Episode 6: The Future of Black Feminism Re-Routed

Crystal Moten: What is the future of Black feminism?

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: The future of black feminism is infinite. It's truly infinite because, Black feminism is really about proliferating possibility.

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, and we're members of the African American History Curatorial Collective at the National Museum of American History.

Crystal Moten: On this pilot season of Collected, we're talking about Black feminism and placing it in its original historical context.

Krystal Klingenberg: In this, the final episode of the season, we're talking about the future of Black feminism. Crystal, this is our last episode!

Crystal Moten: I know. Can you believe it? We have gone from the leaves down into the roots of the history of Black feminism, and it has been so exciting to talk about all of these topics and to interact with our guests this season.
Krystal Klingenberg: It's been a fascinating journey, not only to understand how these ideas came into being and think about the way that they've been used in the mainstream, but also to think forward into how these ideas may change things in the future and the way that we see the world.

Crystal Moten: Yeah, I agree. And I like the metaphor of thinking about roots and seeds and sproutings, because that's really what we wanted this season to do, to spark everyone's curiosity with the hope that this would lead to more investigation of Black women's history, as well as Black feminism. And to see them in new ways.

Krystal Klingenberg: Yeah. And to the larger plan of what we wanted to do over the course of these episodes, is to connect our listeners with these histories, but also to credit Black women for their great ideas, and that's something that we can do today, tomorrow, and always.

Crystal Moten: Yes, exactly. And I do want to just kind of restate the point that we made earlier, that our exploration of the history of Black feminism has not been exhaustive. There are many people and many ideas and many places that deserve some kind of context and study. But what we wanted to do was just, again, provide this opening, this invitation, that would provide some groundwork for people to continue their exploration about Black feminism.

Krystal Klingenberg: One thing we haven't talked about is that the interviews that we've done for this podcast are part of an oral history project that will bank the full length of the interviews with the Smithsonian in perpetuity. So, you know our hope here is to talk to the public about these ideas and where they came from, but also hold this material for scholars of the future who may want to learn just as much as we did by speaking to these luminaries.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. Yeah. And just one kind of last thing, reflecting on, especially our conversations with our guests over these last several months is not only did we learn more about the history and the roots of Black feminism, we also learned how contemporary practitioners are using Black feminism to engage and to critique and to reconstruct our present moments, which also helps provide visions for the future.
Krystal Klingenberg: So, we've come to the final episode. We've looked a bit at the history of Black feminism and how it plays out in the present. Now it's time to look into the future.

Crystal Moten: And think about what a Black feminist framework has to offer the world years, and centuries from now.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who we heard from at the top of this episode and in previous episodes, describes the future of Black feminism as joyous and hopeful.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: So, I think that a Black feminist future is a future of love. I think I know that in a Black feminist future, people are really eating well, people are really intentional and life-giving in their relationships with each other, people really get to experience dignity in their everyday lives. That's what a Black feminist future looks like to me and there's infinite forms that can take.

Crystal Moten: Alexis Pauline Gumbs, her idea really sparks in me kind of this understanding about the physicality of what a Black feminist future looks like. Ideas, concepts, theories are important, but you can't eat them for dinner. And so-

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely.

Crystal Moten: Yes. So, Dr. Gumbs really reminds us, it's about the food you have access to, about the love you can experience in your families because they're surviving and thriving. It's about the physicality that manifests when we're living in a truly just world.

Krystal Klingenberg: The piece that I really pull out of what she's saying is about dignity, and affording dignity to all people. Dignity in their everyday lives. That's so important to the kind of world that she imagines down the road of the Black feminism that she's talking about, right, is one where people are cared for, is one that people are able to thrive in their life ways and have that dignity in the way that they're living, and that's a crucial and very hopeful way of imagining that future.
Crystal Moten: Indeed. Indeed

Krystal Klingenberg: And it sounds beautiful, but how do we get there? What do we need to get there?

Crystal Moten: We spoke with Paris Hatcher, who is the executive director of Black Feminist Future, an organization focused on the social and political power of Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people. Here's what she had to say:

Paris Hatcher: I would say that we are in an exciting as well as perilous time. We are facing multiple crises: our climate, anti-Black policies; racist, sexist policies; While it would be easy to have despair, now more than ever we need more organizers. We need more activists. We need more folx to join organizations, and there are organizations for people based on a variety of things you're interested in and want to take action on. And we are an organization that... Our doors are open, and we want more Black feminists. We want to develop more Black feminists, be in community with, and especially at this time when we must continue to fight. I know that many of us are like, "Oh, I don't want to," or "Maybe not." But it's a must. It's also, I think, really exciting in the face of what is really perilous there's so much possibilities. If you are not in an organization or a formation, find your people. Love on your people, and win for your people.

Krystal Klingenberg: The future, as Paris Hatcher puts it, is in organizing. It's in this idea of the collective.

Crystal Moten: Yes, and when we look at many of the grassroots organizations and grassroots movements happening at this moment, many of them are being led by Black women and femmes, using Black feminist concepts. Right? So, for example, when Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi declare Black Lives Matter in the wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin, they started a much larger movement.

