Episode 2: Collective Re-rooted

Dr. Brittney Cooper:

“Oh look, it's always better if you have a crew. So that's first and foremost, it's like go. What does that proverb say? If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

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

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

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

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

Krystal: In this episode, we're talking about the term collective as an essential Black feminist concept.

Feminista Jones:

“Collective is community. It is all of us, every last one of us, being a part of a community that needs whatever it needs and working together to make sure that everyone's needs are being met and no one is being left behind or left out.”
Krystal:

That was writer and social critic Feminista Jones. In her view, the word Collective in this context is about the community, the group as a whole and the larger shared experience. It's the founding principle of Black Feminist thought. And with this idea of community, comes the ability to take joint action, together.

Dr. Courtney Marshall, associate dean, English professor and zumba instructor gives us her take.

Dr. Courtney Marshall:

“When I think about collective, I think about joint decision making, I think about having rules and policies where everybody benefits.”

Crystal: The idea of collective is thinking about the whole rather than disparate individual parts. The idea that we live in a community. That working together, we can all rise. Dr. Alexis Pauline-Gumbs, Black feminist writer, scholar and poet gives us her perspective and broadens the lens.

Dr. Alexis Pauline-Gumbs

“Collective is a form. It's a form of being, it is a movement beyond the individual scale. It is something. It's a way of organizing that comes out of the understanding that while capitalism would divide us into individual units of possible profitability, we actually exist interdependently and we need each other and we impact each other, no matter what we do. So collective is a form that many black feminist groups and other groups have taken on, to really act on that and understand that we grow power by sharing power and by acknowledging the truth, which is that our power was already and will always be connected.”

Crystal: And so Dr. Gumbs sees the collective as both a way to see ourselves in relationship with others, and then also as a form, as a shape, as a way of being within groups, and I think that's what both Dr. Marshall and Dr. Gumbs are trying to illustrate. What is the shape that can be had and that
organizations can take? And so collective and collectivity and thinking about the group and not only yourself is one way of thinking about that.

Krystal: Yeah, and one thing that really sticks out to me is this question of power. So yes, we are in community with others. But if we decide that being in community is a formation we're going to lean into, who makes the decisions and how are we going to move forward?

Part of what they're trying to acquaint us with is that there is decision making across the group, that we share power in this kind of configuration. And that's really important to the success of the collective.

Crystal: Yeah. And I think in thinking about power, it's the decision to share power. Dr. Gumbs says power was already and will always be connected. In some other formations, there is power, but the decision is not made for that power to be shared equally among the members of the formation. And so in thinking about groups that call themselves a collective, it's really about, how is that power distributed? And then what does that group use that power towards?

Barbara Smith:

“Our deciding to be a collective was hardly a unique decision during the time period. The people who were involved in Combahee, the people who formed Combahee, we had all had political experience in other movements and we were also on the left.”

Krystal: We had the privilege of speaking with Barbara Smith, a founder of the Combahee River Collective, a group of queer black feminist thinkers. They started meeting in the early 1970s in Boston, Massachusetts, and released a groundbreaking statement in 1977, which put into words the oppression and injustice faced by Black women.

The group took its name from a local South Carolina river that was actually pronounced Combahee [cum bee] by the indigenous people of the area. The founding and early members of the Combahee River Collective included Barbara Smith, her sister, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, Cheryl Clark, Akasha Hall, Margo Okazawa Rey, Chirlane McCray, and Audre Lorde.
Barbara Smith

“I was thinking, "Well, instead of us naming ourselves after a person, why don’t we name ourselves after an action?" Because we are about action. At least we want to be. We want to be. And that’s how Combahee came to exist. I had read a short, very short biography, less than 100 pages if that, about Harriet Tubman that was published by a radical publisher. I think it was international publishers. And so they had a little biography. And I remember it was green because green is my favorite color and this little green book. And in this little book about Harriet Tubman, because I did not know a huge amount about her. Anyway in that little book described the raid on the Combahee River. And I was like, "What? Oh my God. This Black woman, formerly enslaved, was a scout for the Union Army." And she helped to plan and execute this action of the Combahee River in South Carolina that freed over 750 Africans. And I was like, "Okay. I love that."

