (1995: 68–93; 2013: 189–208).

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Wall Street offices. These logics—ahistorically appropriating the name "identity politics"—have become widespread, even making their way to Presidential Elections.[13] This phenomenon, mis-identified as Identity Politics, changes *faces* in power without challenging *structures* of power. This obvious departure from the original theorizatons of the Black feminists is indicative of, I argue, the neoliberal co-optation of Identity Politics.

The Rise of Neoliberal Hegemony

In 1938, as the proto-Civil Rights period germinated in the United States, an international group of liberal economists met in Paris (Rehmann, 2014: 272). At this time classic liberal economics had evolved as a limited welfare state formed in the United States and parts of Europe in light of economic depression. Following the work and influence of economists like John Maynard Keynes (1936), leaders in these countries felt the only way to return from recession was if governments intervened in the market by creating employment and programs that promoted employment, thus stimulating the economy. The economists meeting in Paris, however, rejected this plan, the notion of a welfare state broadly, collectivism in any form,[14]

[13] As aforementioned, Nancy Fraser calls this phenomenon "Progressive Neoliberalism" which she defines as, ". . .an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end 'symbolic' and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other. In this alliance, progressive forces are effectively joined with the forces of cognitive capitalism, especially financialization. However unwittingly, the former lend their charisma to the latter. Ideals like diversity and empowerment, which could in principle serve different ends, now gloss policies that have devastated manufacturing and what were once middle-class lives" (2017).

[14] Including communism, socialism, Keynesian economics, and Fordist-class constructions.

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and articulated an alternative. As Jan Rehmann notes, "against the 'narrow economic conception' of classical liberalism" and growing Keynesian economics, these economists developed a strong emphasis on the state which "had the task of establishing and securing market-competition as the organizing principle of the economy" (2014: 272). Government's job was not to intervene in the market, these economists argued. It was rather to ensure the market could function in what they understood to be its naturally unhindered form. To distinguish themselves from contemporary liberals who upheld the welfare-state, this group adopted the name "neoliberals."

Neoliberalism's chief architect was Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek. In the 1930s, Hayek (1973; 2012) developed a theory of economics that, more than anything, was an all-encompassing worldview. Stephen Metcalf writes,

> [Hayek] begins by assuming that nearly all (if not all) human activity is a form of economic calculation, and so can be assimilated to the master concepts of wealth, value, exchange, cost—and especially price. Prices are a means of allocating scarce resources efficiently, according to need and utility, as governed by supply and demand. For the price system to function efficiently, markets must be free and competitive. . .Within such a society, men and women need only follow their own self-interest and compete for scarce rewards. Through competition, 'it becomes possible. . .to discern who and what is valuable' (2017).

Hayek's economic theory formed the bedrock of neoliberalism—and this bedrock was expansive. More than just opposing the welfare-state, neoliberalism's proponents advocated for an all-encompassing vision of social organization. This vision converted everything, including individual subjects, into prices and goods that could be exchanged

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in an economic market place protected by the state. Put differently, Hayek's conception was not merely about the economy but about how societies ought to operate.

Over the next decade, neoliberals continued meeting and developing these ideas. By 1947, the group formed the Mont Pérelin Society in Switzerland which sought to influence think-tanks that could fine tune their view, and "set about influencing public opinion" (Rehmann, 2014: 272).[15] They sought to change how people viewed and engaged the world. And they were quite successful.

By infiltrating think tanks like the Institute for Public Affairs (U.K.) and the American Enterprise Institute (U.S.), neoliberals influenced the conservative party in the United Kingdom and Republicans in the United States. In 1974—the same year the Combahee River Collective formed—Friedrich Hayek was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, demonstrating the extent of his impact. By 1979, when Margaret Thatcher was elected in the United Kingdom, and 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected in the United States, neoliberalism reached a new height. Both figures promoted economic deregulation, privatization, reducing the influence of unions, and thus opened space for the increased prominence of multinational organizations. The impact of these policies spread within and beyond their respective countries as neoliberal ideals took shape globally. As Rehmann (2014: 273) contests, once state-socialism collapsed in 1989[16] neoliberalism could continue expanding as its only "noteworthy competition" for organizing economics and society had fallen.

