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LONG LIVE THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE!
ENOUGH is ENOUGH!
THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT

A Critical Analysis of The Combahee River Collective and Black Feminism in the 1960s -1970s

Parker Kirlew

I am writing this essay as a Black cisgender woman in her early 20s, born and raised in Texas, who identifies as a lesbian, and who is interested in discussing issues affecting the success of Black feminists and lesbian liberation. As a Black feminist, I hope this essay contributes to conversations on the mistreatment of Black feminists in "Pro-Black" movements. History has made evident that while Black feminist ideas have been met with hostility when integration into other social movements has been attempted, it has also been rejected when it's been asserted as its own ideology. Nevertheless, groups like The Combahee River Collective have demonstrated that Black feminists have found solace within each other throughout the fight for liberation. Published in 1977, The Combahee River Collective Statement touches on the key concepts of identity politics, Black feminism, Black lesbianism, Black liberation, and the different obstacles that stand in the way of Black feminist liberation. Throughout the later 20th century and into the present day, The Combahee River Collective has been instrumental for inspiring Black feminist politics, disciplines, activism, and discourse. This critical essay argues that while The Combahee River Collective inspired the creation of groups like The Black Lives Matter Movement, there has always been discourse surrounding the focus on the liberation of Black feminists and lesbians.

With the chasm of socioeconomic disparities ever-growing between Black women and other classes of citizens in the United

States, The Combahee River Collective was formed in Boston, Massachusetts in 1974. From the 1960s to the 1970s, America experienced the Second Wave of Feminism, but Black feminists were not included or considered in this fight for liberation. The United States was simultaneously undergoing a tense shift in cultural dynamics as The Civil Rights Movement, The Black Panthers, and Black nationalism began to take root; all of which inspired many of the collective's political ideologies. Frustrated with the lack of anti-racist police in the feminist movement and a general lack of inclusivity in the other progressive movements that swept the country, Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith decided to express their concerns in The Combahee River Collective Statement (CRC). The primary objective of the organization as a whole, and their statement in particular, was to "[struggle] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (CRC 2015, 1). This objective was particularly progressive for its time, as it sought to not only root out racism but also misogyny, common enemies to Black women's autonomy in the United States. Moreover, the statement sought to address the idea of heteronormativity in Black culture. In an identity so firmly developed by traditional Protestant ideals of self and the sanctity of marriage, addressing homophobia in Black values was a concept far ahead of its time. The traditional "Pro-Black" stance of this day involved strengthening the Black familial unit. The radical idea of Black lesbian liberation still inspires Black feminist and lesbian thought in the present day, as the fight to normalize LGBT identities in Black culture continues.

Given the complex legacies of exclusion from second-wave feminism and the "Pro-Black" movement, it is important to talk about the focus, or lack thereof, on Black-women-centered services during the 1970s. There were decades of work to be done regarding the formation of Black-women-focused establishments, as the statement explains how there was no refuge for battered women in Boston during this time. Left with nowhere to turn, Black women created establishments aimed at serving all, with particular emphasis on Black women. Saint Charles Lockett, for example, was a successful Black businesswoman and capitalist that hired mothers who received state benefits. Lockett understood that Black women were considered to be at the "very bottom of the American capitalistic economy" and had a plan to change this (CRC 2015, 3). She was surrounded by several obstacles, as she was immersed in a White, male-dominated field. In fact, Lockett would have to persuade companies to purchase contracts because she was a Black woman (Moten 2016, 113). She also explic-

itly stated that her company was a "profit-making venture," which suggests that she would be willing to take the steps necessary to ensure the success of her business.

By contrast, the women of The Combahee River Collective self-identified as socialists because they believed that work and profits must benefit those that *actually* do the work, not the supervisors, CEOs, or other high-ranking executives (CRC 2015, 5). Nevertheless, I believe Lockett was using socialist values, as she had a vision of making sure all of her employees, which consisted of women receiving public aid, were able to be find gainful employment. Like the women of The Combahee River Collective, Lockett looked at the "implications of race and class as well as sex" when handling the employment process (CRC 2015, 5). She saw her company as a gateway into Black economic success, which was another important idea held by members of The Combahee River Collective. Ultimately, I believe if Lockett and the women of The Collective crossed paths, they would be able to learn from one another because Lockett's dreams to uplift the status of Black women and women in general, holds a direct link to the economic dreams of The Combahee River Collective. With this being said, it is likely that Lockett would be inspired by the statement because she also aimed to improve the lives of those for whom "racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working / economic lives" (CRC 2015, 5). This is explicitly seen when examining her steps toward inclusion and economic prosperity. In brief, it would be extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible, to fully identify as a capitalist with such all-encompassing goals to provide Black women and other women of color a chance at improving their financial standings.

While the official term intersectionality was not developed until 1989 in Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," overlapping oppressions have always impacted the lived experiences of Black women. The Combahee River Collective Statement thoroughly, although not explicitly, explained the idea of intersectionality throughout their statement. The authors state that they encounter difficulties when attempting to "separate race from class from sex oppression" because living as Black women, they are "experienced simultaneously" (CRC 2015, 4). Stories told by other Black women like Frenchie Bell, a manufacturer worker, likewise showcase a damning economic reality for people that fall within intersectional boundaries. Placed on an automatic, male-dominated assembly

line without proper training, Bell faced repercussions from her supervisors whenever she could not keep up with the other employees. She protested to a review board, however, the board "was not sophisticated enough to handle intersectional complaints that hinged on race and gender" so Bell was not granted the necessary justice (Moten 2016, 112). Crenshaw further adds economic critique when she brings up a similar story to Lockett's career, in which she talks about Black women not being hired at General Motors until 1964, before The Combahee River Collective. While the CRC statement did not inspire changes by General Motors, it further contextualizes Lockett's story of being a Black woman in the manufacturing field in the 1960s and 1970s. The General Motors story also showcases the ways in which different forms of inequality have intersected—and for a long time—before the Collective formed in the 1970s, and before the term "intersectionality" was coined by Crenshaw in the late 1980s.

