Episode 1: Black Feminism Re-rooted

Crystal Moten: When I think about Black feminism

I think about deepness, depth, and the fact that the ideas, the concepts, the practices, the meanings, the people, the women, they have deep histories, deep legacies, deep traditions, and we have to keep them connected. In other words, we need to re-root them.

Krystal Klingenberg: You're listening to Collected, a podcast project of Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Crystal: My name is Dr. Crystal Moten. My pronouns are she/her and I'm a curator of African-American history.

Krystal: And my name is Dr. Krystal Klingenberg. My pronouns are she/her and I'm a curator of music and we are members of the African-American History Curatorial Collective.

Collected is a podcast exploring stories of Black history. This first season of the Collected Podcast is about Black Feminism. Over the next 6 episodes we're going to give you some historical context, so folks can understand Black Feminist theories, practices and legacies that are contributing to society today.

Crystal:

This is Black feminism re-rooted.
Dr. Brittney Cooper:

“Black feminism is a movement to end actual oppression toward black women.”

Feminista Jones:

“We can’t isolate racism from sexism. Because we exist in the intersection of both.”

Paris Hatcher:

“Black Feminisms is a blueprint for our collective liberation.”

Crystal: You just heard the voices of Brittney Cooper, Feminista Jones, and Paris Hatcher, a few of the preeminent Black feminist thinkers of our time. You will hear more from them and others over the coming episodes.

So this season, we're going to take a look at black feminism, a method of survival, a tool for analysis, and a source of healing for Black women. It is a set of theoretical approaches originally crafted by Black women thinkers meant to address racial and gender oppression that we face in our daily lives.

Krystal: We will be focusing on what is considered contemporary Black feminism, which emerges in the 1970s.

Crystal: Over time and through the use of social media, many Black feminist ideas and practices have been divorced and disconnected from the original people and context from which they emerged. And as a result, the ideas and practices have been diluted, misrepresented, misunderstood.

Krystal: Politics, business, educational curriculum and recently social media have contributed to the gap between what these ideas originally meant and how they've come to be used in these spaces.

So Crystal, let's start with the essential question what is Black feminism and who are the main people that we need to know in order to get a sense of who's involved in it?
Crystal: Alright so we’re historians so it's important that we understand the history and context behind Black Feminism.

Historically Black feminism is a means to ending gender and racial oppression directed at Black women. The actual term Black feminism doesn't come into popular use until around the 1970s but people who have been acting at the intersection of fighting racism and gender oppression were doing that long before the 1970s.

So we can think of, for example, Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved woman who traveled around the country in the 1850s protesting slavery and advocating for women’s rights.

Krystal: Yeah That's right.

Crystal: In the 1890s, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper wrote and spoke about the status of Black women in America, critiquing the racism and sexism they experienced and advocating for better educational opportunities.

Krystal: So it sounds like we have a number of people who were acting on behalf of racial gender oppression, who are doing this way before the 1970s and who might not even have called themselves Black feminists, but they are clearly in this legacy of this tradition.

Crystal: And part of what happens is that there is a broader women's movement that begins to use the term feminism. And what we know about the use of this term feminism is that it did not include everyone. Particularly when we think about Betty Friedan and her book the Feminine Mystique.

KRISTAL: Right, that's the more well-known take on feminism that people know.

CRYSTAL: Yes yes yes. The Feminine Mystique is a critique of how women were being marginalized, excluded in society, how they weren't able to get certain types of jobs, how they were being circumscribed to the home and to childcare. And so there was this critique about women's roles in society. But what that critique missed was that all women's experiences were not the
same. And so that's where we come in and we get this idea, okay, well, what are the experiences of Black women?

And so Black women begin to think about and theorize and analyze their condition, which leads to the creation of Black feminism. But what's so special about Black feminism is that it is not just being created off in colleges and universities. Black feminism is being created on the ground, in the street, in kitchens, in beauty shops, in stores, on porches in the sidewalks. It's being created wherever Black women are.

