Episode 3: Identity Politics Re-Rooted

Duchess Harris: “College campuses that have any kind of curriculum about women's gender and sexuality studies often teach the Combahee River Collective statement, right? That's going to show up probably before Halloween, right? That's just like the beginning of the semester.”

Krystal Klingenberg: You're listening to Collected, a podcast project of the Smithsonian's national museum of American history.

Crystal Moten: I'm Dr. Crystal Moten and my pronouns are she/her.

Krystal Klingenberg: And my name is Dr. Krystal Klingenberg. My pronouns are also she/her.

Crystal Moten: On this pilot season of Collected, we are re-rooting Black feminism and placing it in its original historical context.

Barbara Smith: “Ok, it looks like it’s recording. My name is Barbara Smith”

Crystal Moten: In this episode, we're continuing our conversation with legendary foremother Barbara Smith from the Combahee River Collective. We're going to focus on an important statement that Barbara Smith and members of the collective wrote in 1977 AND tell you how this statement introduced the concept of “identity politics.”

Barbara Smith: “We were describing our objective reality. “
Crystal Moten: The Combahee River Collective began meeting in 1974 at the women's center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and started what was essentially a study group.

Barbara Smith: “We were always trying to develop our politics and also have some fun.”

Crystal Moten: They came together to read and discuss writing related to Black feminism and Black women's history. They also engaged in consciousness raising.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, what do you mean by consciousness raising?

Crystal Moten: Black women talking about what was going on in their lives, right? Their experiences, raising their awareness about the social, political, economic dynamics that caused them to experience their lives the way they did, and having an analysis about that.

And so it was getting together to say, "Hey, I'm experiencing X, Y, Z in the workplace." And then you'd have a discussion, "Oh, well, that's because of the racial and gender oppression you're experiencing."

Crystal Moten: Now, prior to this, Black power movement groups, civil rights groups, they were conscious raising, but it was really race based. It didn't have really uh the connection between race and gender oppression. But this was engaging Black women with okay, "As a Black woman, how and why are you experiencing the things you are?"

Krystal Klingenberg: I think the closest we probably have these days to some of these kinds of gatherings is perhaps book clubs that are centered on particular topics, but this practice of consciousness raising in these kinds of study groups were certainly something people in the larger social justice movement at the time were participating in.

Krystal Klingenberg: And to boot, popular representation of activism and political activism, don't really showcase working class people, reading and writing their beliefs. So, when we think about Combahee and we think about some of the organizing that happens in the decades later, there is this phenomenon of people reading and writing, regardless of their background, to engage with these ideas.

Krystal Klingenberg: So back in 1977, the women of the Combahee River Collective came together and wrote a groundbreaking statement about their ideas and beliefs and the ways Black women were experiencing race and gender oppression. It is in this piece of writing that they also discuss identity politics.

Let's hear a bit of the opening of the statement as read by Fath Davis Ruffins, Curator of African American History and Culture and member of the African American History Curatorial Collective at the National Museum of American History.

Fath Davis Ruffins: “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 on the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the condition 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.”

Krystal Klingenberg: The statement was made public in a volume of essays. Barbara Smith’s friend, professor Zillah Eisenstein, invited the Collective to write a piece for a book. Eisenstein was working on called Capitalist Patriarchy And The Case For Socialist Feminism. It was here that the Combahee River Collective statement was first published.

Crystal Moten: So talk a little bit about why you wrote this statement.
Barbara Smith: “Okay. I don’t know, honestly, if we ever would’ve written such a thing had we not been asked to do it. So I am forever grateful.”

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And when we had our conversation with Barbara Smith, I love the story she told around how they wrote the essay. And literally what she said is that, so the collective had been meeting and they had had a retreat to kind of further think about their ideas, and help consolidate what they wanted to say about their politics. And so after the retreat, Barbara Smith, as her sister Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier, they came together to have a discussion about their ideas related to Black feminism, and in conversation, they developed a statement.

Crystal Moten: Now, they recorded this conversation. And what happened after they recorded was that Barbara Smith then transcribed their conversation using a Smith Corona typewriter. And that transcribed document became the basis for the statement, right? So after she transcribed that document she shared it with Beverly and Demita. They talked about it some more. And so that was the process of them writing this statement. It was like before Google documents was a thing, right? This was the pre-digital Google document.

Krystal Klingenberg: It’s easy when we look back on these people who have made such an impact on a field to think that like they’re sitting in this lofty position where they write these things and these big important ideas, yes. But it was in conversation with her colleagues that this came together, and in that meaning she writes it down and enshrining your ideas and writing is a really important part of this process as well.

Crystal Moten: Yes. Yes. That’s so important.

Barbara Smith: “Notice also about the Combahee River Collective Statement, it was never attributed to authors. It was published anonymously, so to speak, with no author attribution. Only with Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor’s book, How We Get Free. That’s when it was revealed that it was the three of us, although there were people who knew that from conversation. And perhaps, I may have written somewhere at some point that it was written by the three of us. But in general, that was not known. And that was on purpose because those were our
politics. We were writing for the movement, we weren't writing for our own reputations or anything like that.”

Krystal Klingenberg: And that really speaks to the collectivity at play, right? That it's not about one person taking credit, and it's not about one person necessarily leading it, that it's the collective that takes credit for such a piece, although we would later find this out.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And one thing that makes me think of also, is that it's not about individuals, it's about the ideas, right? It's about what they wanted to say and how they wanted to define, number one, the experiences they were experiencing at the intersection of their identities, and then also, how those experiences shaped their reality and the political activism that they wanted to engage in. And so it was about the ideas and not about the individuality of the people who were writing.

