HOW WE GET FREE
BLACK FEMINISM AND THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

In the days after the disastrous 2016 presidential election, a popular meme showing that 94 percent of Black women voters had cast their ballot for Hillary Clinton was circulated as proof that Black women had done their part to keep Trump out of the White House. The meme, though, was misleading. It was true that 94 percent of Black women who voted cast their ballot for Clinton, but those voters represented 64 percent of all eligible Black women. Even though this was a large voter turnout, it represented a 6 percent drop in Black women's historically high turnout in 2012, when Barack Obama was on the ballot. Indeed, the overall turnout for Black voters declined for the first time in a presidential election in twenty years, falling to 59 percent from its historic high of 66 percent in 2012.*

The search for answers to how the loathsome Donald J. Trump could become president of the United States tended to focus on who did and did not vote. Of course that was part of the explanation, but what was often missing was closer scrutiny of what kept tens of millions of people from participating in the election. To that point, given Trump's repeated appeals to racism, why would

fewer, not more, African Americans, including Black women, have participated in that critical election.

Any cursory investigation into the lives of African Americans would have revealed deep dissatisfaction with their conditions—even after the historic election of Barack Obama in 2008. After all, the last few years of the Obama presidency had seen the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and an eruption of Black social protest. Indeed, a 2017 "Power of the Sister Vote" poll, conducted by the Black Women's Roundtable and Essence magazine, found an 11 percent drop between 2016 and 2017 in the support of Black women for the Democratic Party. The poll also reported that the percentage of Black women who feel that neither party supports them had jumped from 13 percent to 21 percent in the same time period.

To anyone who bothered to investigate the conditions in Black communities, these numbers should not be surprising. Looking at Black communities through the specific experiences of Black women would have revealed the depths of economic and social crisis unfolding in Black America. Black women had led the way in electoral support for Barack Obama, and with those votes came the expectation that life would improve. Instead of getting better, wages stagnated, poverty increased, and policing was an added burden. These very conditions explain why Black women have led the latest iteration in Black social protest.

In other words, Black women's experiences cannot be reduced to either race or gender but have to be understood on their own terms. For example, wage differentials between men and women are often used to demonstrate the persistence of sexism in the workforce. The main statistic cited is that women generally make 80 percent of what men make. Of course, that disparity unto itself demonstrates the injustice of sex discrimination in the American workplace, but it fails to capture the enormous injustice experienced by Black women. African American women make, on average, sixty-four cents on every dollar made by white men. In real dollars it meant that Black women were making, on average, $34,000 a year compared to $53,000 for white men. If we looked even closer, we could see that in Louisiana, Black women were making 43 percent of what white men in that state make. And when you consider that in 80 percent of Black families, Black women are either the sole provider or the main provider, it brings into focus the economic hardship experienced by most Black families in this country. The same could be said of poverty. Black women make up 25 percent of the poor, compared to Black men, who are 18 percent; and to white women, who make up 10 percent of poor people. Thus, the inclusion of Black women on their own terms is not a concession to "political correctness" or "identity politics"; it is necessary to validate the particular experiences of Black women in our society while also measuring exactly the levels of oppression, inequality, and exploitation experienced in African American communities. More important, looking at the condition of Black women reveals the utter inadequacy of what qualifies as social welfare in the United States today.


The year 2017 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Combahee River Collective Statement, which introduced to the world terms such as “interlocking oppression” and “identity politics.” The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a radical Black feminist organization formed in 1974 and named after Harriet Tubman’s 1853 raid on the Combahee River in South Carolina that freed 750 enslaved people.

The CRC formed as a radical alternative to the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). The NBFO itself had formed in response to what Black feminists believed was the failure of white feminist organizations to adequately respond to racism in the United States. But the identification of racism alone as a phenomenon in the lives of Black women was politically insufficient as an analysis or as a plan of action.

It is difficult to quantify the enormity of the political contribution made by the women of the Combahee River Collective, including Barbara Smith, her sister Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, because so much of their analysis is taken for granted in feminist politics today. Take, for example, the ubiquity of the term “intersectionality” in mainstream political discourse. The Combahee women did not coin the phrase “intersectionality”—Kimberlé Crenshaw did so in 1989—but 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.

The CRC described oppressions as “interlocking” or happening “simultaneously,” thus creating new measures of oppression and inequality. In other words, Black women could not quantify their oppression only in terms of sexism or racism, or of homophobia experienced by Black lesbians. They were not ever a single category, but it was the merging or enmeshment of those identities that compounded how Black women experienced oppression.

The women of the CRC were not the first Black women to recognize their position in American society. This historic insight was captured, perhaps most succinctly, by Black writer and public intellectual Anna Julia Cooper in 1892: “The colored woman of to-day occupies...a unique position in this country...She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.” In the 1960s, Black feminist activists like Frances Beal described the oppression of Black women as “double jeopardy,” which also recognized the specificity of their compounded oppressions.

The Combahee River Collective built on those observations by continuing to analyze the roots of Black women’s oppression under capitalism and arguing for the reorganization of society based on the collective needs of the most oppressed. That is to say, if you could free the most oppressed people in society, then you would have to free everyone. For the Combahee River Collective, this was not an academic exercise. Not only was it crucial to understanding the particular experiences of Black women as compared to white women and Black men, but it also created entry points for Black women to engage in politics. This was a critical aspect of the CRC’s political intervention in the women’s movement. One could not expect Black women to be wholly active in political movements that neither represented nor advanced their interests. The inability or unwillingness of most white feminist organizations to fully engage with antiracist issues affecting Black women, like campaigning against sterilization and sexual assault or for low-wage labor and workplace rights, alienated Black women and other women of color from becoming active in those organizations.

The same was true within the Black liberation movement that was overwhelmingly dominated by Black men. Indeed, it was not unusual for Black male organizers to oppose abortion rights for Black women on the basis that abortion was genocide for Black people. Thus, the narrow agendas of white liberal feminist organizations and some purported Black radical organizations cut them off from a cadre of radical Black women who had been politically trained through their participation in the civil rights movement and the urban-based Black insurgency during most of the 1960s. The inattention to Black women’s issues also cut them off from newly radicalizing Black women looking to become involved in political activism. In this context, the women of Combahee were not only making a political intervention into the feminist movement, but by doing so, they were also creating new entry points into activism for Black and Brown women who would have otherwise been ignored. This was borne out in Boston, for example, where the Combahee River Collective was centrally involved in campaigns against the sterilization of Black and Brown women, the abortion rights movement, and the emergent struggle against domestic violence. Of course, all of these women newly activated into the feminist movement did not join the CRC, yet the influence of that organization and the generalization of their analysis opened up the world of organizing and radical politics to new Black feminists.

Demita Frazier, for example, had been active in the Black Panther Party in Chicago long before she was involved in the CRC. Barbara Smith cut her political teeth in the antiwar movement and as a fellow traveler of the socialist left and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Beverly Smith had been active in the Congress on Racial Equality in Cleveland. In all of their cases and perhaps thousands of others, these women had come to revolutionary conclusions that their, and indeed all Black people’s, oppression was rooted deeply in capitalism. This meant that the narrow goals of simply reaching “equality” with men or with white people were not enough. It also meant that many Black feminists rejected the calls for women to completely separate from men, as lesbian separatists advocated. Black men and women may experience racism differently in the world, but they had common interests in overcoming it—interests that could not be realized in struggles separated along the lines of gender. The point was to convince Black men that their interests were also tied to the liberation of Black women and that they should play an active role in that struggle.

The radicalization of African Americans over the course of the 1960s brought many of them to revolutionary conclusions. They came to believe that Black liberation could not actually be achieved within the confines of capitalist society. While predominantly Black male-led and -dominated organizations have historically been presented as the vessels for these kinds of politics, radical and revolutionary Black feminist organizations took up these politics well into the 1970s.

The Combahee River Collective Statement stands tall among the many statements, manifestos, and other public declarations of the period for its clarity, rigor, and political reach. It is an important document, not only as a statement of radical Black feminism but also in its contribution to the revolutionary left in the United States. The main reason is that the women of Combahee not only saw themselves as “radicals” but also considered themselves socialists. They were not acting or writing against Marxism, but, in their own words, they looked to “extend” Marxist analysis to incorporate an understanding of the oppression of Black women. In doing so, they have sharpened Marxist analysis by recognizing the plight of Black women as an oppressed group that has particular political needs. As they wrote, “We are not convinced...
that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation."

