

# HOW WE GET FREE

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**BLACK FEMINISM AND THE  
COMBAHEE RIVER  
COLLECTIVE**

Edited and Introduced  
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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

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\*Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016, Even as a Record Number of Americans Cast Ballots," Pew Research Center, *Fact Tank* blog, May 12, 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/).

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

\* Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

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.



\* Anna Brown and Eileen Patten, “The Narrowing, but Persistent, Gender Gap in Pay,” Pew Research Center, *Fact Tank* blog, April 3, 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/03/gender-pay-gap-facts/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/03/gender-pay-gap-facts/).

† Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, PhD, and Jessica Milli, PhD, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” National Domestic Workers Alliance (Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2017), 19, [www.domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/SOBW\\_report2017\\_compressed.pdf](http://www.domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/SOBW_report2017_compressed.pdf).

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.”<sup>\*</sup> 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.

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<sup>\*</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, “The Status of Woman in America,” in *A Voice From the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 134; Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

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.

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\* Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 292–93.

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 over-represented 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.”<sup>\*</sup> 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.<sup>†</sup> The ability to distinguish between the ideology of the American Dream and the experience of the American nightmare requires political analysis, history, and often

<sup>\*</sup> “Transcript: Read Michelle Obama’s Full Speech from the 2016 DNC,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/07/26/transcript-read-michelle-obamas-full-speech-from-the-2016-dnc/>.

<sup>†</sup> Christine Clarridge, “Autopsy Shows Charleena Lyles Was Shot Seven Times by Police,” *Seattle Times*, August 30, 2017, [www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/autopsy-shows-charleena-lyles-was-shot-7-times-by-police/](http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/autopsy-shows-charleena-lyles-was-shot-7-times-by-police/).

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.<sup>\*</sup>

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-

<sup>\*</sup> Joy James, “Radicalizing Feminism,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

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 of-

fers 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 cofounder 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 capitalistic 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 ostensibly 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 difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political 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 arrives at this conclusion: "We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial 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

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\* Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," *Village Voice*, July 28, 1975, 6-7.

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 determinant 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 wiser. . . . 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 understanding. 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.

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\* Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, *Mwanamke Mwananchi* (The Nationalist Woman) (Newark, NJ: Mumininas of CUN, 1971), 4-5.

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