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The Combahee River Collective - "How We Get Free": Lessons of Radical Black Feminism in the Age of Trump

Monday 15 January 2018, by [HENDERSON Tasasha](#), [TAYLOR Keeanga-Yamahtta](#) (Date first published: 31 December 2017).

Forty years ago, a group of radical Black feminists who named themselves the Combahee River Collective released a statement defining their politics and describing their political work. [The Combahee River Collective Statement](#) has endured as a powerful document that clearly named the multiple oppressions that Black women faced due to their race, sex, class and sexual orientation; developed the idea of identity politics; and provided a key roadmap of the political work and organizing necessary to uproot all oppression. [1]

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Professor and author Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has provided us with a moving commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Combahee River Collective Statement in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. In this work, edited by Taylor, we learn about the founding of the Combahee River Collective from three of its members, Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier and Beverly Smith. Coming out of the National Black Feminist Organization, they and the other members wanted to create an organization with a more radical vision for liberation that addressed the multiple oppressions Black women faced, including racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. Readers also learn the impact that the Combahee River Collective Statement has had on this generation of organizers and activists through a conversation with Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) network.

Taylor states in the book's introduction, "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 holds true today, as a new generation of Black women activists and organizers are continuing in the Combahee River Collective tradition of centering the most marginalized communities in liberation work, so that we all can get free.

Tasasha Henderson: In the "Problems in Organizing Black Feminists" section of the Combahee River Collective Statement, the authors discuss the opposition they experienced from Black men in the 1970s, in regards to feminism. They talk about how that opposition was rooted in Black men's fear of losing allies for their struggles and having to change their behavior. In both on-the-ground and online activism spaces today, have you seen a shift in the acceptance of Black feminist principles and praxis among Black men and other people who were traditionally opposed to Black feminism?

The ways that one engages in struggle influences the outcome of that struggle

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: In some ways, it's difficult to compare the two very distinct periods: the period of Black insurgency and rebellion that was the context to the development of Black feminism and the era of Black Lives Matter we are in today. What I mean is that in the 1960s, there was a pervasive view — from the state down to the level of organizers — that Black men were being emasculated by Black women and that was blamed for unraveling Black families, and therein blamed for the disproportionate levels of inequality experienced in Black communities. It was also an era that had not experienced the full impact of the women's liberation movement, though it did overlap as the struggle crossed into the 1970s. This, of course, is all in addition to the fact that the US was a deeply sexist society with very little regard for the contributions of women. It would seem unlikely in the context of all of this that sexism would not have pervaded the social movements of the day, including the Black liberation movement, which it most certainly did.

What is different today? The context is, of course, completely different. The absurdity of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's [assertions about the Black family](#) [have] been discredited even as they continue to hold resonance for others. On the other hand, we still live in a deeply sexist society that continues to devalue the contributions of women. To the extent that the women's liberation movement impacted US society, those gains have been uneven and have tended to benefit mostly white middle-class women. The impact of the #MeToo campaign has revealed to the world what most women have always understood: the depths of sexual harassment and sexual assault in American culture [that contribute] to the diminution of respect and regard for the experiences, insights and leadership of women. All of these issues are then amplified when overlaid with race, sexual orientation and class position. All of this is to say that people in the movement do not live in bubbles, and so sexism, harassment and beyond have also impacted the BLM movement. At the same time, I think most women in the movement could probably point to many men who have been comrades and collaborators in the struggle, in addition to the episodes where this has fallen short. I don't think the abject hostility to feminism exists within movement circles the way that it did 50 years ago, but women still struggle to be heard and respected.

The “Black Feminist Issues and Projects” section of the Combahee River Collective Statement explores the importance of engaging in organizing that materially impacted people's lives. They include examples such as workplace organizing and creating rape crisis centers. How can we continue to engage in that type of work using Black feminist praxis?

Well, this of course, is the most important organizing work, and there is lots of organizing around concrete issues facing oppressed people — whether it is the struggle for a living wage, ongoing struggles for abortion rights, organizing against the murder of transwomen of color, and beyond. The problem we face right now is that our movements are not big enough or influential enough. And so we have to not only be engaged in the day-to-day organizing around these concrete struggles, but we must also be politically engaged in convincing people politically about why struggle matters, why Black feminism matters, why anti-capitalism matters and why socialism matters.

I think the last paragraph of the Combahee River Collective Statement is so important: “In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the ends always justify the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving ‘correct’ political goals.” Are there recent examples of this, and how can we safeguard against repeating these mistakes?

African Americans engaged in struggle saw the anti-colonial rebellions as a model for the movement in the United States

Well, I do think the [Combahee River Collective] was addressing historically specific situations that had arisen in the late stages of the radical movements of the 1960s. But I think there is a more general lesson to be learned, which is that often the ways that one engages in struggle influences the outcome of that struggle. So our tactics and political organizing strategies need to match up with our stated goals. This probably most expresses itself with questions about how activists or organizers should regard the issue of electoral politics. Can we purport to be radicals, anti-capitalists, socialists while backing a party invested in empire, imperialism, and the oppression of Black and Brown people all over the world? Of course, this is complicated by the presence of the Republican Party's naked embrace of white supremacy with Donald Trump as its leader. And so this is a complex question that needs to be taken seriously and not just treated simplistically, but we also must consider the consequences of political expediency and whether it brings us closer to the "ends" we all desire. After all, while the Trump administration makes nostalgia for the Obama administration seductive, we must remember it was during that presidency that the first sustained Black movement against racism emerged in at least two generations. So it's obviously not about getting back to the "good old days" of Democratic Party rule, but really, the question we have to continue to press on is: "How do we get free?"