Krystal Klingenberg: Yeah. And the movement doesn't focus on individuals, it focuses on people. And this kind of sets things apart from previous civil rights movements of its kind.
Crystal Moten: Right, with the focus perhaps on one charismatic leader, one person who received all of the media intention. When we think about actions related to Black Lives Matter, it's about the collective. Right? The collective that we've heard about and learned about over the course of this season.

Krystal Klingenberg: We spoke with our foremother and Combahee River Collective founder, Barbara Smith, about the influence of Black feminism today and the possibly of its future.

Barbara Smith: That's a very good question. What is the future of Black feminism?

Barbara Smith: One of the things that's exciting to me is that we see Black feminist politics and practice in places that we might not have expected to see them in previous years. And I'm thinking particularly of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives. The people who have organized around police brutality and mass incarceration in the prison industrial complex, which is the focus of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives. They openly acknowledge that they are influenced by the politics of Black feminism and even draw directly from the politics of Black feminism in their work. And what's really so fascinating about that... What is fascinating about that is the fact that these are not movements that are primarily focused on gender and sexuality issues. I had the privilege of attending a Black Lives Matter gathering a couple of years ago. And Barbara Ransby, the incredible friend and historian, Barbara Ransby, was there. And she and I talked about the fact that isn't it something that they are... They wanted us to be there because we were Black feminists. But we talked about isn't it remarkable that this is a movement that is embracing Black feminist analysis and theory and practice. And is not focused on issues of gender and sexuality oppression primarily, although that gets incorporated too. So that's really exciting to me and dynamic.

Krystal Klingenberg: To Barbara's point, Black feminist theory and practice are in the activism you see today and you may not even know it.

Crystal Moten: One of the big issues that Black feminists are currently organizing around is mass incarceration in the prison, industrial complex, right. The fact that so many Black people are being imprisoned and jailed.
And this not only affects those who are incarcerated, right. A Black feminist analysis asks us to consider what's the impact of incarceration on communities, on families, on children who perhaps are left behind, on grandparents who then would have to take on the role of a parent because of an incarcerated relative. Also, on the resources it takes to perhaps visit incarcerated relatives and, or send them supplies or things they need while they are incarcerated. So it's not just being behind bars, right, but how those bars extend and expand outward.

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely. It has global impact in that way. It touches so many people, not just the person who is incarcerated. And so Black feminists are organizing around this issue and many are suggesting abolition as a solution. So what do we mean by abolition? Typically we hear the word abolition when it comes to slavery: abolitionists were against slavery as an institution. When contemporary Black feminists discuss abolition they're envisioning an end to policing, jailing, and mass incarceration. Journalist and Black feminist, Raquel Willis, explains further.

Raquel Willis: I definitely see an abolitionist future in an expansive way, right, not just rooted in the carceral state, but also just kind of the abolition of these industries that are still beholden to and fueled by white supremacy and patriarchy.

But I think at the core, I see a collective spiritual transformation in which we understand that being Black is inherently gender nonconforming, and that we see that there's actually a sacredness in ancestral power to understanding that gender is a construct, that it is not binary, and that also our concepts of our own kind of sexualities and the ways that we relate to each other are also expansive.

And so I think in that future, we won't see domestic violence, intimate partner violence, state violence, we won't see these kind of constant tensions amongst us as Black people, because we are trying to contend with the ways that white supremacy has even ravaged us on a cellular level."

Crystal Moten: What stands out to me in terms of what Raquel just said is two points. One, thinking about abolition of institutions and then thinking about
abolition of ideas. And it's both of these areas where we could use abolition, right? Abolition of institutions that uphold white supremacy and patriarchy, but also abolition of ideas that would keep us in an impoverished understanding of gender, of sexuality, et cetera.

Krystal Klingenberg: And she's also pointing us to a future where these kinds of limited ideas... The limits on those ideas are expanded. We're living without binaries, we're living in a more... She says expansive way that takes us away from violence. And you know allows some taking of stock and repair from the ravages, she says of white supremacy. One thing that's clear when we're hearing from these thinkers, these writers about the way that they're casting into the future is that yeah, we might be designing a utopian future. It's really talking about a future that's safe and healthy and thriving for Black people. And so addressing white supremacy has to be a part of that.

Crystal Moten: And you know while we are imagining and envisioning, we need to imagine the best, and the most just, and the most free and expansive world we can. I mean, it serves no purpose to imagine a constraining and limiting future, one in which people still can't, you know, exercise the freedom to be who they are and not face violent repercussions from that.

Krystal Klingenberg: We talked in a previous episode about liberation and about freedom, what those words mean. And it's the kind of futures that these thinkers are describing. You know. It's ones without limits. It's ones that are safe.

Crystal Moten: Over the course of this season and even in this episode, we've heard our guests talk about action and organizing around issues that are important to you, around injustices that you see in the world. And that involves finding a community of people who you want to be connected with. But Feminista Jones encourages us that something needs to happen before getting active and that's studying, that's reading, that's not forgetting the importance of the contributions, the theories, the concepts of those who came before us, who will help us analyze and inform and understand the struggles that we are participating in.

