OUR COLUMNISTS

UNTIL BLACK WOMEN ARE FREE, NONE OF US WILL BE FREE

Barbara Smith and the Black feminist visionaries of the Combahee River Collective.

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I first encountered the Combahee River Collective Statement in a women's-studies class, my second year of college at SUNY Buffalo. We had been reading about divisions within the feminist movement in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, and the emergence of a body of thought captured in the framework of "Black feminism." The Combahee River Collective was a small organization, but it involved some of the luminaries of Black feminism: Barbara Smith and her twin sister, Beverly Smith, as well as Demita Frazier, Cheryl Clarke, Akasha Hull, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Chirlane McCray, and Audre Lorde. Equally dismayed by the direction of the feminist movement, which they believed to be dominated by middle-class white women, and the suffocating masculinity in Black-nationalist organizations, they set out to formulate their own politics and strategies in response to their distinct experiences as Black women. But they were not only reacting to the deficits they found in organizations led by white women and Black men. They were also inspired by the national liberation and anti-colonial movements, from the Algerian struggle against the French occupation to the Vietnamese resistance to the American war. The C.R.C. saw themselves as revolutionaries whose aspirations far exceeded women's rights: they aspired to the overthrow of capitalism.

The Black women of the C.R.C. were not the first to break with white feminist and Black-nationalist organizations. In many ways, they built on the work of the Third World Women's Alliance, which was an outgrowth of the Black Women's Liberation Committee—a caucus of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. What distinguished the C.R.C. from those groups was the explanatory power of their statement, which was first collected in Zillah Eisenstein's anthology "Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism," in 1978. Reading the statement for the first time, two things struck me. The first was its effort to combine socialist politics with feminism. I had been a socialist since I was fourteen, and, in the groups that I had become active with, feminism was always painted as hostile to socialism. As it was explained to me, feminists saw

the world as divided between men and women and not between classes. The Combahee Statement obliterated that premise. Theoretically rich and strategically nimble, it imagined a course of politics that could take Black women from the margins of society to the center of a revolution. Because Black women were among the most marginalized people in this country, their political struggles brought them into direct conflict with the intertwined malignancies of capitalism —racism, sexism, and poverty. Thus, the women of the C.R.C believed that, if Black women were successful in their struggles and movements, they would have an impact far beyond their immediate demands. As they put it, "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 the systems of oppression."

My other revelation came out of their insistence that "Black feminism" was necessary to clearly articulate the experiences of Black women. It had never occurred to me that the framework of "race" was not nearly capacious enough to capture the particular ways that Black women experienced American society. I had seen the everyday variety of racism in the U.S. that left most Black people with a bitter edge, at least those in my family. I had seen my father harassed by police, in Cincinnati, Ohio, for jaywalking. When I was seven, I saw my father jump in to stop a group of white teen-agers from threatening my older brother, only to have the police blame him for the altercation. But my mother's experiences were altogether different. She and my father met in high school, dated through college, and eventually landed in graduate school, at SUNY Buffalo, in the early nineteen-seventies. While my father believed that a revolution was within the grasp of those who fought hard enough to make it happen, my mother, who had studied English, French, and Spanish in college, was finishing her doctorate and raising me and my brother. My father left when I was two, and my mother took us to Dallas, where she worked as a reading specialist for the Dallas Independent School District. Three of her brothers followed her to Dallas, and one, a Vietnam veteran, lived in our garage for a time, as he tried to jump-start his life. When, in the early eighties, my mother got burned out from haggling with less qualified white male

administrators and a fancy career that was going nowhere fast, she started a house-cleaning business. She didn't know about the Volcker Shock and the recession that would follow. My mother's advanced degrees could not protect her from bankruptcy in 1982. They could not stop our lights from being periodically turned off, or a steady stream of bill collectors from coming to our front door. They could not help her relax, work less, or be more present. My mother died at fifty-two, fifteen years after she filed for bankruptcy; the chronic exhaustion she felt from work was masking the symptoms of an untreated and ultimately deadly case of lupus. Doris Jeanne Taylor's life was unceremoniously extinguished two weeks after she entered the hospital.