Krystal: And that's the beauty of it. It's not coming down from on high. It's created by regular Black women where regular Black women are.

So we arrive in the 1970s who are the thinkers, the writers that really occupy this space that at that point we are now starting to call Black feminism?

Crystal: In politics, we have Shirley Chisholm, the first African American Congresswoman and the first Black woman to attempt to win the presidential bid of a major political party.

In the literary and creative arts, there was Audre Lorde, Black feminist, lesbian, mother, warrior poet who uses words and language to think about radical action and being, and who creates communities around language and words.

Krystal: Bell Hooks is probably one of the most well-known of these Black feminist writers, and thinkers. She was a professor, a theorist, People really know her name in mainstream circles. And part of her wide appeal was that her books were accessible and it's the way that she described the life experiences of Black women in the way that she did. She talked about love, relationships, culture, media, education and the home.

We've lost Audre Lorde and now more recently Bell Hooks, so as we move forward in our journey through this material on black feminism, we're working with the voices of the ancestors here to guide us. It's important to note that the ways that early Black feminists framed things over the course of their work, others have added to over time and the umbrella of what we call Black feminism now includes lots of diverse viewpoints.
Dr. Brittney Cooper

“Black feminism is a movement to end actual oppression towards Black women. But it is also a set of tools.”

Crystal: This is Brittney Cooper. She’s a Black feminist professor of women and gender studies at Rutgers University.

Dr. Brittney Cooper

‘It is vocabulary to name our social condition and to say very specifically, that white supremacy is not the only oppressive system that besets us. That gender oppression is real. That class oppression is real. But what Black feminism also means to me more basically than all of that is that it is the one moment in our political lives where Black women get to be at the center of the conversation”

Crystal:

Now this idea that Black women can being the center of the conversation can be a radical idea, but it also connects to the late Bell Hooks who wrote in her important work, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center that we need to understand and make Black women the center of our concern.

Black women need to literally be brought from the margins to the center or closer to where decisions are being made so the health and well being of themselves and their communities could be considered.

Krystal: In the theater of power, bringing Back women from the nosebleed seats to the front or really from outside of the room into the room altogether and bringing Black women closer to that power where their concerns are going to be taken seriously and that’s what Black feminists are trying to do in centering Black women.

Dr. Brittney Cooper

“We are always thinking about our politics in terms of how they help our communities, our church, our sons, our families, the lady down the block, our elders. But we’re never thinking like, what do Black women need and how can we be okay and Black feminism says that that has to be fundamental, that we can’t love ourselves and we can’t have a liberation
“Black feminisms is the belief in the inherent value of Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people. So, if you believe that Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people are inherently valuable, then you are on a path to understanding or being aligned with Black feminisms. Black feminisms really helps us understand how our world, in particular systems of power and oppression, are set up. It explains how white supremacy and patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, on and on, are interconnected and systemic and impacts our lives: so who has access to the resources to be able to live and thrive, as well as it helps us to think about the plans, the actions, that we must take in order to get free.”

Crystal: There’s so much in what Paris Hatcher just said, but one of the main questions that comes to the fore:

Krystal: Is Black feminism just about Black women?

Crystal: For some of the guests we interviewed for the series they make it clear that to assume the identity of Black feminists, you have to be a Black woman or femme. However, to use a Black feminist analysis, anyone can use a Black feminist analysis. Anyone can use the tools of Black feminism to understand and comprehend the world that we live in and to think about solutions to the injustice that we all face and are exposed to.

Krysta: Yeah. And, core to the way that the people that we spoke with really handled that part of it is really about Black men. Can Black men be Black feminists, where do Black men place themselves in relationship to these intersections intersections.
And to your point, I think part of what we're talking about here is, can we talk about Black feminism as an identity? Or do we talk about it as a set of beliefs? All of these definitions are possible and determine who can call themselves a Black feminist. So much of black feminism though is rooted in the experience of being a black woman.