The CRC identified their recognition of this political tension as “identity politics.” The CRC statement is believed to be the first text where the term “identity politics” is used. Since 1977, that term has been used, abused, and reconfigured into something foreign to its creators. The CRC made two key observations in their use of “identity politics.” The first was that oppression on the basis of identity—whether it was racial, gender, class, or sexual orientation identity—was a source of political radicalization. Black women were not radicalizing over abstract issues of doctrine; they were radicalizing because of the ways that their multiple identities opened them up to overlapping oppression and exploitation. Black women’s social positions made them disproportionately susceptible to the ravages of capitalism, including poverty, illness, violence, sexual assault, and inadequate healthcare and housing, to name only the most obvious. These vulnerabilities also made Black women more skeptical of the political status quo and, in many cases, of capitalism itself. In other words, Black women’s oppression made them more open to the possibilities of radical politics and activism.

The Marxist tradition had also recognized this dynamic when Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin identified the “special oppression” of national minorities as an added burden they faced. Lenin used this framework of “special oppression” to call upon the Communist Party in the 1920s to become more active in the struggles of Black people against racism. Lenin also recognized that the layers of oppression faced by Black people made them, potentially, more curious about and open to the arguments of the Communists.


But “identity politics” was not just about who you were; it was also about what you could do to confront the oppression you were facing. Or, as Black women had argued within the broader feminist movement: “the personal is political.” This slogan was not just about “lifestyle” issues, as it came to be popularly understood, rather it was initially about how the experiences within the lives of Black women shaped their political outlook. The experiences of oppression, humiliations, and the indignities created by poverty, racism, and sexism opened Black women up to the possibility of radical and revolutionary politics. This is, perhaps, why Black feminists identified reproductive justice as a priority, from abortion rights to ending the sterilization practices that were common in gynecological medicine when it came to treating working-class Black and Puerto Rican women in the United States, including Puerto Rico. Identity politics became a way that those suffering that oppression could become politically active to confront it. This meant taking up political campaigns not just to ensure the liberation of other people but also to guarantee your own freedom. It was also of critical importance that the CRC statement identified “class oppression” as central to the experience of Black women, as in doing so they helped to distinguish radical Black feminist politics from a developing middle-class orientation in Black politics that was on the ascent in the 1970s. Indeed, the intersecting factors of race, gender, and class meant that Black women were overrepresented in the ranks of the poor and working class.

Combahee’s grasp of the centrality of class in Black women’s lives was not only based in history but was also in anticipation of its growing potential as a key divide even among Black women. Today that could not be clearer. The number of Black women who are wealthy and elite is small, but they are extremely visible and influential. From Michelle Obama to Oprah Winfrey to US
senator Kamala Harris, they, as so many other Black wealthy and influential people, are held up as examples of American capitalism as just and democratic. They are represented as the hope that the United States can still deliver the American Dream. For example, in the summer of 2016 Michelle Obama delivered a speech at the Democratic National Convention that electrified her audience, as she outlined what she believed to be evidence of American progress. She described how “the generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation . . . kept striving . . . kept hoping so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves.” Michelle Obama ended her speech declaring triumphantly—in a clear rebuke to Donald Trump—“Don’t let anyone ever tell you that this country isn’t great, that somehow we need to make it great again. Because this right now is the greatest country on earth.” But the actual state of the country has never been measured or determined by the wealthiest and most powerful—even in those few instances when those people are Black or Brown. A more accurate view of the United States comes from the ground, not the perch of the White House. When we judge this country by the life of Charleena Lyles, a thirty-year-old, single Black mother, who was shot seven times and killed by Seattle police officers in June 2017, the picture comes into sharper focus. The ability to distinguish between the ideology of the American Dream and the experience of the American nightmare requires political analysis, history, and often struggle. The Combahee River Collective employed this dynamic approach to politics, not a reductive analysis that implied identity alone was enough to overcome the sharp differences imposed by social class in our society.*

The women of the CRC did not define “identity politics” as exclusionary, whereby only those experiencing a particular oppression could fight against it. Nor did they envision identity politics as a tool to claim the mantle of “most oppressed.” They saw it as an analysis that would validate Black women’s experiences while simultaneously creating an opportunity for them to become politically active to fight for the issues most important to them.

To that end, the CRC Statement was clear in its calls for solidarity as the only way for Black women to win their struggles. Solidarity did not mean subsuming your struggles to help someone else; it was intended to strengthen the political commitments from other groups by getting them to recognize how the different struggles were related to each other and connected under capitalism. It called for greater awareness and understanding, not less. The CRC referred to this kind of approach to activism as coalition building, and they saw it as key to winning their struggles. Their analysis, “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,” captures the dialectic connecting the struggle for Black liberation to the struggle for a liberated United States and, ultimately, the world.

Finally, the CRC was important because of its internationalism. Before the multicultural moniker “women of color,” there were “third world women.” The distinction was important histori-


cally as well as politically. It was a way of demonstrating solidarity with women in countries that were often suffering because of the policies and military actions of the US government. It was also a way of identifying with various anticolonial struggles and national liberation movements around the world. But of even more importance was the way that Black women saw themselves not as isolated within the United States but as part of a global movement of Black and Brown people united in struggle against the colonial, imperialist, and capitalist domination of the West, led by the United States. One can see the importance of international solidarity and identification especially today, when the United States so readily uses the abuse of women in other countries, such as Afghanistan, as a pretext for military intervention.

The women of Combahee tied their sophisticated political analysis to a "clear leap into revolutionary action." For them, the recognition of oppression was not enough; analysis was a guide to action and political activity. This is why this forty-year-old document remains so important. The plight and exploitation of Black women has continued into the twenty-first century, and it is paralleled by growing misery across the United States. The concentration of wealth and power among the "1 percent" is matched only by the growing poverty and deprivation of the bottom 99 percent. Of course, those experiences are not shared equally, as Black women and men are overrepresented in the most dismal categories used to measure the quality of life in the United States. But it does mean that those whom capitalism materially benefits are decidedly small in number, while those with mutual interest in creating a society based on human need are broad and expansive. There are, of course, many obstacles to achieving the kind of consciousness combined with political action necessary to make such a society a possibility. But the CRC Statement offers an analysis and a plan for "revolutionary action" that is not limited by time and distance from the circumstances in which the members wrote it. Their anticapitalism, calls for solidarity, and commitment to the radical idea that another world is possible and, indeed, necessary remain relevant.

This small book, How We Get Free—Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, is an effort to reconnect the radical roots of Black feminist analysis and practice to contemporary organizing efforts. In the same ways that Marxism became a tool for critical analysis in the academy of the 1980s and 1990s, so too did Black feminism find a home in academic circles as the political movements that engendered its rise began to recede from the streets. CRC coauthor Barbara Smith is credited as a founder of Black women's studies. This was critical in opening up spaces for intellectual inquiry and deeper investigation into the lives of the oppressed within the academy more generally. But Black feminism is a guide to political action and liberation. Political analysis outside of political movements and struggles becomes abstract, discourse driven, and disconnected from the radicalism that made it powerful in the first place.

In the last several years, Black feminism has reemerged as the analytical framework for the activist response to the oppression of trans women of color, the fight for reproductive rights, and, of course, the movement against police abuse and violence. The most visible organizations and activists connected to the Black Lives Matter movement speak openly about how Black feminism shapes their politics and strategies today. The interviews I have compiled in this book—with the three authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, #BlackLivesMatter co founder Alicia Garza, and historian and activist Barbara Ransby—are an attempt to show how these
politics remain historically vibrant and relevant to the struggles of today. As Demita Frazier says, the point of talking about Combahee is not to be nostalgic; rather, we talk about it because Black women are still not free.

THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that 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. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.
1. The Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared 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. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. 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. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change
our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post–World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalist economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

2. What We Believe

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from 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. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensible progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g., mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western Hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

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, 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.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

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 antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. 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.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were “smart,” had also been considered “ugly,” i.e., “smart-ugly.” “Smart-ugly” crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our “social” lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers [are] comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se—i.e., their biological maleness—that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists
During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's move-
ment continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In
this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the
organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the
stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we
are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two,
but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not
have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon,
nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power
that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficul-
ties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing po-
itical work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value
placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both
racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, “We are all
damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women.” We are
dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel
the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women.
In “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” Michele Wallace ar-
vives at this conclusion: “We exist as women who are Black who are
feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently be-
cause there is not yet an environment in this society remotely conge-
nial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have
to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.”

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black
feminists’ position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic
isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom,
however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. 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.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of
Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic
assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determi-
nant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female roles
were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970s:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is
the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because
his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his
understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wis-
er... After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the
house because he is able to defend and protect the development of
his home... Women cannot do the same things as men—they are
made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women
is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men
Are not equal to other men, i.e., ability, experience or even under-
standing. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value
of gold and silver—they are not equal but both have great value. We
must realize that men and women are a complement to each other
because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both
are essential to the development of any life.

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly
lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that
seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women
have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but, because
of the everyday constrictions of their lives, cannot risk struggling
against them both.

* Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood," VillageVoice, July 28,
1975, 6–7.

* Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwumake Mwunachi (The Na-
The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women’s movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and started doing an intense variety of consciousness-raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women’s International Women’s Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possibility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO’s bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and, despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements, which were first conceptualized as a lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in
isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to Sisterhood is Powerful Robin Morgan writes: "I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power."

As Black feminists and lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

Combahee River Collective, April 1977
BARBARA SMITH

KEEANGA-YAMAHTA TAYLOR: It's the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the Combahee River Collective Statement. First, how do you pronounce it?

BARBARA SMITH: We always said Comm-buh-hee. Some people say comb—like, you know, a comb that you comb your hair with... I don't know what the real pronunciation is. I have visited there [the Combahee River area in South Carolina], and I think I was around people who pronounced it correctly, and I can't tell you exactly if it matched my pronunciation or if it was something slightly different. But I would say Comm-buh-hee, like the beginning of Comcast or something.

Well, why don't you tell me where the name comes from—what inspired the collective that formed?

I don't know if this is in the Combahee River Collective Statement itself or if it's in commentary that I have done. One of the things that was happening during that time—pretty much the beginning of the second wave of the feminist moment—was that white women were, for lack of a better word, well, I'll just say taking instead of appropriating. They were taking the names of Black women, par-
ticularly Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and using them for different projects. There was a longtime feminist newspaper in Boston, which evolved over the years into an excellent feminist newspaper. Its name was *Sojourner*. Are you familiar with that one?

Yes.

So there was *Sojourner*. I can't remember if there was anything specifically focused upon Harriet Tubman, except that there was a social service agency in the South End of Boston, which was one of the poor working-class and lower-middle-class sections of Boston—at least in the 1970s it was. It was gentrifying and now it's unrecognizable as what I just described. But, as I said, there was a settlement house in the South End called the Harriet Tubman House, and then they built a new building. Harriet Tubman House was on our radar, although I think we decided to name ourselves the Combahee River Collective before that new building for Harriet Tubman House actually opened.

I had read that short biography, from I think International Publishers, about Harriet Tubman. I don't know if International Publishers still publishes, but they were definitely a leftist press. And it was a very short biography, like maybe about fifty or sixty pages, but full of information that you would not necessarily get elsewhere. And it talked about her having planned and led this raid on the Combahee River that freed over 750 people who were enslaved.

So when we were talking about becoming independent and what to name ourselves, I suggested Combahee. Some of the other members probably read the book, borrowed the book—I told them about what had happened at the Combahee River. So we all agreed we wanted to be the Combahee River Collective. My pers-pective, and I think it was shared, was let's not name ourselves after a person. Let's name ourselves after an action.

A political action. And that's what we did. And not only a political action but a political action for liberation.

Absolutely.

Harriet Tubman—and I think this would be true until this day—as you know, was a scout for the Union Army, and hers was the first and only military campaign in US history that was planned and led by a woman. Yeah, and I know there are generals—women generals now. So I don't know exactly how that fits in with what they have done in our continuing imperialist adventures [laugh] around the globe.

**When did you become a feminist?**

I began to identify or to be curious about feminism in the early 1970s. I graduated from college in 1969. I was very involved in political organizing on my campus, which was Mount Holyoke, including being involved in the peace movement to end the war in Vietnam. And that was stepping out there for a Black woman, although there were some other Black women who were also involved. There were a tiny, tiny number of Black women on that campus anyway.

There were not that many Black women or Black men involved in the movement to end the war in Vietnam. There just weren't that many. We finally took heart when Martin Luther King spoke out about the war. And that was during my college years. I was involved in a group called the Civil Action Group. They had focused on civil rights issues. But by the time I got to college in '65, the civil rights movement was really changing, and morphing, into Black liberation, Black power, and Black nationalism. I was also
involved in student organizing around campus issues, particularly Black student organizing.

I spent my junior year at the New School for Social Research. There was a college program that they had just started, and it was a two-year college program for juniors and seniors only. So they really had designed it to pull people transferring from other institutions. And because of the content and the perspective of the New School College, and also the context of the New School for Social Research, which of course has always been at least a progressive academic institution, they were really pulling students who were some of the most dissident in the entire nation. Because they were all students who were not satisfied with where they were.

I had transferred from Mount Holyoke, which was a pretty conservative middle-of-the-road institution in many ways, but there were students in my program from Antioch, from Reed, maybe even UC Berkeley, etcetera. So the first day [laughter] we had this assembly—and it was of course a small group of students, like a hundred or so perhaps—but the first time we had a meeting in the beginning of the semester—this was the fall of ’67—I looked around this auditorium and I thought, “Wow, these are some of the most dissident students in the entire country! And I’m with them!” You know? [laugh]

So that was great, because I was already radicalized in some sense. But being at the New School, I became even more so, because there were people in my classes who were very involved in SDS—Students for a Democratic Society. Our teachers were also young radicals, by and large. So it was a wonderful experience for me. I came back to Mount Holyoke then my senior year. But in the meantime, the summer of ’68, I had been in Chicago for the Chicago convention demonstrations... against the war.

* Upward Bound was a college-prep program for low-income Black and Brown youth that was originally funded by the War on Poverty.
So we definitely knocked heads. He was very ideological and very sexist. But be that as it may, that's what I was doing. So one of the people I met was this wonderful guy named Allen Binstock, and he was a student at Western Reserve. He and another friend of his, and probably more friends who I do not recall—we clicked because we were activists and we were involved in the movement against the war in Vietnam. I think Allen might have been in SDS, probably.

We didn't have SDS at Mount Holyoke. I did not join SDS when I was at the New School because it was basically a white male organization. And I didn't really see myself—even though my politics were aligned with SDS, I just didn't see myself being in a white male-dominated organization. I met women—there were women who I knew when I was at the New School—I don't know if any of them were in SDS or not.

**On what basis were your politics aligned? What were you in agreement with?**

As I said, our politics were aligned. So Allen and some of his friends, all summer long, we were talking about the Chicago convention demonstrations, and wondering whether we were going to go because the Chicago police had let everybody know that they were about [laughter] beating heads. And being very, very adversarial if indeed people did come. And Rennie Davis, one of the leaders in SDS—he came and spoke, I believe, at Western Reserve—not connected to our Upward Bound program, but he came and spoke that summer. And after seeing Rennie speak, I was like, "Okay, I'm going. I'm going to do this."

The thing that I was going to say about my dear Aunt LaRue is that as my sister and I got more politically active—and we did get involved in the civil rights movement as teenagers in Cleveland she never put up any roadblocks. And I can only imagine—I can't tell you what was said when I told her—I don't know what she said to me when I said, "I want to go to Chicago for this anti-Vietnam War demonstration." Whatever she said, I don't remember it being a big fight. I mean, I don't remember any fight or conflict at all. Whatever was said, I went. She did not stand in the way.

And she and my sister—they were watching it on television as the police riot unfolded. And when I hear—sometimes you know on NPR or on the news, sometimes they'll do a story on the anniversary of the Chicago convention demonstrations. I swear, when I either hear a story or see a story like that, my anxiety just goes through the roof and I think, "I can't believe I was there. I can't believe I was there." So incredibly upsetting. And then I think about what my aunt and my sister were going through watching it on TV wondering they were ever going to see me again.

**Right.**

But as I said, I was given that amount of latitude, and of course this is a transforming experience. Now to get back to feminism in my senior year—the Columbia University strike happened during the year I was at the New School. So the New School closed down in solidarity with what was going on at Columbia. That's how hip the professors and the administration were at the New School. Its like, "Oh! Columbia's going out on strike? Okay, so we're closing down, so if you want to participate up there, go ahead."

So that's where I first got to read Marx and other socialist thinkers in the original. It was a great experience for me. Mark Rudd was speaking on one of the other nearby campuses—probably Amherst, in the early fall of 1968. So we go to see him, and then another friend of mine and I who I had just met—even though
we were in the same class, we connected because she also had been in Chicago for the demonstration. We bonded around that. And I think it was Betsy who said, "We've got to bring Mark Rudd to Mount Holyoke!" [laugh] And you know, better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission. That's how we operated.

He said he would come, and we had this beautiful outdoor amphitheater at Mount Holyoke. It was a gorgeous fall day. I had really good relationships with the people who ran what was called our Fellowship of Faiths. We did not have a student union or anything like that, but our Fellowship of Faiths functioned in many ways like a student center because you could do things there—have meetings, bake. You know, or cook meals—there was a kitchen, et cetera.

The dean of the college chapel and the assistant dean of the college chapel—they were people who I had had really good relationships with during my first two years at Mount Holyoke. We asked them if they would provide the sound system, which they did. And the way that we advertised that Mark Rudd was going to be there was that we wrote in colored chalk on the sidewalks [laugh] "Mark Rudd, today, amphitheater, 12 o'clock." That's what we did.