[15] Among those present were Walter Eucken, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Wilhelm Ropke, Ludwig von Mises, and Karl Popper.

[16] Two years before Kimberlé Crenshaw published her groundbreaking work on intersectionality.

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It must be reiterated, however, that while at base neoliberalism was and is an economic system, it necessarily promotes a societal vision. Here Loïc Wacquant's "thicker notion" of neoliberalism is instructive. Positing that sociologically speaking the rise of neoliberalism coincides with an increased prison state, Wacquant argues that we must understand neoliberalism as a *"transnational political project* aiming to remake the nexus of market, state, and citizenship from above" (2009: 306). Such a project is carried out by a global ruling class of executives, politicians, state managers, and "cultural-technical experts" that do not simply reassert "the prerogatives of capital and the promotion of the marketplace, but the articulation of four institutional logics" (Wacquant, 2009: 306–307). These logics include "economic deregulation. . .welfare state devolution, retraction, and recomposition. . .the cultural trope of individual responsibility. . .[and] an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus" (Wacquant, 2009: 307). As these logics infiltrate various societal sectors, Wacquant argues, humans are encouraged to pursue their "individual appetites" and participate in a civil society that stresses "self-reliance, commitment to paid work, and managerialism" (2009: 307). Under a neoliberal culture the individual is central, they engage deregulated markets, they needn't depend on welfare of any kind, and they are thrown into an expansive penal system if they challenge neoliberal social norms. Such a culture is encouraged in society at large, educational institutions, businesses, and the like as this societal vision becomes normative.

The expansion of neoliberalism, then, did not merely shape governmental and economic policies. It pushed and pushes social norms and expectations in order to shape culture. Or, as Mary Wrenn writes, in neoliberalism "the economic sphere enlarges, eventually encompassing the entirety of social life, subordinating the other spheres of livelihood to support its purpose and further intensification" (2014: 506).

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The Neoliberal Co-Optation of Identity Politics

Historically, neoliberalism's rise paralleled the rise of Identity Politics. While the seeds of the Civil Rights Period were being planted in the U.S., the seeds of neoliberalism were being planted in Paris. While the Civil Rights Period gained traction in the U.S. through movement building, Neoliberalism gained traction in Western Europe and the U.S. through think tanks. And while new reflections on the Civil Rights Period gave rise to Identity Politics, Neoliberalism established itself firmly in government. As Identity Politics expanded in works like those of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neoliberalism grew in dominance, establishing hegemony in state control and dominant ideology and expanding globally. By the mid-1990s, neoliberalism had expanded across society, infiltrating universities, political organizations, and society at large.

That neoliberalism and Identity Politics are contemporaneous does not necessarily mean they are connected. But, as a hegemonic ideology, neoliberalism thrives by encouraging that which upholds its dominance (like government bailouts of Wall Street) and co-opting that which could be potentially disruptive (like Identity Politics). Thus, my first point is that it is historically unsurprising that these parallel developments would become connected—albeit through co-optation. I would suggest that *a* site of this co-optation was slowly shifting institutions of higher education in the 1990s United States.[17]

[17] Taylor, Barbara Smith, and Demita Frazier signal to higher education as a site of co-optation. Taylor suggests that as Black feminism receded from the streets it was able to "find a home in academic circles" (2017: 13); Smith argues that most younger people are introduced to Identity Politics by "academics who have a partial understanding of what the depths of it would be, they are also confused about it too" (Taylor, 2017: 62); Frazier argues that situated in the academy, discussion of Identity Politics has lost the accountability that comes with political praxis (Taylor, 2017: 138). In each there is a suggestion, whether explicit or implicit, that in the academy Identity Politics morphed into something other than what the Combahee River Collective intended.