Crystal: So hearing Barbara Smith talk about the origins of Combahee is so important especially when we think about the 1970s.

We know some well-known people like Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, But lesser known people who were engaged in activism and who were moving and organizing at the center of race and gender and sexuality deserve to be recognized.

And so Barbara Smith she’s in the middle of all this and she and the other members of Combahee come together to form this organization.

Krystal: But Barbara Smith isn't just important for Combahee. She was doing more than that and she continues to do more than that. She's also a writer, a teacher and a professor. So, at once organizing with Combahee, but she's also teaching English literature.

And she's one of the people who helped more Black women publish their work. You know, part of how she does that is by then going on to form a press, kitchen table press, which publishes the words of Black women writers, people like Audre Lord. And then there's also Combahee. So she's doing a
variety of work that speaks to her Black feminism and her activism and it's not just Combahee.

Crystal: So coming back to the historical period of the 1970’s there was a lot going on at the time. There was a continuing movement for racial justice, which found its form in terms of Black power and Black nationalism.

But we also know there was a continuing movement for women's equality that really found its form in national organizations.

There were so many groups working and engaged in struggles around racial equality, women's liberation, and the fight for gay and queer rights.

And some of these groups, members of the Combahee River Collective, were already involved in, they were already organizing, and they joined together to create change in these very important areas.

Krystal: So this was a particularly fertile time for the development of this kind of organization on the left.

Crystal: Right, but even in this environment of so much activism happening, speaking up and out could really result in physical violence. And so, so many people were active, but it was also tremendously dangerous to be out and active fighting for Black equality, gay rights, gender justice or whichever cause you found yourself involved in.

Krystal: And the women of Combahee took a stand. Here’s Barbara Smith again:

Barbara Smith:
“What do you think it was like to be out as a black lesbian less than a decade after Stonewall and to be political? Oh, it was not fun. It was not fun. It was fun internally for us because we had found our community. We did things...that kept our spirits alive and that nurtured our souls. So we had been involved. One of our members Demita Frazier had been involved with the Panthers in Chicago. I had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement.
Krystal: You know there were a variety of different organizations that were working towards some sort of civil rights or social change at the moment that Combahee comes together. But why did the founders of Combahee feel the need for another organization? They were already participating in these other groups?

Crystal: That’s true, but they needed an organization that met their needs. Some civil rights and Black power organizations were sexist to women members. Women’s rights organizations were an option, but they silenced Black women’s voices. And there were other Black women’s organizations at the time. But as lesbians, the early members of Combahee faced rejection there as well. And so all of these experiences together compelled them to create Combahee.

Krystal: In talking with Smith about the origin of Combahee, she recalled that the structure of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, served as a model for the new organization. SNCC was one of the most important civil rights organizations of the 1960s, and it was led by youth.

Barbara Smith:

“SNCC was a perfect example of an organization that was democratic and not top down, at least it had that ethos. And even though it had executive directors and staff, et cetera, they were grassroots organizations.”

Krystal: And they took that model and folded it into Combahee's structure.

Crystal: We also talked to Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, professor in the department of African American Studies at Princeton University, and author of How We Get Free: An Oral History of the Combahee River Collective which was published on the 40th Anniversary of the Collective’s statement.

Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor:

“I think that they want it to model something different, that they wanted to model what we today call horizontalism, right, where there is a kind of mutual agreement that the organization is collectively possessed and we make decisions on the basis of consensus, we function without hierarchy,
and that we all take responsibility for the practices and for the guiding, guidance and direction of the movement.”

Krystal: Collaborative decision-making that centered the needs of the community was a critical element that made the collective a strong political formation. Dr. Taylor spoke about the significance of the collective in a broader political sense and what that structure said about Black feminist politics.

Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor:

“But what to me systematically might be to overstate it, but that is regularly left out of this kind of celebration of Combahee, is not only were these women anti-capitalists, but they were socialists. And they said forthrightly, “We are socialists.”