My understanding is that the administration was losing their natural minds. They were losing their minds, because Mark Rudd, well-known student radical, male [laugh] from Columbia, is going to be at Mount Holyoke. And what can we do? They did not stop us. I mean, they could have. I think that the police were certainly made aware that this was happening. But he did come, and he did speak. So, when did I first get involved with feminism? He was traveling with a woman in her early twenties, in our age group, who described herself as being a part of women's liberation.

And I looked at this white woman and I could not even understand—what the hell is she talking about? I could not—this is '68, right? I had no idea what she was talking about, because she was white, you know? And my perspective was, like many Black women—and even now some Black women still hold this today—my perspective then was like, "What do white women have to complain about? I mean, they've been terrorizing us in their homes and in their kitchens for several centuries here now." "They are the excuse for a pandemic of lynchings in the United States." Their status as, you know, "pure white women" is instrumental, and has been instrumental, in lynching and other forms of racial violence. Their status also was the absolute opposite of what our status was as Black women. So I couldn't even wrap my mind around it.

But after I got out of college and began to deal with not so much the workforce—though that to some extent, because I went directly from college to grad school—but trying to do things, to buy a portable electric typewriter as I started my graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh—I couldn't get one. I could not put it on credit or anything—because I couldn't apply for credit in my own name on my own behalf because I was female!

Wow.

Now a young male recent college graduate—I mean, and mark my words, college graduate, right? That guy would have been able to get credit. But you couldn't get credit in those days unless it was attached to your husband! I mean, that's in my own lifetime! How insane is this, you know? So I said to my dear Aunt LaRue, "I need to get an electric typewriter." I had a manual. I said, "I really need to get an electric typewriter." I said, "Would you get it for me and I'll pay you back?" And that's exactly how I got that typewriter. Which is ridiculous.

During the spring of my senior year [when I was home for break]—because I always like to try to keep options open if I
can—I thought, "Well, let me go and explore perhaps working for an airline." Because one of my big, big, dreams as a young person was to travel. That was really high on my list. We didn't travel when I was growing up, probably much to our benefit, given that it was during Jim Crow [laugh]. We didn't have the [financial] wherewithal to travel, and we also did not go down south where all our family came from. I hate being Georgia. We didn't make the trip that many of our peers were making during that time. And I'm glad that we didn't because I think my sister and I; I think our spirits would have been completely crushed. Anyway, I went to Pan Am—Pan American had an office downtown, as did other airlines. And I went to have a job interview at Pan American because I thought, yeah, that will get me a few places, you know?

In those days there were downtown ticket offices. And these offices were not big. But there was a young white man who was the person doing the interview. I took the test, and I completely aced the test, you know. [laugh] So he had that usual deer in the headlights expression, How did you possibly get this kind of grade on this test given that you're not white and male? But I took the test and I was talking to him about the possible career options—it would have meant relocating to Chicago because that's where one of their headquarters was. I did not have any desire to fly as a part of my job. We talked about me being a reservationist, and I said to him I had enough sense to say to him, even as a not-quite-graduated senior in 1969, I said, "And what would be the possibilities for management or career advancement?" He told me that there would be none.

Because I was female! And I said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to go to grad school!" [laugh]

Right, right.

And these are things that were happening to me in real time. Also, I was trying to be a heterosexual at that time. And there were certain kinds of expectations around what I was supposed to be interested in and doing versus what the males were doing—you know, we socialized with other couples, and one of the things that used to interest me is that when the women were in the kitchen, I'd be out there in the living room, talking to the guys. Because I was interested in ideas, et cetera.

There were all these things used to be called clicks—you know, as in a click, like a light bulb—a lamp clicking on, and you'd say, "Oh! Oh, Okay." "Oh! So that's what's going on in relationship to sexism and gender roles!" After I finished my masters at the University of Pittsburgh, I was at the University of Connecticut working on my doctorate, and I got a job working at Phillips Academy in Andover, which as you know, is one of the bastions of white male elite privilege in this nation.

That's where I met the guy who I was talking about—I ended up socializing with other couples with him in Boston, because he lived in Boston. And one of the things that happened that summer is that Ms. magazine published its first issue. I was a charter subscriber to Ms., and also I got a copy of Our Bodies, Ourselves during that time period too. I was alert to and interested in feminism. I can't remember what year it was, but it was in the early '70s. I think I was still at the University of Pittsburgh, so very early '70s. I got my master's in '71. And one of my other aunts gave me a gift certificate to a local bookstore, and what did I go and buy with my gift certificate? Kate Millett's Sexual Politics. So I was interested in it.

My first semester at UConn I'm taking this course then in women's literature, and we started with—there's a woman named Aphra Behn, I assume British—and she was writing probably in
the 1600s—it was a long time ago. We started that far back. She's known for being one of the first, if not the first, published women writers during that period. I talked to my professor and I said, "I want to do my seminar paper on a Black woman writer." And she had nothing to tell me. I had already done an independent study at Mount Holyoke on four major Black writers, including Wright, Baldwin, Ellison, Amiri Baraka, who at that time was still LeRoi Jones. So I had already done that, you know? It's not like I wasn't trying to teach myself the discipline. But it didn't occur to me at that point that I could include a woman writer, and I didn't even know any major Black women writers to include. But when I talked to my seminar professor, she didn't have any suggestions for me. I think she let me borrow a copy of Gerda Lerner's book, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. All well and good—I loved the book. But it wasn't a book that collected literary—creative literature by Black women writers. Then my aunt died suddenly... in late 1971, in November. I took in completes in the courses I was taking at that time. And then I read in one of the early issues of *Ms.* magazine that Alice Walker, who I was already familiar with—nobody else knew who she was, but I did, because I read everything. I had seen poetry by her in *Harper's* magazine, actually. So I read that she was in the Boston area, up from Mississippi, and she was going to be teaching a course on Black women writers.

I said, "Wow!" I was so excited. And she would be doing that at Wellesley. I wrote to her and I asked if I could audit her course. By the time I connected with her, because she taught it a second time, she was teaching at UMass Boston, the downtown campus, not the Columbia Point campus, because I don't think they had even finished building the Columbia Point campus at that point. But anyway, they had different colleges—colleges 1, 2, and 3—at UMass Boston at the same time. And college 3 was the one for adult learners, and it was, as I said, downtown, in these kind of ramshackle, not fancy, buildings.

But that's where I first got really exposed to Black women's literature. My sister in the meantime had gotten a job working at *Ms.* She lived in New York. She was married briefly during that period. And she met Margaret Sloan, who was one of the major founders of the National Black Feminist Organization. By the fall of '73, I was teaching at Emerson College, and I said, after having audited this course with Alice, "I don't know when my next teaching job will be." And I never really had a teaching job that was not associated with a graduate fellowship or assistantship. But I said, "Wherever I teach, the next time I teach, I'm going to teach Black women writers." I asserted that as a goal.

And lo and behold, one year later, fall of '73, I got a job teaching at Emerson College. There was a wonderful woman who was chair of the English department, and besides the required composition courses that I had to teach, and African American literature—which, of course, I wanted to teach—she said, "Is there anything else? What other things would you like to teach?" I said, "Black women writers." She said, "Fine." [laugh]

So that was my first course. I'm teaching my first course on Black women writers. And then later that fall, the National Black Feminist Organization had its first Eastern Regional Conference, and that was the springboard for our starting an NBFO chapter in Boston, which eventually became Combahee. So I'm not capable of giving short answers.

Oh, no, this is fantastic. Will you say something about coming into contact with NBFO? What were some of the discussions surrounding the feminist movement at that time? Earlier you talked about second-wave feminism.
Right.

Now you’re talking about the founding of this chapter in Boston. What were some of the debates animating feminism at this time?

Well, one of the debates was “How are you going to deal with race?” Does the feminist movement as a whole, does the women’s movement as a whole have any racial consciousness or any interest in dealing with the racial politics and the racism and white supremacy of the nation in which it is indeed located? That was a big question. One of the things that enhanced concern about that question is that Boston at that time was in a state of racial warfare because of the court-ordered school desegregation and school busing. It was like World War III up in there! It was violent. It was frightening. And to say that the city was divided doesn’t even begin to describe—what it was like—to be a young Black woman living in that city, trying to do very different kinds of politics than the usual—in other words, Black feminist politics—and to be doing it in a context of, as I said, just outright racial warfare.