It was years before I pulled those different strands of my mother's life together. I was still annoyed by her absence and neglect when I was younger. It was not until long after her death that I saw the composite portrait of a single Black mother, raising two kids with a bankruptcy scuttling her credit, a perpetually faulty car draining her bank account, and a broad network of family members to care for. Racism alone could not explain what killed my mother. Gender was also an incomplete answer. It was the overlap of race, gender, and the aspirations to the comfort of a class that she poked around the edges of but could not ultimately break into. Black feminism made sense of my mother's life of work, her compulsory caretaking and debt. It made sense of her senseless death, just shy of the twenty-first century. Malcolm X made it plain: "The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."

All of this stood in stark contradiction to what, as a young person, I had understood "feminism" to be. I had seen feminism as the domain of white women primarily concerned with glass ceilings and access to abortion. Those were fine things to act against and struggle for, but they felt like lightweight politics in contrast to the things that my nineteen-year-old self was concerned about: the U.S. presence in the Middle East, police brutality and racism, poverty and inequality. The women of the C.R.C. described how the myriad ways that Black

women experienced oppression could translate into a radical rejection of the status quo. As they explained, "Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence." And they were doing even more than that: the Combahee Statement was also written to describe how race, gender, and sexual orientation were woven together in the lives of queer Black women. In describing the distinct experiences of Black women who were lesbians, they pioneered what would eventually become known as "intersectionality"—the idea that multiple identities can be constantly and simultaneously present within one person's body. The experiences of Black lesbians could not be reduced to gender, race, class, or sexuality. The C.R.C. demanded politics that could account for all, and not just aspects of their identity.

Most important, the C.R.C. saw themselves as socialists and as part of the broader left, but they understood that no mass movement for socialism could be organized without responding to the particular forms of oppression experienced by Black women, Chicana women, lesbians, single mothers, and so many other groups. Their point was a simple one: you cannot expect people to join your movement by telling them to put their particular issues on hold for the sake of some ill-defined "unity" at a later date. Solidarity was the bridge by which different groups of people could connect on the basis of mutual understanding, respect, and the old socialist edict that an injury to one was an injury to all. It was mind-blowing!
To be honest, I didn't know what to do with the Combahee Statement. It was so unlike anything I had ever read before in politics, and it clashed so violently with what I had come to believe about feminism and "identity politics" that I did not know how to integrate it into my activism. I had to put it away.

The members of the Combahee River Collective march down Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, at a 1979 memorial for murdered women of color. Photograph by Ellen Shub / Courtesy the Estate of Ellen Shub

The Combahee River Collective formed in Boston, in 1974, during a period that regularly produced organizations that claimed the mantle of radical or revolutionary struggle. The group broke from the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization, and named themselves after a daring Union Army raid, led by Harriet Tubman, to liberate seven hundred and fifty enslaved people in South Carolina. A few years ago, Barbara Smith told me that she and her comrades believed that, by naming the group after the Combahee River Raid, they were both honoring Harriet Tubman and indicating that liberation required political action.

The women of the C.R.C. drew on their experiences in Black, male-dominated organizations. Demita Frazier had been a member of the Black Panther Party in Chicago, right up until the Chicago police helped to assassinate the Panther leader Fred Hampton, in 1969. More generally, Black men dominated the leadership of the organized Black left. As a result, many Black women felt shut out of directing those organizations, just as they felt that their experiences as Black women were ignored.

They fared no better in organizations led by white women, who, for the most part, could not understand how racism compounded the experiences of Black women, creating a new dimension of oppression. The overwhelming majority of Black women were working-class and were forced to labor both outside and inside their homes. But Black women who tried to utilize public welfare so that they could spend more time caring for their children were demonized as freeloaders, even as white women who chose to work at home were celebrated for prioritizing their families over personal ambition. In the reality of organizing, these tensions manifested themselves in white women's desire to focus their organizing on abortion rights, while Black feminists argued for the broader framework of reproductive justice, which included the struggle against forced sterilizations of Black and brown women. These were hardly doctrinaire disputes. The eugenics programs of the early twentieth century continued into the nineteen-seventies, as

tens of thousands of women in the United States were subjected to sterilization procedures without their informed consent.