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As Aisha Beliso-De Jesús notes, institutions of higher education in the United States underwent a major transformation in response to student protests of the 1970s and 80s. At this time institutions were forced to,

> . . .include African American, Latino/a, Asian American, Native American Studies, and Women's Studies as new fields and academic programs. Student uprisings, social protests, radical activist politics against war, and the civil rights movement coalesced in colleges and universities across the country, demanding dramatic change. This agitation resulted in some limited recognition of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy that had been ignored by white supremacist renditions of history and Western civilization. . . [By the 1990s] *Diversity* became the newfound rhetoric of American multicultural liberal education. Oftentimes, concessions made by university administrations were deployed through politics of identity appeasement: providing identity groups with a particularized representational location within a multiculturalist university arena that did little to change the structural frameworks of racism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, class difference, and Western centrism (Beliso-De Jesús, 2018: 315–316).

Under this framework, institutions of higher education forced groups to partition themselves by "identity" and fight for validation within the academy by making the case that their individual corpuses of knowledge must be represented within the institution. If represented, the group would gain funding and social positioning that would sustain their existence within the academy. As Beliso-De Jesús notes, although many of the programs formed (e.g. Latino Studies, Asian American Studies, Women's Studies) in response to political activism, under the new multiculturalist structure of the period the radical politics of their activism was diffused

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when "validated" with a department or program within the institution.

Building upon Beliso–De Jesús' argument, I would emphasize that institutional politics in higher education did not merely occur in response to social activism. They happened as institutions of higher education began transforming under a growing neoliberal hegemony. As previously shown, by the time multicultural initiatives in higher education took root in the late 1980s and 90s neoliberal policies were already instantiated and expanded in the country at large. The rising cost of higher education, defunding of state institutions, and increased prominence of private colleges and universities during this period (that have led to the present U.S. student debt crisis) is only one example of neoliberalism's reach. It is unsurprising, then, that the logics of diversity initiatives Beliso-De Jesús describes are fundamentally neoliberal. Under these initiatives, institutions of higher education deregulated the academic market by dividing subjects based on social groups. These groups were then forced to compete with each other for funding and institutional legitimacy by constantly demonstrating the validity of their individual fields. If unsuccessful, groups ran the risk of being cut from institutions all together—punitively removed from the micro-society of the institution.

Constantly fighting for validation within the institution caused and causes departmental anxiety which is mirrored by students in neoliberal institutions. Such anxiety has ramifications for learning. Focusing on graduate students, Tiffany Lethabo King argues that the "Neoliberal Corporate University" has overemphasized production and credentialing all while placing extra burdens on students through increased debt. This has transformed students into what King calls "anxious neoliberal subjects" who must constantly move to the newest, sexiest idea while simultaneously dismissing knowledge-bases that are deemed "problematic" or "old" (2015:

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121).[18] If they don't perform in this way, the over-saturated academic job market might dismiss them. "As subjects who adhere to the neoliberal mandates of economic rationality and risk assessment, graduate students try to reduce the time and money spent on a degree. Students learn to distill material and eliminate what might be deemed unnecessary" (King, 2015: 121). Socially, this promotes antagonism between students all while diminishing rigorous analysis of concepts and histories. Learning that places ideas within a context and extrapolates its implications are then replaced with facile analyses that regurgitate the latest, most provocative theory according to King's argument.

The impact of this cannot be understated in light of this present work as it was precisely the rise of neoliberal higher education and openings created by diversity initiatives that encouraged—albeit limitedly—Black feminist discourse and scholarship in the academy. It was during this very period that the works of Black feminist academics like bell hooks, Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and even founders of the Combahee River Collective like Barbara Smith were written and incorporated into academic discourse. Like other discourses it created space for, the neoliberal academy diffused the radical politics of these writers and the movements they were a part of all while creating space for their work to be present. While this occurred, the academy divided subjects based on "identities" that could be added to diversity initiatives without any reference to radical theorizations of "identity"

[18] Important to this present work is that King levies this argument in relation to the ways "intersectionality" is treated in the academy. Without taking the time to understand the history and context in which this term and concept arose, graduate students dismiss it as "old" and turn to newer, sexier ideas such as "assemblage"—no matter if these ideas advance constructs that too can be critiqued. On this last point see, Jasbir Puar (2007: 212, 215) and Patrice Douglass (2016: 44–46).