Brenda Verner, who was very antifeminist, came to our first NBFO meeting in Boston—and as a result there were some women who never came back. They never returned. That meeting was held in Roxbury, which as you know is the core Black community in Boston. In mid ’74 I moved to Washington, DC, to work for a major national newspaper, the National Observer. I only stayed there for six months, but it was a good time to be in Washington, because that was the summer that Nixon got his behind on the plane—on the helicopter. So it was an interesting time to be working in media. The job wasn’t working out because of the racism and the sexism. I came back to Boston in late ’74. But in the meantime, Demita had written me a letter . . . and said she was really interested in our formulating and beginning to start a chapter of NBFO in Boston. The letter was forwarded from my Boston address. I explained to her that I wasn’t in Boston at the time but that I would be returning soon. The thing I want you to keep in mind about the context of our organizing is that we were organizing in the context of a race war. They almost beat a Black man to death in Government Center, where the city hall is in Boston, using a staff of a flagpole to do it. Look it up. Ted Landsmark. He was dressed nicely in a three-piece suit. And he was a young Black lawyer.*

So, a major question was racial politics. And then the one that was right next to it was class and economic politics. We connected with socialist feminists in the Boston area during that period because they were the feminists who actually had a race and class analysis. Now whether they were completely woke—to use a contemporary term—who is, and are we ever? And that’s when [Demita] and I met.

And there’s so many things to say about Combahee. We need more dialogue about the history and the ongoing organizing of people who claim and share these politics. But there are a couple of things that I think are really important about why Combahee is still looked at as being valuable forty years later. And one is about why I think the work has continued to be relevant and useful. The other one is about the context of when and how we were doing our organizing. So the first is the fact that we were socialists. We were part of the organized left. We were not sectarian. We did not belong to

* Landsmark was a Yale-educated African American attorney. On the day he was attacked, he inadvertently landed in a rally of white students who opposed busing. Joseph Rakes was a white high school student and was wielding the American flag when he attacked Landsmark. Landsmark was taken to the hospital and suffered a broken nose as a result of the assault.
any parties or groups. Both Demita and I have never belonged to any party or organized formation. That’s just where we were coming from. But we did consider ourselves to be a part of the left. We did consider ourselves to be socialist. And we had been involved in other radical struggles for justice prior to organizing something called a Black feminist collective. I had been involved in the movement to end the war in Vietnam, when I was in college. I was a few years older than Demita, so her high school years were my college years. And to be a Black woman involved in the antiwar movement at that time—that was not really anything that was easy—it was not easy to do. You faced the racism of the predominantly white antiwar movement, but you also experienced a lot of censure from the Black community and from Black activists who by that time in the early seventies had moved into Black nationalism and Black power. I was in grad school at the University of Pittsburgh during that period. They had one of the first Black studies departments in the nation. And I cannot tell you the amount of grief that I experienced because I actually thought that ending a war against people of color—that was fought predominantly by poor young men, who were disproportionately of color—was important. They thought that was irrelevant. That was a white thing to do. So as I said, we had paid—we had already paid some dues. And Demita [was] involved with the Panthers.

One of the things about our involvement in the antiwar movement is something that characterized the politics of Combahee, which was our internationalism. This is not a part of our politics that has necessarily been uplifted widely, but that’s where we were coming from. In those days, the term “women of color” or “people of color” was not used. It may have been used on the West Coast, but we were not there. I didn’t hear it until the early eighties. We were third world women. We considered ourselves to be third world women. We saw ourselves in solidarity and in struggle with all third world people around the globe. And we also saw ourselves as being internally colonized. We were internally colonized within the United States. We identified as third world people. And that kind of solidarity was not just true of the very new Black feminism that we were building. Also at that time there was the gay rights movement—because that’s what it was called, so I’m being historically accurate. What was then the gay rights movement—there was a part of the gay rights movement that also had that kind of solidarity and understanding that the “-isms” connected with each other. And that sector, if you haven’t looked at that history, was in conflict many times with those who only wished to work on gay issues. You can see that Combahee had a very broad perspective.

I’m not saying that there were no kinds of tensions among and between us. There definitely were between us, as women of different racial and class backgrounds. But socialist feminists at least had it out on the table that they thought race and class were important oppressions to be integrated into an analysis of gender oppression. So we did a lot of work with socialist feminists, including going to the socialist feminist conference that happened in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in the summer of ’75. I can’t remember if anybody else from Combahee went. But I met Cheryl Clarke there. She is a distinguished Black lesbian feminist poet and activist, and she was eventually published by Kitchen Table. You’ll easily find her work. She still continues to publish new work. But I met Cheryl at the socialist feminist conference, and we were kind of like, “What in the hell are we doing here with all these white people?”

**What was KitchenTable Press and how did it come to be?**

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was not a project of Combahee. Audre Lorde and I had become friends in the mid to
late 1970s—she participated in our Black feminist Combahee River Collective retreats. And we also saw each other in other contexts, too. She was coming to Boston in the fall of 1980 to do a Black women’s poetry reading on Halloween. Donna Kate Rushin, whose work is in both Home Girls and in This Bridge Called My Back—all of those books, of course, had not come out at that time. But Donna Kate Rushin, a wonderful writer and poet who lived in Boston. And I can’t remember—there’s a woman from New York—I think Hattie Gossett was also one of the people who was coming from New York to read. And then there was one other person, I think, from New York. But anyway, there was this wonderful white gay man who was really down with Black feminism and Black lesbians. His name was Clover Chango. And he was the organizer of this Black women’s poetry reading. And he had done cultural events like that before, and would do things like that subsequently. So he was organizing this reading for Halloween in 1980. And Audre and I were talking on the phone prior to her coming for that purpose. And she said, “Barbara, we really need to do something about publishing.” I don’t know what preceded that remark. I don’t know if we were talking about our most recent adventures with the white feminist publishing establishment, which was not really an establishment, but you know what I’m saying.

I’m referring to the infrastructure of the white feminist publishing movement, in which she and I were both thoroughly involved, both on the periodical side, and also on the press/publication side, because our work was getting published in those places. When Audre said that, I said “Oh yes, definitely. We absolutely do.” Because we had had some really not positive experiences dealing with white women publishers and publications. I said I would get together a meeting, during the time that she was in Boston, for that poetry reading on Halloween. We did have the meeting, and we had decided even from I think the beginning, because of who we invited to the meeting, that we would be a press for all women of color, not just for women of African heritage. There were some Latinas at the meeting. And that’s how Kitchen Table began. And then we just continued to build and to organize. So it was not a project of Combahee. But it was the next thing after Combahee that I devoted a significant chunk of my life to.

Part of what you’re saying is that, given some of the complications for women of color publishing with whatever number of white feminist presses existed at the time, that there was a particular role that could be played by Kitchen Table that otherwise would not have existed.

Well, absolutely, because we did not have a press. There was no women of color press that was doing the kind of publishing that Kitchen Table did, particularly since we were publishing all women, of whatever sexual orientation, and women of all nationalities, races, and ethnicities. One of the things that we arrived at in the early days—and we moved the press to New York in the fall of 1981. We had not really officially launched until the fall of ‘81, or announced that there was such a thing as Kitchen Table. We certainly had not done any publishing at that point. But we had made the decision—when we talked about who qualified as a woman of color, we came up with, after much discussion, that our definition of women of color was any woman who identified with the indigenous people of her respective nation or land. One of the reasons we put it that way is that there are people of European heritage in Argentina, for example, Jewish women. Are they Latinas or not? Well, I think we could argue that indeed they are,
because of where they were born, and the language they speak, and the culture that they're a part of. So, we made that decision that we were not looking for photographs of people. We just wanted to know if you identified with the indigenous people of your respective nation or country.

To me, that was a very sophisticated decision. And it was a very principled decision. And it's hard to explain, Keeanga, what it was like—in this historical moment—what it was like to have little or nothing. It's hard to explain how ridiculed and how debased and how much insult women of color and feminists of color and lesbians of color in particular—how much we faced in that regard. During a time when gay people can get married, and Beyoncé says she's a feminist, it's difficult to explain what we were up against in the late 1970s.

**How were your politics influenced by socialist feminism?**

**What was socialist feminism and how did they fit into the feminist movement at this time?**

And there were racial divides at the socialist feminist conference. So it's not like there was ever any place where we could go and it was just perfect, or even acceptable. [laugh] Moderately acceptable. It was always like striking out into new territory. Having to make a place for ourselves and a way for ourselves. One of the things that the socialist feminists had organized were women's unions. Are you familiar with the women's unions?

No. **What was the relationship between socialist feminism and the women's unions?**

In the 1970s, there were women's unions—socialist feminist women's unions—all over the United States. I don't know how many there were. I think there were at least twenty or thirty of them, maybe even more. But they were women's unions that were connected to each other. That's what they called themselves.