The class and race tensions within feminism lasted far beyond the seventies. When I reached college, in the nineties, these same debates could be found animating women's-studies classes. In my Intro to Women's Studies class, one white woman, who said she was from Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, chafed at what she described as the "divisiveness" of Black feminism. After all, weren't we all women? To clarify, the woman said she was as much in solidarity with the women who cleaned her home as she was with white middle-class women like herself, who had also been trained to lower their horizons and expect less out of life. Apparently, the sisterhood was powerful.

The Combahee Statement was anything but divisive. It celebrated the possibilities of a political coalition born out of solidarity among groups who recognized the need to be engaged in struggle. In this way, the C.R.C. pioneered the notion of "identity politics," perhaps one of the most controversial and misunderstood terms in all of U.S. politics. In the statement, the authors described "the concept of identity politics" in the following way: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. 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."

I recently spoke with Barbara Smith, who made clear that "identity politics" was not intended to be exclusionary or to contend that only those who suffered a particular oppression could fight against it or even comment on it. "We were not being reductive, we were not being separatists," she said. "Combahee was never separatist." This would, of course, have been a rejection of the solidarity at the

heart of the C.R.C.'s politics. Instead, they argued that Black women—and all oppressed people—had the right to form their own political agendas, because no one else would. Smith told me, "By 'identity politics,' we meant simply this: we have a right as Black women in the nineteen-seventies to formulate our own political agendas." She went on, "We don't have to leave out the fact that we are women, we do not have to leave out the fact that we are Black. We don't have to do white feminism, we don't have to do patriarchal Black nationalism—we don't have to do those things. We can obviously create a politics that is absolutely aligned with our own experiences as Black women—in other words, with our identities. That's what we meant by 'identity politics,' that we have a right. And, trust me, very few people agreed that we did have that right in the nineteen-seventies. So we asserted it anyway."

Any concept, once it is released into the world, can take on new meanings when confronted with new problems. Identity politics has become so untethered from its original usage that it has lost much of its original explanatory power. In its earliest iteration, Black feminism was assumed to be radical because the class position of Black women, overwhelmingly, was at the bottom of society. But the civil-rights revolution and concerted efforts by the political establishment created a different reality for a small number of African-Americans. Today, there is a small but influential Black political class—a Black élite and what could be described as the aspirational Black middle class—whose members continue to be constrained by racial discrimination and inequality but who hold the promise that a better life is possible in the United States. They stand in contrast to the Black poor and working class, who live in veritable police states, with low-wage work, poor health care, substandard and expensive housing, and an acute sense of insecurity.

More than a fifth of Black women live below the poverty line, but their lives are largely invisible. Instead, popular culture and mainstream media outlets are fixated on Oprah Winfrey, Beyoncé Knowles, and Michelle Obama, to whom they turn for insights into the experiences of Black women. Much of what is meant by

identity politics in its contemporary idiom is simply representation—the presence of Black, queer, gendered, and classed bodies with almost no attention paid to their political commitments. But the radicality of Black women's politics was based on their position at the bottom. The view is decidedly different from the top. The C.R.C. gave us the political tools to understand the difference between bottom-up and top-down politics, and their distorted manifestation in the identity politics of today.

At an event in late April, 1979, Barbara Smith, with megaphone, protests nine murders of women of color that took place in the first months of the year. Photograph by Ellen Shub / Courtesy the Estate of Ellen Shub

When I came back to the Combahee Statement, in the aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, I saw that its politics had the potential to make a way out of what felt like no way. But then I understood it differently, not just as a critical document in the canon of feminist literature or as a much-needed exposition of the origins of Black feminism. Instead, I read it as a powerful intervention for the left as a whole. In a political moment when futile arguments claimed to pit race against class, and identity politics against mass movements, the C.R.C. showed how to understand the relationship between race, class, and gender through the actual experiences of Black women. As the statement read:

> We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

Black women were at the helm of the growing Black Lives Matter movement, and they, too, were gravitating to the politics of the C.R.C. Smith told me, "Many of the people in the Movement for Black Lives absolutely acknowledge that they are inspired by the politics of the Combahee River Collective and by the feminism of women of color, not just Black women." She was thinking of Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Cheryl Clarke, and of the pioneering Chicana activists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. As Smith put it, "These people were looking at the situation and saying, 'What we have here is not working. We need to think about things in a different way.' And who better to do that than feminists of color who are queer and on the left?" She added, "One of the signs to me that feminist-of-color politics are influencing this moment is the multiracial, multiethnic diversity —and not just racial and ethnic, but every kind of diversity—of the people who are in the streets now. That's right out of the Black feminist playbook."

In 2016, as the fortieth anniversary of the Combahee Statement approached, I realized that it would be an opportunity to draw attention back to the document and its astounding prescience and analysis, and to complicate a stilted and unsatisfying national discussion about who the real inheritors were of socialist politics in the United States. At that time, when I first thought of collecting an oral history of the Combahee River Collective, which became the book "How We Get Free," Senator Bernie Sanders was in the thick of a contentious Democratic Presidential primary. A good portion of the tension was generated by wild and unfounded assertions that socialism and the spoils of social democracy were only of interest to white people. I kept coming back to the C.R.C.'s basic claim:

> We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.

No one had the right to strip socialism and its rootedness in collectivity, democracy, and human fulfillment from Black women, or the Black radical tradition. The claims that socialism was for white people were an affront to a long lineage of Black communists and socialists here in the United States. Black Americans have always been drawn to radical and revolutionary politics as a salve for the diseased wound of racial oppression and the poverty and misery it creates. If lynchings, police brutality, and rat-infested housing were the best that American democracy could offer Black Americans, then how bad could communism or socialism really be?

Today, in the midst of the greatest wave of protest and social upheaval in more than a generation, books about racism, policing, and the Black Lives Matter movement top best-seller lists. Instinctively, many of us turn to history as a way to

grasp some frame of reference. I myself have found the Combahee Statement more compelling than ever. The C.R.C. connected the exploitative tendency of capitalism to a range of oppressions that kept apart those with the most interest in coming together. They envisioned coalition politics on the basis of mutual solidarity, including a commitment to the struggles against sexism, heterosexism, racism, class oppression, exploitation, and imperialism. These were, in their view, the preconditions for a mass movement in which no one's issues were left behind.

After the C.R.C. disbanded, in 1980, Barbara Smith went on to play a critical role in the establishment of women's studies in colleges and universities, as well as in publishing. She founded the legendary Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, with Audre Lorde, in 1980. Smith served on the Albany city council from 2006 to 2013, and later worked in the Albany mayor's office on issues related to inequality. During the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary, she served as a surrogate for Bernie Sanders. Smith is skeptical about the longevity of this particular moment, as she has earned the right to be. Will it turn into something more lasting than a frustrated outburst from those at the bottom? But her caution also betrays the hope and deep desire for radical change that all revolutionaries harbor. Smith told me, "I'm not convinced that, despite the millions of people who are out in the streets expressing that they are done with things as they are—I'm not convinced that that translates into a movement. We now have language, we have an analysis of what's going on with the prison-industrial complex, with mass incarceration, with police brutality, with extrajudicial murders—we have that, and we have bases of operation, because there are definitely Black Lives Matter organizations in various cities around the country." She continued, "But the question for me is: What's next? How do we mobilize all of this energy and actually bring about fundamental political, social, and economic change?"

Of course, what comes next will depend on what those who constitute the movement do. There are no maps or predetermined paths that guarantee the success or failure of a movement. It is a living thing. But we can take inspiration

from the imaginative optimism of the Combahee Statement. Many things have changed since the publication of the document, but many have not, and therein lies the problem that continues to pull people into the streets. The women of the C.R.C. believed that another world was possible, one in which Black women, and thus all of humanity, were freed from systems of oppression and exploitation, as the result of a collective struggle that reached down to the roots of the problems we face.

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