In your conversation with Barbara Smith, she discusses how in the 1970s, Black women and other women of color referred to themselves as "third-world women," in solidarity with colonized people all over the world. How important was it not only to the collective, but other Black feminists during that time, to have an internationalist perspective and understand the connections between oppressive policies in the United States and in Black and Brown countries across the globe?

When we tell the truth about the experiences of Black women, we tell the truth about the United States

The politics of internationalism, anti-capitalism and the solidarity necessary to make those politics intelligible and legible were at the heart of Combahee River Collective Statement. In the period that the statement was written, international solidarity could not be assumed; it had to be stated as a political imperative. Indeed, Black feminist politics came of age in a period of what could be described as a highpoint of international solidarity and consciousness. From the anti-colonial struggles across Africa and the Global South to the international response in opposition to the US war in Vietnam, the notion that the oppressed of the world were connected through politics and struggle was central to the political development of an international left in that period. Indeed, African Americans came to describe the conditions in Black communities as the product of colonialism, and that Black communities were the "internal colonies" of the United States. And consequently, African Americans engaged in struggle saw the anti-colonial rebellions as a model for the movement in the United States. There was a well-developed and articulated connection between the movement abroad and the movement at home. Today, those ties between struggles abroad and struggles at home are less developed and more muffled and constrained than clearly articulated.

In some regard, it is unfair to compare the highpoint of struggle in the United States in 1968 and beyond to the current moment of ideological and political formation today. That is to say that while the radicalization is real and underway in the United States, it is still grasping for politics that can explain the genesis of this current iteration of crisis in the United States, that can offer political

clarity for a direction forward for the various movements, but — and perhaps, most importantly — is rooted in the communities and workplaces of those who are the most impacted by the inequality in our society.

How do you see the principles and analyses that were outlined in the Combahee River Collective Statement show up in today's freedom movements?

The Combahee Collective Statement was not just a document for radical Black feminists, but it was an important document for the revolutionary left as a political perspective or plan of action for the movement of the 1970s. It included areas of work that radicals could involve themselves in as a way to relate to the struggles of Black women while also raising the level of political education concerning the conditions that constrained the lives of Black women. Perhaps most important as we elaborate on this concept of “political imagination,” the Combahee statement recognized that to actually end Black women’s oppression, we needed to consider the possibility of ending capitalism. And it was here that they unlocked the dialectic at the heart of their manifesto. Orienting on the most oppressed in a society — in the United States, that meant Black women — exposed the injustice of the entire system. This is why the Combahee Collective insisted, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.” The liberation of Black women is the genesis for human liberation.

Indeed, this is also a critical intervention made by the Collective. Black feminism, identity politics, the personal is politics are all terms and units of analyses that have been misconstrued as demands for separation and exclusion. But the concept of solidarity — in all of its complexity and difficulty — was at the heart of their politics. They called it coalition building and recognized its necessity in building movements beyond those who were directly affected. This was not easy, but it was necessary if we were going to organize struggles that actually won.

These are all critical lessons in the struggles we face today. After 40 years, these are analyses that are important not only in understanding the conditions that shape the life and experiences of the majority of African Americans, but most importantly, the politics of the Combahee Collective are the politics that are necessary to actually win the struggle for Black liberation and freedom.

What does that mean? It means recognizing the significance of the recent campaigns to highlight Black women’s oppression and struggles. When feminists insist on “centering” the experiences of Black women, it is not a cry for attention; it is because by doing so, the depths of oppression and exploitation in American society are laid bare for all to see. When we tell the truth about the experiences of Black women, we tell the truth about the United States. And in doing so, it reveals the same conclusion that the women of Combahee came to: that Black women will never be free within capitalism. It is a system that is dependent upon racism, gender and sexual oppression, and sexism. We live in a country where these oppressions are so tightly wound into its marrow that there has never been a single moment in its entire history ... free from this injustice and oppression.

If we are going to fundamentally challenge and politically confront the white supremacist menace of Donald Trump, then we have to continue to engage with the legacy of the Combahee. We have to build upon what the Black Lives Matter movement has begun. And in doing so, we cannot restrict our thinking to what happens in the next election or the election after that. If we are only thinking in those terms, we are almost certainly never thinking of “how we get free” or “what would Black liberation look like?” And to imagine that world, we don’t need the nostalgia of Combahee; we need their politics. They called for revolutionary action to defeat capitalism. They called for a socialist reorganization of our society. They understood solidarity and coalition building were the way forward. And they believed that the liberation of Black women could free the world. These remain

the tasks for the current moment.

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