So ours was the Boston Women's Union. And there were similar socialist feminist organizations all around the nation. I'm sure Chicago had one. I know California or Berkeley, Bay Area, had one. I can't tell you all the places they were. But that would be fertile ground for you to do some research on, too. It's fascinating to me that these are politics that you undoubtedly would identify with, and yet here's a chapter of that history that you don't know anything about. There was a network—a national network of socialist feminist women's unions. They were all aligned with each other. I don't know if they had conferences or not. They may very well have had conferences. Because I actually attended the socialist feminist conference in 1974. '74? Let me just think. '75. In 1975, the summer of 1975, there was a socialist feminist conference at Antioch College in Ohio. And it was attended by hundreds of women, if not more than hundreds. It might have been a thousand women. It was very well attended. And that's where I met Cheryl Clarke, actually. But that conference had the familiar problems around the marginalization of women of color. There were relatively few women of color there. The reason that I went is because we had met, and had begun working with socialist feminists in the Boston area by that time. Because there was a strong Boston women's union in Boston, and we met them because of them inviting us to get involved with the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse. That was my first kind of organizational interaction with the socialist feminists in the Boston area. And a couple years later, it was socialist feminists primarily who organized against the Hyde Amendment and started the Abortion Action Coalition. They were doing other things. I can't tell you all the issues that they were working on, because I was not part of their organizational structure.
But around the issue of sterilization abuse, and abortion rights, those are two of the major initiatives that we worked with socialist feminists on. And we did so for quite some time. So we're talking about a few years. And some of the people who I knew from that era, I'm still friends with to this day. The white women in the socialist feminist movement had been a part of the left, of course. We were age peers, women in our twenties and thirties, for the most part. And they had been sure involved with the movement to end the war in Vietnam, campus organizing, etcetera. These were women who actually understood that you could not really deal with sexism and the exploitation of women if you didn't look at capitalism and also at racism. So unlike some of the other feminists—cultural feminists, radical feminists, lesbian separatists, bourgeois feminists, and mainstream feminists—unlike all of those groups of feminists, socialist feminists had a race and class analysis...and thought that addressing race and class were important. Whether they did so expertly and without any mistakes, that of course was not true. We sometimes knocked heads around what we perceived as their racism and perhaps sometimes their classism or elitism or whatever. It's not like it was all smooth sailing, because we were organizing across identities. We were doing that intersectional organizing. But of all the feminists, of the varieties of feminists that I just described, socialist feminists were best aligned, as far as I'm concerned, with the work of Combahee. Because they had a race and class analysis that was actually a solid race and class analysis as opposed to, "Oh, I don't really care if people are different." The baloney, you know. "I don't really see color." "Well, time to go to the ophthalmologist."

The socialist feminists, the Boston Women's Union was already looking at the issue of sterilization abuse before members of Combahee started participating. We got involved and we had what was called the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse in Boston. CESA. There was a really incredibly brilliant and wonderful leader around sterilization abuse, whose name is Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias. When we first met her, she was Helen Rodriguez. She was a Puerto Rican woman who was a pediatrician. And she just incredible, as far as inspiring us and teaching us about—strategically—how we could indeed bring this issue to the fore.

We would have demonstrations at Boston City Hospital. I lived in the South End at that time, where Boston City Hospital was. And that was the hospital for poor people—the public hospital in Boston. There was also a very infamous antiabortion case. Have you ever heard of Dr. Kenneth Edelin?

No.

Dr. Kenneth Edelin. He was an ob-gyn—and he was Black. He did a legal abortion in Boston City Hospital, and he was tried for manslaughter.

Oh my god, wow.

This had to have been—this is after Roe v. Wade. So abortion was legal, right? And the compulsory pregnancy people—they had been looking for an ideal test case. And with whoever was around during the procedure cooperating, they brought him up on charges. He went on trial. We used to go to the courthouse, where his trial happened. Fortunately, he was acquitted. We were triumphant.

So we were involved in his case. And then there was the case of Ella Ellison, a Black woman wrongfully convicted of robbery and first-degree murder, who was serving two life sentences. We were involved in the organizing to free Ella Ellison, and eventually all charges against her were dropped. We were involved in a lot of
things. The Committee to End Sterilization Abuse was connected with CARASA, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, in New York City.

In those days, if you were politically involved, particularly as socialist feminists and leftists, you were always studying and reading, you know? So we learned a lot about population control. The worldwide population movement. Eugenics. Probably it was during that period that I first read some biographical material about Margaret Sanger and the founding of Planned Parenthood.

We were very serious. And it was great. It’s like I got my education in college and in grad school, but I got another kind of education just being in the movement. And as I said, we were successful in Boston in eventually getting legislation or regulations to ban sterilization abuse. Sterilization abuse was happening to women of color all over the country and in Puerto Rico. It was so common in Puerto Rico that they just called it “la operación.” In Spanish, “La operación,” or however you would say it.

So many women had been sterilized in Puerto Rico. Native American women were disproportionately sterilized against their will or without their consent. Black women, particularly Black women who were receiving government entitlements, were sterilized. There were two sisters—the Relf sisters in Alabama. The Relf sisters, Mary Alice, who was twelve years old and Minnie Lee, fourteen, had developmental disabilities. They were sterilized as teenagers. So it was pandemic, you know? And we were trying to deal with that.

Those are some of the things we were doing in the early days. But those contradictions—I talked a lot about the socialist feminists because we shared political ideology with them, and political priorities—the radical feminists saw patriarchy and sexism as being the primary contradiction. We did some organizing with them as well, because they were strong on violence against women. I had one friend in particular, Lisa Leghorn; she was one of the people who helped to start the first battered women’s shelter in Boston, which was called Transition House.

We worked with anybody who we could work with, whoever it was viable to work with. And it was a wonderful time, because we were young, we were idealistic, we were energetic, and in the case of Black feminists in Combahee, we were making it up from scratch.

Let me ask you about that. Because you said that you began as a chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization.

That’s right.

And then you became the Combahee River Collective. What led to the change, the switch?

We wrote a little bit about that in the statement itself, I believe. We were not getting the kind of support and resources we felt we needed to have as a chapter of NBFO. Because NBFO was a grassroots organization trying to be a national organization without the kinds of infrastructure or funding that, for example, the National Organization for Women had.

NBFO, I think, in some of its aspirations and its perspectives, wanted to be like NOW. That kind of a broad, maybe electorally focused, not necessarily by any means radical or left, formation. But a major thing was that they didn’t have the resources to actually service chapters. And there were chapters in Chicago and Washington. I think some out in California. There were chapters around the country, and it was very difficult for NBFO—I think the national office was in New York City—it was difficult for them to really meet the needs of a chapter organization, given their limited resources.
So there was that, and then there was also the fact that their politics were not the politics that we were developing in Combahee. Because we were very fortunate to have people in the founding group of Combahee who had extensive experience in other movements, including the Black Panthers, the peace movement to end the war in Vietnam, and in socialist organizations. There was one person in particular, Sharon Bourke—she had worked at the Institute for the Black World. And she also was a highly sophisticated, well-educated Marxist. So, we had people who had those politics. And us coming together, at a certain point, we said, "You know, NBFO is just not the right fit for us. Let's be independent." And that's what we did.

How big was your group in Boston?

It was never huge. And I have to say, over the years, I have liked being in small grassroots local groups. It's not that I've not ever done work on a national level—I have. It's just that for me, being in those smaller grassroots organizations that really make a difference in the landscape and in the political possibilities—in a particular place—that has always worked for me.

Combahee, because of the statement, had a much wider impact. But we still were a grassroots collective. We started by doing consciousness-raising. When we were still NBFO, we would have consciousness-raising groups, which was very popular at the time. We did that at the Cambridge Women's Center, which is probably the oldest—if not, the second-oldest—women's center in this country. I don't know how many women's centers there are left in the United States. They used to be everywhere. But as I said, we used to do consciousness-raising meetings at the women's center in Cambridge. And dozens of people came through for those meetings. But as far as the core group is concerned, I would say ten or less.

That's my recollection, that we were always a relatively small group. Starting in '77, we began having Black feminist retreats. That was an idea that I had. I was traveling around mostly the East Coast. But I was already speaking primarily on college and university campuses, because of my work in Black women's literature and Black women's studies. I had the opportunity to meet other Black feminists in different places. And I felt like wow, it's so frustrating that we're so separated. Wouldn't it be great if we could get together?

The first one was in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where Mount Holyoke is. We were using the home of a professor who became partners with one of my dear friends in college after I graduated. We asked if we could use their home for our first retreat, and that's exactly what we did. I think we had two retreats at their home. And they vacated the home for the weekend. We had them in New Jersey. We had them in Washington, DC. We had one, I think, on Cape Cod. We had seven in all.

Wow. And what was the purpose of the retreats?

It was really about—first of all—to get Black feminists together so we could talk about what it was we were trying to do. It was to address isolation that we faced as Black feminists. So it was to get us all together in one place. It was to have serious political discussion. It was to have cultural and social opportunities and outlets. It was everything. [laugh] It was multipurpose, three days of everything. There would be—there was food of a level you could not even imagine.