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written by Black feminists. Thus, I would suggest that the neoliberal academy of the 1990s was a site where Identity Politics as originally articulated by Black feminists could be co-opted and, moreover, ripped from its historical context. Under this co-optation, what became called "identity politics" under the logics of diversity initiatives and multiculturalism was and is a complete departure from the original articulations and ideals of Black feminists.

If the neoliberal academy was a site for this co-optation, the question remains as to how co-optation of a radical political ideal like Identity Politics was even possible. Thus, in this second point I would suggest that aside from the fact that the neoliberal academy necessarily diffuses radical political visions, in part by ripping them from their historical contexts, Identity Politics and neoliberalism share commonalities that facilitated co-optation. Namely, both center subjects as the beginning of analysis.

Identity Politics and neoliberalism center subjects extremely differently. The former centers subjects to understand and combat systems of oppression. Indeed, the women of the Combahee River Collective understood the personal (i.e. the subject-oriented) as political. In that vein, the subject—particularly Black women who are inherently imbued with value[19]—was centered.[20] In neoliberalism, however, subjects are centered in order to define their worth by their production and ability to compete in the deregulated marketplace. Centering subjects, then, allows for systematic assessment of market relations.

[19] As the River Collective writes, "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable" (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

[20] As they stated, "a political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political" (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

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As such, neoliberal ideology co-opts Identity Politics by giving subjects value in relation to the productive capacity of their identity as defined by the market. Here, non-dominant identities are relegated to lesser spheres of society. Hence women of color are paid less in jobs, and studies around people of color are relegated to "special"—less funded—university departments such as "ethnic studies" and "liberation theologies." Yet this also means that the ability to gain prominence in society demands that one prove why lesser identities hold productive value. Hence diversity initiatives are established to show that Latinxs can also be college presidents, LGBTQI+ identifying individuals can also work on Wall Street, and women can also be President. As shown above by Beliso-De Jesús, under these initiatives even though "diverse" subjects are placed in positions of power, the structures of power that maintain communities oppressed and marginalized do not change. As a result, the subject-oriented disposition of Identity Politics, once violently removed from its history and context, is co-opted and pacified by neoliberalism. Stripped of any systemic critique, neoliberal identity politics emerges to give value to identities only in as much as they can demonstrate their market value in societal and institutional competitions.[21]

Geo-Political Situatedness as a Decolonial Discussion Partner

As Keri Day (2016) has recently contested and the Womanist tradition has taught us, reduction of human life to market value—whether in the encomienda or White House—is morally deplorable as it merely breeds abuse and death. In the

[21] Reflecting on Black feminism, Reina Gossett (2016) quips, "For me [Black feminism] is not about making police and prisons gay friendly. . .and it's certainly not about making a military occupation of indigenous people in the U.S. or Palestine gay friendly."

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spirit of life, I offer the notion of Geo-Political Situatedness[22] to present discussions about combatting neoliberalism's co-optation of Identity Politics.[23]

This concept centers geographic spaces—without erasing subject-identity—as that which is politicized. I argue that when we discuss systemic oppression faced by subjects—such as sexism, white supremacy, heteronormativity—we are talking about the ways these systems map onto geographic space and how those sites—now politicized by oppression—effect subject identities. Thus, an Afro-Latina girl in a Harlem elementary school is not targeted for suspension only because *she as a subject* embodies the identities of blackness, latinidad, and female-ness. She is targeted because Harlem elementary schools as geographic spaces have been historically militarized and exploited by privileged classes, and thus politicized with the oppressive logics of racism, classism, and sexism. The elementary school girl's intersectional subject-identity of blackness, latinidad, and female-ness, then, mean something *only in relation to* her being situated within the political geography of a Harlem elementary school.[24]

Conceptualized in this way, the school to prison pipeline, gentrification, and the like—all of which disproportionately affect Black women and women of color—are understood as

[22] I also draw on works in decolonial theory and space theory such as those of Catherine Walsh (2010: 79–93), Walter Mignolo (2010: 1–21; 2011), Darrel Wanzer-Serrano (2015), as well as Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura (2011: 1933–1952).