Feminista Jones: I've constantly reminded people, you still have to study. You still have to read the text. You got to read the articles, read the books. You
can't just say, "Well, I follow Feminista Jones on Twitter, and therefore, I know everything about Feminism." No, you don't. You have to read and so I'm constantly reading, I'm constantly studying. And we have to constantly rethink, reimagine until we get to a place where we're like, "Yes, this is it. This is it." I think we will get there.”

Krystal Klingenberg: Last episode we spoke with Raquel Willis who asked us to think expansively about Black feminism, thinking about Black trans feminism, as a way of imagining a better world. Feminista Jones asked us to think beyond Black feminism and what might be further down the road for these kinds of ideas.

Feminista Jones: So, is there something else after Black feminism? I'm absolutely sure that there is. But I think it will build upon that. And I'd like to be a part of that. I'd like to be a part of that reimagining and that speculation, and what could this be that is even more inclusive, even more expansive, even more liberatory than what we've already been building? That's where I see myself-trying to get us to that place.”

Krystal Klingenberg: I can't believe we've come to the end of our journey.

Crystal Moten: Me either. It's been so fascinating and fabulous. I have really enjoyed learning from our guests, discussing these really important topics. I really don't want it to end actually. I think we can go on for another 20 episodes.

Krystal Klingenberg: Oh, we certainly could. I mean, talking about other people, other issues, other concepts, even the conversations we had with our guests were so wide ranging and fascinating, and we've just given you a sliver of what even they had to offer. So there's just so much more we could have talked about.

Krystal Klingenberg: I hope that in the episodes over this season, we've been able to really concretize these connections between the women who thought these ideas and where they came from and where they ended up. And if you perhaps started listening without an understanding of contemporary Black feminism, or organizing or intersectional histories. This was an opportunity to
scratch the surface at least just a little bit and hopefully learn more in the future as you continue to read and engage with these ideas.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. I think that's what my hope is too. My hope is that our listeners would take from these episodes the excitement and the energy and the joy we had in talking with our guests. But then also be curious to read some of the works that our guests have written, who are prolific right in their writing. And they're just so much more to learn from them. That they would continue to engage with these ideas and with our guests, many of whom also, who are on social media and who respond and who love being in dialogue and in conversation with folks.

Krystal Klingenberg: Absolutely. So you can seek out their ideas as they put them out on social media as well. What has working on this podcast meant to you, Crystal?

Crystal Moten: Well, that's such a profound question. Not only because Black women's history is my particular area of research, but also because I use and I apply Black women's history and Black women's thought to understanding in my own personal life. A lot of our conversations have had personal impact and meaning, right that really touched me in a very special way. And so I found myself just feeling very privileged to be able to work on this topic, to be able to talk to all of the luminaries that we spoke to. It's just meant so much to see both my personal and my professional lives coincide in this way.

And to be able to work with you Krystal! That has been an absolute joy, working with you and then also the other folks on our production team, Jenna Hanchard and Taylor Polydore. You know, it's just been really special to work on this project and to see it come to life. And to know that there's going to be a wide audience experiencing the joys of this.

Krystal Klingenberg: I agree. And, you know, Crystal and I, our conversations off the mic sound a lot like our conversations on the mic. So it's been nice to let you all in on some of the things that animate our conversations and the ways that we think about this material as museum curators, this is a different direction for our kinds of work. Typically, our work is inside the museum. Right? And it's up for the public in a different way. So to share these ideas, which have impact on our work and on our lives, it's been a wonderful
opportunity to do that and share that with you all. And so we're both really grateful. And working with you Crystal has been fantastic.

Crystal Moten: Yes.

Krystal Klingenberg: And we are so excited about all the different kinds of stories from Black history that we can tell and we can share, and we can make accessible to folks who may be thinking about them, may not be. And so we really look forward to continuing on this journey with you all.

Crystal Moten: Yeah and I would just add one more thing to continue to lighten up the mood. The one thing that's different about our conversation on the podcast is that usually our conversations include lots of GIFS and memes. And so that's the...

Krystal Klingenberg: Yes. The one thing you're not seeing is our GIFS and the memes and our chuckling with each other. But you know just as much as Crystal and I have found connection and fellowship with each other and sisterhood in doing this, this is where community and collectivity become so important. And we urge you to find those communities for yourself.

Crystal Moten: And that's a wrap.

Krystal Klingenberg: We'd like to thank all of our guests, Paris Hatcher, Barbara Smith, Brittney Cooper, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Raquel Willis, Duchess Harris, Courtney Marshall, Charlene Caruthers, Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Feminista Jones. Our podcast team is Jenna Hanchard, Taylor Polydore, Ann Conan and Alana Gomez. Special Thanks to Fath Davis Ruffins, Modupe Labode and Tony Perry. Collected, is funded by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the National Museum of American History.