Completing my RRASC internship final report has been a long and arduous process. Faced with complications like not having a computer due to my home being burglarized, and the rush of coming to Hampshire right after I finished SisterSong for Residential Life training, time to process my experience has been limited. Looking back on my weekly blog posts helped me figure out where to begin, but I’m wondering if the amount of words and space allotted in a five-to-seven page report can truly encapsulate my three-month experience at SisterSong and it’s drastic effect on my life.

When I started at SisterSong, I had no idea what Reproductive Justice really was outside of the weird contexts I would hear students misconstrue on the Hampshire campus (granted the translation of knowledge can get lost along the way). I knew that I was interested in social justice, legal rights and personhood, and the idea of equality but I never thought about reproductive justice because I was so used to hearing about social justice and reproductive rights separately. My scholarly feminist work began to illuminate the inextricable connection between both social justice and reproductive rights for women of color, but it wasn’t until I began working at SisterSong that I began to realize the very real effects women like myself feel.

As a college student, it can be easy to isolate myself in a bubble where I am only concerned with my immediate surroundings. Working at SisterSong, however,
provided me with much more than the opportunity to work in a women of color created and operated space but also the in-your-face everyday discussions about the issues disproportionately affecting women of color and our communities. Before I arrived at SisterSong, I heard about feminist and community activist responses to the racist/sexist billboards popping up around the country that targeted the decisions of women of color; conversely, very little information was readily available that focused on activist led responses. Likewise, I would often hear whispers about marches, rallies, and calls for forced resignation of leaders at many prominent pro-life and religious institutions for their participation in the demeaning billboard process. It wasn’t until I continued working at SisterSong that I saw the process by which activists worked to get the results they desired.

From what I remember, when I first arrived, the SisterSong staff placed significant emphasis on three core projects. These endeavors included creating strategies to deal with the billboard crisis, advancing the Trust Black Women campaign, and finalizing the logistics of their national Let’s Talk About Sex Conference. Much of my work was set before I arrived. I was expected to assist with the conference, learn as much as possible about RJ, and complete a project that would relate SisterSong to my studies at Hampshire. I completed all of these goals with the exception of the latter because my computer was stolen. Though this sucked, for lack of a more academic adjective, I did complete small writing assignments, including an analysis of the Public Religion Research Institutes Millennial Report that I worked on with Charity, social media work, and a compilation of statistical data for SisterSong to release to its base.
Although I appreciated working at SisterSong because it was the first time I was in a space filled with women who understood my plight, I often found myself asking if SisterSong’s structure was truly as radical as the work they produce. After all, SisterSong is known as an alternative organization but how much different is SisterSong – or any activist organization for that matter – from the corporate model? I questioned this because the office was open during traditional corporate hours, you could see the differences in stress on staff members with children and those without, and their were many instances where a certain level of respect was given to older staff that newer staff had yet to attain. As an outsider looking it, it could be easy to critique SisterSong for maintaining corporate practices. What is not as simple, is figuring what opposite of a corporate model actually entails? What would a truly non-traditional system look like when the corporate model exists as the only model?

As much as I thought about SisterSongs’ bind in trying to tear down a structure the organization was very much a part of, I had several significant experiences. The first being my attendance at the Let’s Talk About Sex (LTAS) conference; next, developing a piece for the fall issue of Collective Voices (SisterSong’s publication); and lastly, my participating in the environmental justice and reproductive justice (EJ/RJ) roundtable. For LTAS specifically, I enjoyed meeting so many women of color and allies working towards common goals. Though I did not have much time to participate in workshops, due to illness and focusing on conference logistics, I enjoyed conversing with conference participants and even some hotel visitors and staff about RJ work. Likewise, my appreciation for
SisterSong deepened, as I felt welcomed and wanted during the EJ/RJ discussions. I not only spoke as a brand new intern but a woman with a limited scope of what RJ actually entailed. Nevertheless, when I raised my hand to give suggestions, ask questions, or speak from my experience, I was neither shunned nor forced to feel as though my opinion was less valid because of my inexperience in the RJ movement.

While these highlights are among my positive and proud moments at SisterSong, I must admit I had several disappointments both on my end and at the hands of others. During the conference, I found myself sad that I could not participate in many workshops and plenary sessions. Looking back on this, I can understand my immediate feelings of sadness, however, I wish I had spent more time focusing on the value of serving the women and men working to further the progress of the RJ movement. Far too often we, as a people, praise politicians and celebrities for their work and advocacy without realizing how few of them would truly commit to the work they do without the pressure of advocates, some of whom attended LTAS.

Another low of the LTAS conference was the irony of attending a conference on advancing the reproductive and social rights of women of color while experiencing several forms of racism and classism at the hands of hotel staff. Not only did the Miami welcome speaker further polarize those belonging to Miami-South Beach versus “those poor colored folks actually in the city of Miami,” but many of the hotel employees continuously policed my actions. Granted I am a woman of color who could not have afforded the LTAS conference if I were not SisterSong sponsored, I think it was highly inappropriate for hotel staff to treat me
as a criminal during meals. This made me feel as though I didn’t deserve the work-getaway-learning experience that LTAS became.

Much like wanting to work on my service to those attending the conference, I wish I had connected more with my boss. Heidi is an amazing woman, teacher, resource, etc. and I know now more than ever the importance of communicating with employers. This summer was extremely difficult for me outside of SisterSong and I hadn’t realized how much this affected my relationships at work until it was too late. This was a valuable lesson for myself (and hopefully anyone reading this), as I could have solved many of my problems by asking for help. Heidi and the staff did an amazing job with helping to accommodate me during the stressful moments of the summer and even going so far as to having a self-help session with me. I had never heard of the practice of self-help until I got to SisterSong and I cannot explain how great it felt to get some of the things I expressed off my chest (shout-out to Laura).

I improved significantly during my time at SisterSong in several ways. The first being increased comfort in my ability to write about myself from an academic perspective – an important skill when few opportunities exist for women of color to incorporate our personal lives; secondly, I now have the ability to explain the RJ framework while simultaneously making conscious decisions that can directly or indirectly further the RJ cause; and lastly, I gained the strength in character and responsibility I needed to tell those I am working closely with about the personal difficulties I face.
When I originally chose SisterSong, I did so because I knew I wanted experience in social justice related legal and policy work. I initially thought SisterSong would merely provide me with a few ideas to expound upon in my Division III and perhaps post-graduate career decisions. What I have found, however, is that this experience has completely shaken up my entire understanding of the Division III project I am embarking on in addition to my understanding of reproductive rights. While this is frightening because I am expected to have the basic premise of my Division III solidified in the coming weeks, I am also grateful because my completed work is one that is sure to cover more ground than I would not have otherwise covered without working at SisterSong.

I have not only forged new relationships and gained more knowledge around the issues SisterSong works on, but I have also begun a new life journey with Candace, another staff member, as my mentor and stylist. When I think about the rapport I have built with many of the women at SisterSong, I know it is unparalleled to those I will create in the future because of SisterSong’s organizational structure. I mean, who else has the great Loretta Ross? Overall, I enjoyed my experience and I recognize my entering SisterSong during a place of transition as an organization, staff, and collective. Nevertheless, the interconnections of RJ, EJ and Social Justice are now inseparable entities that I (sub)consciously work towards improving.