Because my sister and I, we loved to cook. Demita is one of the best cooks on the planet. So we would throw down. We would
just absolutely throw down. And there were other people—we were all Black women of a certain generation. When I meet Black women who don’t know how to cook, it’s just like, “Really?”

Right, right, right.

How did that happen? [laugh]

So there was the food, there were the books. If we had read something somewhere—the only technology at that point was to copy something or to xerox it or to mimeograph it or to ditto it. I mean, we would have like a literature table. A little literature table with books and articles. Bring enough so that everybody could have a copy of whatever it was.

Audre Lorde was involved. In fact, I think it was being around Audre that made me start thinking about how we needed to have a retreat because I had met her earlier. But anyway, Cheryl Clarke came, Gloria—who now is Akasha Hull, but at that time I don’t think she had changed her name quite yet. She is one of the coeditors, of course, of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. All kinds of people, wonderful people who have made real contributions to the movements and also to our culture.

So let me ask you a somewhat related question. What you just said raises a couple of questions for me. One is, I’m wondering if you could say more about Audre Lorde, and her influence at this particular time when you met, and when she was a part of the Combahee retreats. But what more generally—how would you describe her contribution to the politics of Black feminism?

Audre was a key figure in the creation of the mobilizing of Black feminism as a political theory and practice. If you are familiar with her books, I particularly think of *Sister Outsider*, her book of essays. You will see that she was definitely making significant contributions as well as of course in her poetry, to what do we think of—what do we mean when we say we’re Black feminists? What are Black feminist concerns? As I said, she played a pivotal role in the building of Black feminism in the United States. The fact that we got connected via Combahee I think was very important for all concerned, because I think for her—you know, I think this may be somewhere in writing, but I certainly know it to be true—that for her it was like finding a really important community that before that, she didn’t necessarily have in the same way. Although Black feminism was building in New York City as well. So it’s not that there was nothing there, but Combahee, as you know, was unique in the breadth of its politics. Audre definitely identified as a socialist as well. And she had had extensive political experience working in leftist movements prior to being involved with Combahee. So she brought that to Combahee, or to our retreats.

The retreats resulted in an ongoing network among those who participated in them, when we weren’t at a retreat. All of a sudden, as a result of having our retreats, we suddenly had people, sometimes in our own geographic location, sometimes elsewhere, who we could reach out to, plan things with, do projects with, et cetera. The reason I thought of us having retreats—and it was I who thought of the idea of us doing that—as I recollect, I was at a Modern Language Association convention in Chicago. And I guess it was probably December ’78—or it could have been ’77. I’m not sure. I can’t remember. But Audre was at that convention. I don’t think I talked to her about the retreat idea, but it was just so clear to me, because I was getting to go and meet people in various places, who were Black feminists. And I just thought, we need to kind of organize this and institutionalize this. Not in the sense of being
a bureaucracy, but we need to figure out a way that the experiences I was having—because they were so valuable—and the opportunities to meet other Black feminists, that we needed to do that in an organized fashion.

So that's where the idea for the retreats came from. And of course, you know, when I got back and we talked about it in Cambridge, everybody thought that was a great idea. And then we went about the work of organizing them. And they were well organized. We had to communicate only by letter or by phone. We would have a literature table at our retreats, which were generally in people's homes. That is, people who had large enough homes to accommodate us. And that was generally not people who were part of the collective. Our first retreat was at the home of a professor whose name is Jean Grossholtz. She's a political scientist and emeritus at Mount Holyoke. And the first retreat that we had was in their home in South Hadley. And it was a large home. But as I said, wherever we were, whether it was in a house—you know, like wherever we were—and as I said, almost all the retreats—I don't think we ever had a retreat in a public setting—we would have a literature table. And literature in those days was xeroxes. And even mimeographed. That's what literature was for Black women who were interested in feminism or in politics that included a gender analysis. There were no books. [laugh]

As I said, they were very well organized. They generally went from Friday through Sunday. And I would imagine sometimes people arrived on Thursday so that Friday was a full day. We talked about politics. We talked about organizing. I'm sure we talked about spirituality. We would have cultural performances, usually on Saturday evening. There is a stunning example of that that occurred at a retreat that we had in New Haven. And one of the people who's still—she was on the panel at the June Jordan Symposium in 2016. Her name is Sharon Page Ritchie. Sharon was an accomplished belly dancer. And she always said that she wanted to dance for us. And so, at this particular retreat, we were able to have that occur. And when I say it was stunning, it was stunning. Because it was like we were on another plane and on another level. You know, someone who you thought you knew in a particular way, as just another good sister, turns out to be this incredibly accomplished artist in a realm that we would never even have thought.

And, of course, a lot of reading. Readings. Because there were a lot of poets involved... with the retreats. Audre, and Cheryl Clarke, and Akasha Gloria Hull. We talked about anything that conscious Black feminists would be talking about at that time. I think our major goal, at least as I would describe it—our major goal was how do we establish Black feminism functionally so it has actual political impact upon which way forward, for all the groups of people we cared about. I mean, if we were involved—and we were—in working on sterilization abuse and reproductive freedom, we might have been talking about that. I can't tell you. I really can't tell you. The retreats were also a time for healing and spirituality.

Why was that important?

If you're asking why it occurred, as opposed to why it was important—well, actually, the answer to both of those questions could be the same. Because we were Black women. Our value systems were not shaped primarily or initially by the airless ideological sectarianism of the white European male left. They were not. We came from a different place. We came out of Black homes, Black neighborhoods, and Black culture. Black people, as we have observed us over the decades, are always interested in cultural practices and cultural expression. That's why most of US culture that's worth anything was
created by us. As Beverly, my sister says, if it wasn't for Black people, the only thing you would be able to listen to on the radio is news.

Can we talk about your objectives? What did you see ultimately as the goal of your work? Because you talk about being a relatively small organization . . .

Right.

. . . but a serious organization. Serious about political ideas and serious about political activism. What was the goal of your organizing?

I think our goal first of all was to make a political place for people like ourselves. We were marginalized in the Black movement, in the Black liberation movement, certainly in the Black nationalist movement. And we were marginalized in the white feminist movement, for different reasons. One of the reasons we were marginalized in the Black movement, besides sexism and misogyny, was also homophobia. A lot of us were indeed lesbians, and we— including myself, at this time I was coming out. Some people had been lesbians for longer. So they weren't coming out simultaneous with their involvement with Combahee. But for me, those things kind of went together.

So, as I said, we were marginalized in Black contexts. We were marginalized and not understood in white feminist or women's liberation contexts. We needed to have a place of our own. We needed to have a place where we could define our political priorities and act upon them. And that's where identity politics come from. I explain this over and over and over again. I believe that the Combahee River Collective statement is the first place that the term "identity politics" actually appears. I've asked people about this through the years—I'm not just asserting it. I ask anybody who I think might have the depth of knowledge and of reading and research and experience politically to answer that question, "Did you ever see it anywhere else before?" And the answer is always "no."

So this is one of the questions I had as a follow-up, so it actually flows from what you were just discussing. And that is about identity politics. I think that you have really clarified sort of what Combahee meant by identity politics in response to the way that the right sort of abuses the term. That if you're not of a certain race, ethnicity, or gender, then that becomes an invitation to chastise or castigate you and sort of dismiss anyone who doesn't have any of those characteristics.

But however the right wing got ahold of identity politics and began using it as their whipping boy and their whipping girl, what we meant by identity politics when we originated the terminology was wholly different. What we were saying 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 of these identities, and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality. That was all we were trying to say. That's what we meant by identity politics. We didn't mean that if you're not the same as us, you're nothing. We were not saying that we didn't care about anybody who wasn't exactly like us. One of the things I used to say, and of course I've had so many speaking engagements I have taglines at this point [laugh] of things that I've said more than once, is that it would be really boring only to do political work with people who are exactly like me.
That’s what the right pretends that we mean by identity politics, a very narrow version. And unfortunately because identity politics often have been first introduced to younger people by academics who have a partial understanding of what the depths of it would be, they are also confused about it too. Trigger warnings and safe spaces and microaggressions—those are all real, but the thing is, that’s not what we were focused upon.

Ma: So I wonder if you could say more about that. And let me—I’ll just add that I think that there’s certainly a right-wing kind of ridiculous caricature of identity politics. But I think that the concept is also sort of seen in a particular way by liberals or the left, in that for some the notion of identity politics seems to be that unless you suffer a particular kind of oppression, that you have no role in the struggle against it. And so there’s this real emphasis on experience as the main sort of—as the main kind of way that gives you the ability to fight a particular oppression. That if you don’t have that experience, then you really have no role. And so it’s almost as if by embracing one’s identity, that you give up on any sort of hope or notion that there is such a thing as solidarity.