Crystal: Combahee members identified as socialists, in opposition to capitalism. In capitalism, private ownership of resources and the means of production is the norm. In socialism, public ownership of resources and the means of production is the norm. Dr. Taylor continues.

Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor:

“And when I interviewed Barbara Smith for the book, she says that it is the fact that we are socialists that gives the statement itself its edge and that makes it powerful, that it is not just kind of a personal reflection on an individual experience unto itself, but it’s looking at these experiences of Black women and analyzing them and coming to political conclusions about why those experiences exist and locating them in the system of capitalism. And that is part of the power of the document and part of the power of their political analysis.”

Crystal: This comes directly from the Combahee 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.
“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.”

Krystal: Members of the collective were socialists. In their understanding of socialism, material resources should be equally distributed among those who created those resources, the workers. It’s important to consider how that influenced and affected their overall politics. And it brings to light that this really was about what Black women were experiencing materially, what they were experiencing financially, and what they were experiencing in the job market.

Crystal:

That's right. That's right. And so what Dr. Taylor is illuminating is that we can’t take one part of the collective and leave the others. When we’re trying to understand what causes them to form themselves and what they're speaking out against, it's not just gender injustice, it's not just racial injustice, but it's the injustice they felt at the intersection of their race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Krystal:

I think it's worth noting that there continues to be this tension between feminism and capitalism, so that this excessive consumption and attainment of massive wealth by a few, these are signals of contemporary success for Black women and femmes in capitalism. And we see, in some of the girl boss mentality, we see Black women succeeding, we see Black women in power, we see Black women doing things that their ancestors, their foremothers could never have even conceived. But simultaneously, that success has not resulted in the liberation of all Black women, which is the goal of Black feminism, right? So here we see this tension between, what does it mean to be a feminist today? And how does that line up against critiques of capitalism? Or does it?

Crystal:
I mean there's this sense that being a billionaire, that could be a problem right. Yes, there's representation in terms of wealth and Black women attaining those signs and signatures of wealth, but there still remains that there are a vast number of Black women, right, who are impoverished, who don't have access to education, who are struggling for reproductive autonomy and justice, Right? And so the question arises, can you be a Black feminist and a billionaire? Right? That's the question that we find ourselves facing.

These are questions that we have to raise when we're really thinking about what justice looks like, what liberation looks like, right. Does the ability to accumulate and attain vast numbers of resources while your community, while your sisters, you know, are not right, while there remain serious structural barriers that prevent people from even being able to live? How does that add up? How does that compute? Right? And so I think this question, it's a hard question to answer, but what it really does is it indict structures. There are structures that allow some people to make a boatload of money while those same structures keep some people, Black women, Black trans women, ensnared and entrapped in systems and cycles of poverty. And one individual Black woman billionaire cannot change that structure, not alone.

Krystal: Just looking back on Combahee, looking at the statement, looking at the kinds of politics that they were coalescing around at the time, it really does raise this question of, what is the value of that attainment if your people are still struggling, if your people are still suffering, if your community still needs help? And so when we look at Combahee, when we look at their politics, again, this gets back to the sense of the value of the collective, of the rising tide of all boats, of the ways in which we are interdependent on each other that is kind of ignored by the capitalist framework.

Crystal: Right. Because there's this sense that representation is the answer. You have successful Black women in politics or business. And yes there is representation, but does representation equal liberation?"

Krystal: Join us on our next episode as we continue our conversation with Barbara Smith to learn about the importance of the essential statement
Combahee released in 1977, the ways it spoke to the circumstances, and how they defined a crucial Black feminist idea, identity politics.

Krystal: Crystal and I would like to thank our star guest foremother, Barbara Smith, as well as Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Feminista Jones, Dr. Brittney Cooper, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Dr. Courtney Marshall. Check out Collective’s website for more information and resources related to the history and practice of Black feminism. Our podcast team is Jenna Hanchard, Taylor Polydore, Anne Conanan and Alana Gomez. Special thanks to Modupe Labode, Tony Perry and Fath Davis Ruffins. Collected is funded by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the National Museum of American History.