[23] I think of the continuous work of publications like *For Harriet*, founded by Kimberly Foster, as well as articles like Anne Branigin's (2017) "It's Time to Reclaim 'Identity Politics'" and Mychal Denzel Smith's (2017) "What Liberals Get Wrong About Identity Politics."

[24] Further, as Candace Simpson once noted in discussion, in the neoliberal political geography of Harlem the reality is that this Afro-Latina girl is likely attending a charter school, the epitome of neoliberal educational logics.

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oppressive realities that occur on politicized geographies that then systematically reproduce the oppression faced by certain subject-identities. Put differently, while the intersecting subject-identities of individuals certainly effect politicization, that politicization is only made intelligible and concrete within a geographic space.

By shifting the starting point of social analysis to geographic space, and understanding subject-identities in relationship to the politicization of that space, we undermine the subject-centered logics of neoliberalism and thus the neoliberal co-optation of Identity Politics. Further, such a social analysis aids our understanding of how brick-and-mortar institutions are politicized to engage and enact oppressive neoliberal ideals. Indeed, it's unsurprising that institutions of higher education, as an example, might co-opt Identity Politics in order to quell its liberative potential, all while siding with neoliberal ideals. As Craig Steven Wilder (2013) has convincingly shown, these institutions were founded on settler colonialism—that is, forcefully taking land (geographic space) from indigenous peoples considered "savages"—and physically constructed by enslaved and exploited indigenous African peoples. They are, then, historically politicized to yield the exploitation of minoritized peoples. Undermining that politicization, then, requires analyzing how the very geographic space is politically constituted and how subjects are politicized accordingly. Such an analysis would also extend to the White House, a geographic space constructed by settler colonialism and slave labor which turns subjects within it—irrespective of subject-identity (e.g. woman, Black)—into agents of empire.

In the case of higher education and all institutions taken up by neoliberalism, challenging this history will take more than diversity initiatives and an a-historical, de-politicized understanding of Identity Politics. It requires uncovering the politicization of the very land upon which institutions stand, the likes of which are constituted in history. And in the end, an

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analysis that centers geographic space may facilitate this, but only the spirit, energy, and power with which Black women originally coined Identity Politics can bring to fruition its liberative potential.

Conclusion

To conclude, in my view, current social movements such as the Movement for Black Lives—which explicitly center a queer, Black feminist analysis—are already engaging this shift to geographic space that I'm merely theorizing. And that's precisely why they pose such a threat to neoliberalism. Indeed, when these movements lead protests where subjects chant "Whose Streets, Our Streets," participants re-politicize the geography they are situated on, taking it from an oppressive State and giving it to the people. But it's not just streets. These movements challenge the politicization of physical prisons, schools, borders, Bernie Sanders' rally stage, Hillary Clinton's lobby room, and thus how those geographies effect subject-identities situated upon them. In their implementation, these movements draw from Identity Politics as historically articulated by the Black women of the Combahee River Collective while situating subject-identities on geographic spaces, providing an example on how to oppose co-opting systems that breed death.

In a historical moment where children are ripped from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border, where Palestinians are openly murdered by Israeli military on their own land, where Syrian children are killed in their homes by U.S. manufactured bombs, and where two years after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Puerto Ricans are still suffering the effects of natural disaster facilitated by a history of colonialism, the stakes for new social analyses like these are high. Within this context historicizing Identity Politics vis-à-vis neoliberalism, assessing the co-optation of the former by the latter, and seeking analytic frames that undermine this co-optation while retaining the

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goal of liberation is not merely an intellectual exercise. Within this context such a project is about undermining the necropolitics of empire emerging from and enacted upon politicized geographic space and the people within that space. Put differently, such a project is about undermining death and the ways our institutions and subject-identities are complicit in perpetuating death. Such a project is not new. As the women of the Combahee River Collective themselves articulated, the work of undermining death and seeking a new world that promotes life has always been the work of minoritized peoples, especially Black women. In these times we are pressed to, once more, learn from and build upon this tradition. For in the final analysis, the cost of not doing so might prove to be too high. . .

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