We never meant that. I mean, we actually worked in coalitions. I just described working in coalitions with socialist feminists. We worked in coalitions with other people, too. We certainly showed up for causes that might not be the expected ones for people who had the identities that we had. Demita [has] talked about standing up for union organizing, and for men of color who were being excluded from work sites and from construction jobs, because of racism. And I often cite that example, too, because I guess both of us will never forget the looks on the faces of the guys—who were primarily guys—who were demonstrating. And then we come, you know, and we demonstrate with them. You know, they didn’t expect that to be the case. So as I said, we absolutely believed in coalition building and solidarity. It’s a real misapprehension of what we meant by it. And I don’t know why people skip it. I mean, to me, all the explanation that’s needed is in the Combahee River Collective statement, about what it is we stand for, and who we think we should be working with. But as I have explained, the reason we used the term “identity politics” is that we were asserting 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. At a time when Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture said—when asked what is the position of the Black woman in the Black struggle, and his response was that Black women’s position was to be prone. He actually meant supine.

Now is a time when much solidarity is needed, because the nation-state is in free-fall. It’s not like I’m a worshipper of the nation-state. That’s not what I’m saying at all. But it is a little bit unsettling when you see what was thought to be basic assumptions about how that nation-state functioned go completely out the window. [laugh] This is a time for solidarity. I mean it’s like just because I—and I’m doing a theoretical “I” here, or a figurative “I”—just because I have health coverage doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be standing in solidarity with those who stand to lose it under this regime. Just because I have a US passport and full legal status in the United States doesn’t mean I’m not supposed to be standing in solidarity with people who are undocumented. Who have every right to be here as well. So, as I said, it’s a misunderstanding and a distortion of what it was that we stood for. And I think that sometimes that notion that you just outlined as, “If I don’t have a particular identity, I’m
not allowed to work on a particular issue"—that sounds to me like an excuse. That sounds to me like Okay, so that's what somebody decides if they're not really willing to go there, and go through the struggle of crossing boundaries and working across differences. The concept of This Bridge Called My Back is an incredibly powerful one, and that book was catalytic in the women's movement, and in certain parts of the left. Bernice Johnson Reagon's essay, which was not originally an essay, it was an article based upon a speech—that concludes Home Girls—I always tell people, the reason "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" is the last piece in the book is because that's what I wanted people to leave the book with: the idea of working together across differences.

Coalitions. "This Bridge Called My Back" as a concept. Why are those so important?

Because of the fact that that's the only way we can win. The only way that we can win—and before winning, the only way we can survive is by working with each other, and not seeing each other as enemies. There's far too much of the perspective of: "You're not like me. I'm not like you. I'm not a transgender person. I don't give a damn whether you can go to a bathroom or not. And the fact that you're being murdered summarily, and that your income levels keep you in poverty far more likely than somebody who is cisgender—that's not my problem!" Those are bad politics. Really, really bad politics. And the reason it's important, as I said, is because that's how we win, and that's how we survive in the meantime.

There are ethical principles of struggle that you can see in any significant political intervention in history. You will see—one of the things that you should see in positive movements forward toward justice—not toward power—because there are many in-
terventions that were just about the accrual of power, where you didn't really have that mentality and that principle of "We must all be in this together." But if it's a forward movement toward justice, you will see that people of different backgrounds and different places in a social structure actually at times come together. The abolitionist movement comes to mind. Because there were white people who actually stepped away from their white skin privilege at a critical time in US history, because they could see as plain as the nose on their face that enslaving other human beings was wrong. And they decided, like, "Okay, yeah, I guess I'm white, but I guess I love humanity more." And of course, there were people who were abolitionists who were racists. Who really thought that Black people were inferior to white people. I'm not that big of a fool that I think [laugh] that everything was just . . . lovely, and everybody was just really conscious and open. No. I mean, there were abolitionists who actually thought Black people were inferior, and actually wished for them, once we were freed, to get on the first boat sailing. [laugh] "Go back somewhere else, not here!" But be that as it may, they still lost social standing, paid prices, speaking out for people whose situation they didn't have to be concerned about—what difference did it make to them? You know, they were still white in the United States. Things could have been really nice, you know?

That's a great example of when people see an incredible wrong, an incredible injustice, and they decide that justice is more important than their status and their privilege. And those are models that we need to adhere to, I believe. I love when we see examples of people pushing themselves far beyond the status quo and far beyond the average, and speaking up and speaking out and acting for justice. I always say that the people I can work with are the people with whom I share political values and goals and priorities. So that means
just about anybody as far as ethnicity, race, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I don’t have a litmus test for, like, “I only work with certain kinds of people who share my specific identities.” I’m going to be a political idiot if I only work with Black lesbian feminists and refuse to work with anybody else. I mean, I wouldn’t know the things that I know about Black feminism and about organizing if the only people I had ever worked with were Black feminists who were lesbians. Don’t get me wrong. I have learned a tremendous amount from working with people whose specific identities I share, but I also would have lost a lot if I had never worked with people who are different from myself.

So let me ask you, as the sort of last thing, what is the state of Black feminism today? Because we were talking earlier, and there seems to be somewhat of a revival, at least in the interest of Black feminism. I think that was clear from the Socialism 2017 conference, where on both occasions that you and Demita spoke, there were literally hundreds of people who came to hear it and see what you all had to say. And so, why do you think that is?

I don’t know. I really don’t know, Keanga . . . [about] explicitly Black feminist organizing at this time. I don’t know what Black feminists are doing. I know of some organizations like Black Women’s Blueprint. I have spent more time with younger people involved in Black Lives Matter organizing in recent years than I have with Black women involved in specifically feminist organizing. I think that Black feminism is strong, because we have built some understandings and also some organizations and organizing projects that address some of the issues that we thought were critical to address, like violence against women. There is available a nuanced Black women’s perspective on how you address violence against women. Not everybody partakes of it, of course. But there are real manifestations that the work that we did and the priorities that we had have indeed been expanded upon and put forward and maintained.

But as I said, I can’t tell you much about the state of Black feminism at the present time. And I’m not even clear that there’s a Black feminist resurgence. I’m not sure of the evidence for that, except for some people in popular culture having recently gotten good responses to them asserting that this is something that people should pay attention to and even be supportive of. I don’t really—I don’t know. I’d love to know what you see in that regard. And I also don’t think that the response at the socialism conference is one that would necessarily be applicable across the board. Because I think that that was an audience—I’m not dismissing the incredible outpouring, because I know people had choices about where they were during the times of those presentations. But I think that the people who attended that conference were people who were kind of like the prime partakers of Black feminist theory and practice, because of where they were coming from politically. And I think also that the words of Combahee and your work, too, that was recognizable to them. It was familiar. And then there were people there who did know about Combahee and they wanted to check it out. It was a perfect context. Perfect context.

Well, I do think that there has been—I wouldn’t say necessarily a revival in organization, per se. But I do think that there definitely has been a resurgence in interest in the politics of Black feminism and what that means. And I think it expresses itself in different ways. I think the fact that Beyoncé in particular identified herself as a feminist raised questions about what that means and what that is,
to a much broader audience. I think that ... the struggle around trans women of color has raised the politics of Black feminism, which has been a kind of framing that trans activists have applied to . . .

Yes, which is wonderful, isn't it?

to a much broader audience. I think the fact that the two sort of leading organizations of the Black Lives Matter movement—Black Lives Matter, hashtag Black Lives Matter, and the Black Youth Project, who consciously sort of evoke the politics and ideas of Black feminism ... in whatever way that means to them, has certainly led to a curiosity and interest in what those politics are. And so those are all relatively new phenomena. I think even in 2011, the emergence of SlutWalk demonstrations, and the idea that we have to struggle against rape culture, and that women have the right to present themselves in whatever way that they please ... a combination of these things has led at least to a questioning of or a curiosity about what is Black feminism, and why are all these other organizers and people who are involved in politics always talking about Black feminism? And maybe this is something that I should investigate further.

Right, right. And you've given some good examples. Particularly Black Lives Matter. When I said that I know more about what is going on with Black Lives Matter organizing than I do about Black feminist organizing, you in some ways have corrected me and reminded me that, wait a minute, major organizations doing Black Lives Matter organizing around the criminal violence of the police consider themselves to be doing so from a Black feminist perspec-
tive. So yes, that's a major example. And the other ones that you gave as well. And I think having the book come out in this context—great idea, great timing. The fortieth anniversary of Combahee seems to coincide with an upsurge of concern and interest about the politics of Black feminism. I tried to figure out terms of how to talk about the Black feminism of Combahee and Black feminism in other contexts. And I came up with a good way to say it, in an email a few weeks ago. Because I was trying not to be dismissive of other types of Black feminism. I might not have called what we did "original" Black feminism, but instead wrote that the reason Combahee's Black feminism is so powerful is because it's anticapitalist. One would expect Black feminism to be antiracist and opposed to sexism. Anticapitalism is what gives it the sharpness, the edge, the thoroughness, the revolutionary potential.