Crystal Moten: The statement has four parts: So the first part discusses the genesis or the origins of contemporary black feminisms. The second part discusses what the Combahee River Collective believed in terms of their politics. The third part goes on to addressing the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief history of the collective, and then the last part discusses Black feminist issues and practice. And so, we're not going to read the rest of the statement, but we will make it available to you on the podcast website.

But from the statement, you get the sense that they are addressing a lot of important questions, issues, and challenges of being a Black feminist in that moment, while also addressing the experiences they were facing as Black lesbian women.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, they write this statement, they get their ideas down on paper, and then what? How does somebody find this piece? How did people read it? Where did it go?

Crystal Moten: Now, it's really interesting to think about it in the 1970s, how ideas circulated and particularly how intellectual, political ideas circulated. And so we didn't have Twitter, we didn't have Instagram or Facebook, but what we did have was a copy machine, right? And so, this book was published, it comes
out. And so the statement is circulated physically, materially among the collectives immediate circles. And it really did not go viral in the sense that we understand things going viral today, instead it gained more popularity over time.

Krystal Klingenberg: Well, and some of that has to do with the speed at which it was possible for ideas to circulate, right? So if I find a book and then maybe I give it to a friend, because I think it’s really important, and she takes it to her book club or her study group, and then they talk about it. Other people, whether they be Black feminists or not are hearing their struggle being articulated in this document, they find that it’s important, so they want to share it with people. So we’re really talking about a grassroots kind of roll out the way it goes from person to person, to person.

We talked to writer and scholar Dr. Duchess Harris, author of *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump* about the impact and legacy of the statement.

Duchess Harris: “It's the first political statement, and I say political because political science departments until recently have rejected the Combahee River Collective as like any kind of political organizing mechanism, because it would not be considered mainstream politics, but it is the first space that talked about racism, sexism, classism, and it’s not named as homophobia, but that would be how we would understand it in 2021. All of those four things coming together, this is also 20 years before Kim Crenshaw writes Intersectionality. So this is intersectionality before Intersectionality.”

Krystal: Duchess also shares another important thing about this statement.

Duchess Harris: “So people have talked about identity politics now for 40 years, but it's often not credited that that lexicon, right? Like those two words coming together, that language identity and politics comes from the Combahee River Collective. So that's one of the things that needs to be celebrated from that group. “

Crystal Moten: Identity politics is one of the main concepts that come out of the statement. So let's bring in Barbara's Smith, again.
Barbara Smith; “We were not saying that we were superior to any other groups of oppressed people. We were not into being a vanguard. We did not think that we were the only people on earth who were oppressed. We just wanted to assert that unlike the women's movement and unlike the Black liberation movement at that time, that there was a particular set of situations, circumstances and experiences and oppressions that Black women experienced, and that we needed to deal with those. And that's what we meant by identity politics.”

Krystal Klingenberg: So, let's talk about what identity politics is. So identity politics” in the way that she's using it is the recognition that people's identity informs their political stances, that who they are affects their politics. And identity politics helps us to understand how and why people engage in political actions. So, how is the term misused today?

Crystal Moten: People think that identity politics is ONLY organizing or being in action with people who are like you. For example, that only Black women can engage in activism against oppression that particularly affects Black women but white women can also also be involved in the struggle.

Krystal Klingenberg: One thing that's tricky about identity politics is that over the last, 20-ish years, the idea of identity politics has been used as more of a way to disregard certain political viewpoints, right? That, "Oh, that's just identity politics."

Krystal Klingenberg: Whereas, what Combahee is trying to say here is that... It's a statement of fact, right? That who you are affects what your politics are.

Crystal Moten: Yes. Yes.

Krystal Klingenberg: So identity politics is just one of the ideas that people have taken from the statement over time, and it being so rich is part of the reason why it's had such a long lasting legacy. So, why have other people continued to read it?

Crystal Moten: Co-author Demita Frazier says very simply, "Because Black women still aren't free." So, the ideas in the statement, the analysis that the Combahee River Collective engages in the statement, in many ways, Black
women are still grappling with some of those same issues related to oppression based on their race, their gender, their class, being economically at the bottom, right? Not seeing themselves represented in, not only main street media, but in politics, in the boardroom, in certain industries, Black women still aren't free.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, the need hasn't gone away essentially, right? But also that, as different groups take different tactics on encountering and fighting oppression, people have continued to take wisdom from this document and wisdom from the Combahee River Collective on how they might want to organize themselves and how they may want to profess their ideas.

Krystal Klingenberg: Basically, the fight hasn't ended. The struggle continues.

Crystal Moten: Join us in the next episode, as we talk about self-care. Not the hashtag or the marketing push, but the concept used by a Black woman who dared to prioritize caring for herself during her final moments on this earth.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: “Self care is what Audre Lorde talks about as political warfare. And it is really just the activation of our love, our love for ourselves and prioritizing it.”

Krystal Klingenberg: “We'd like to thank our guests, doctors, Brittney Cooper, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Duchess Harris and Barbara Smith. Our podcast team is Jenna Hanchard, Taylor Polydore, Ann Conanan and Alana Gomez. Special, thanks to Modupe Labode and Tony Perry and Fath Davis Ruffins. The Collected is funded by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the National Museum of American History.”