Crystal: Yeah. Black women aren't an island all to themselves, but there it this critique of Black feminism that it is exclusive and that it only cares about Black women.

But Black women have sisters, they have brothers, they have mothers, they have fathers, they have uncles, grandmothers. They are these communities that Black women are in such that they can't just focus on themselves.

But what has happened so much historically, and in society, and in Black communities and in white communities, is that usually Black women are at the very bottom or they're forgotten, or they're excluded, or they're silenced or they're ignored.

And so Black feminism offers an opportunity to say, ‘hey we got something to say, we have needs, we have cares, we have desires and we want to think about what those are, because if we center ourselves then all of those who we are in community with can benefit.’

Crystal: We also spoke to sister Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs. She calls herself a queer, Black, troublemaker and black feminist love evangelist. She believes we are all connected and that's an essential idea to Black feminism.

Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs

“Black feminism is the political vision articulated and created by Black women that says that there is no separation between what it takes to become liberated as a Black person and as a woman. It is this expansive possible world where our connections to each other, within our species, beyond our species, across all sorts of forms of difference, are actually coalescent into what Audre Lorde calls the creative power of difference are actually assets and contributions and offerings that can make a more loving, more life giving world for all of us.”
Krystal: What Dr. Gumbs is saying is that liberation has to take into account all parts of a person’s identity. A single focus on race or gender won’t capture all of the ways Black women face discrimination in their daily lives.

Crystal: Dr. Gumbs cites Audre Lorde who writes that there is power in honoring and recognizing our differences. Lorde is critiquing the idea of a colorblind society where the differences between people are ignored and all people are considered the same. Recognizing each aspect of who we are helps create the just future Black feminists are fighting for.

Krystal: Getting free, liberation. What we're talking about is moving past major forces in society that might oppress Black women, but beyond these major forces we’re also talking about the ways in which Black women feel about themselves and their relationship with themselves to that wider society.

Krystal:

Like all theoretical frameworks black feminism is constantly in flux. Writer, speaker and community activist Feminista Jones reflected with us on the promises and pitfalls as black feminism grows.

Feminista Jones:

“We are seeing some people reshape and redefine what Black feminism is. And in some ways, I think that that is wonderful and expansive. And in other ways, I think it indicates just kind of an ignorance and a lack of knowledge about what this is. I mean, we have to remember this is a paradigm. It's a theoretical framework and we can't ignore people like Anna Julia Cooper and other folks that contributed to this by just making it up as we go, and sometimes I see that happening. So, I'm a little bit concerned about that right now, which is why I keep saying, ‘yes, I'm a black feminist and here's why,’ while at the same time questioning what does it mean to be a Black feminist in these times that we're in right now. And is it the same as what it was say, 20 years ago when I came into it? I don't know. But I love that there's the question there.

Crystal: What does it mean to be a black feminist in these times that we're in right now? Over the first season of Collected episodes we're going to explore that question and many more, including how have black feminists understood and engaged in their work over the last 50 years? What tools of
analysis have Black feminists created to understand the injustice faced by their communities over time.

Krystal:

What does wellbeing look like for Black feminists today especially when combating structures of inequality, what visions do Black feminists hold for the future?

Crystal:

Join us next episode as we talk to one of the mothers of black feminism, Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective, as well as professors and authors, Dr. Keeanga Yamatta Taylor, and Duchess Harris, as we discussed the term collective and what it means to Black feminism.

Krystal:

Crystal and I would like to thank our guests, Dr. Britney Cooper, Paris Hatcher, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Feminista Jones for their time. Check out Collected's website for more information and resources related to the history and practice of Black feminism. Our Podcast Team: Jenna Hanchard, Taylor Polydore, Ann Conanan and Alana Gomez. Special thanks to Modupe Labode, Tony Perry. Collected is funded by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the National Museum of American History.