Beyond emphasizing the unique economic disparities experienced by Black women, both Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective distinguish Black women's experiences from those of white women. Crenshaw brings up a fantastic point in which she says that White women do not need to specify their race when claiming discrimination because White people are not discriminated against on the basis of their race (Crenshaw 1989, 144). On the other hand, when Black women experience discrimination, they are forced to question if the discrimination is due to their race, gender, or some other identity category such as sexuality. This scenario perfectly exemplifies what the term "intersectionality" means for a Black woman or any person of color. The impact distinguishes Black feminist concerns from White feminism because Black women contend with "the implications of race and class as well as sex" (CRC 2015, 5). The challenging realities created by intersectional oppressions created complex relationships between Black women and the 1970s White feminist movement.

During that era, there were actually multiple feminist movements occurring simultaneously, as women of color fought to create their own spaces for empowerment. For Black women, it was necessary to create a distinct movement because many felt "rejected or ignored or objectified by white women" (Breines 2002, 1096). This sense of exclusion reasserts the relevance of identity politics and how the concept of *identity politics* created a space for Black women in the 1960s and 1970s. The Combahee River Collective was one of the first organizations to use this term, and White women even tried to discount the *true* meaning of what

identity politics embody. The authentic definition of identity politics is reflected by the CRC, "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity …" (CRC 2015, 4). To explain, Breines discusses how White women acknowledged identity politics by the late 1960s, but they did not define identity politics in a way that made it applicable to non-White women or upheld its original meaning (Breines 2002, 1097). Although it seemed like White women were willing to truly understand identity politics, they continued to define it as something that would benefit the White agenda.

Black lesbian feminists thus felt that it was necessary to create their own feminist coalitions in order to have their unique identities represented in the public sphere. Iconic activist Barbara Smith explains it perfectly when she states that being a White woman feminist is extremely different from what it means to be a Black feminist and/or lesbian (Breines 2002, 1113). Further, in her landmark 1979 conference presentation titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde argues that people cannot beat their oppressors by using the same tools as them, but they can beat them with strength. Lorde proposes that Black feminists and Black lesbians have had to "stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled" throughout their fight for liberation (Lorde 2002, 108). This key example of identity politics not only shows immense strength, but also highlights the obstacles Black women faced in order to be present in certain spaces. The Combahee River Collective statement adds that 'identity politics' allow for the most profound discoveries to be made because members of communities are the most informed about what issues they face. They believe this is revolutionary for Black women because "it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded [Black women] that anyone is more worthy of liberation than [Black women]" (CRC 2015, 4). Coupled with Lorde's insights, identity politics has yielded a gigantic amount of success to marginalized communities, such as Black women. Without strength of will and identity politics, The Combahee River Collective and organizations alike would not have been granted a platform for empowerment.

The push for empowerment within the Black community, however, was not always a united front against oppression. For example, the Combahee River Collective statement acknowledges the apprehension among Black men to support the Black feminist movement. They critique this stance, asserting that the accusations that Black feminism will result in a divide among Black peo-

ple "are [only] powerful deterrents" to a Black women's movement. Furthermore, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2020) gives examples of how sexism manifested in Black spaces, as it was not rare for Black men to disagree with Black women getting abortions, solely because they felt it was a method of Black genocide (10). These realities being considered, The Combahee River Collective thus deemed it necessary for Black women to create their own spaces because spaces run by Black men or White women were either racist, sexist, or a combination of the two (8). Like White women, Black men were often exclusionary towards Black women, as history has showcased that Black women's liberation has been a point of contention for everyone, except for Black women. Furthermore, relationships between Black men and White women created an interesting dilemma in feminist spaces. Beyond navigating the divisive stances many Black men held against feminism, Black women in the movement also had to grapple with the complexities created by interracial relationships.

The romanticization of interracial couples in social media, violent, racially-motivated porn, and music has encouraged Black men to seek non-Black, mostly white women in sexual and romantic partnerships. For example, Black women have been painted as too outspoken or even combative, while White women have been viewed as submissive and soft-spoken. Erica C. Childs (2005) further explains that when Black men choose White women, it is understood by Black women as Black men valuing White women more, and therefore treating them better than they treat Black women (554). Moreover, some people were convinced that Black women became resentful of White women for dating Black men, and some accused interracial relationships of causing a rift between Black and White women. Research shows that Black women have the highest levels of opposition towards interracial relationships between Black men and White women (Childs 2005, 545). This has been attributed to the low level of treatment Black women experience when dating Black men compared to the quality of treatment White women receive when dating Black men. The response to this differential treatment feeds into the idea of the "angry Black woman," which is often described as a bitter killjoy, but this is a substantial misunderstanding, as Black women's testimonies say otherwise. One Black woman describes Black men dating White women as feeling like this:

> As a Black woman, it is difficult enough to have to deal with Whites who [act] as if [Black] is inferior, but it is even harder to

> have your own men act like white is better and systematically choose white women over you; it is hard not to get angry because it feels as if no one values your worth as a woman. You grow up with these men all your life, but then you're not good enough to be a wife ...it's disrespectful and degrading. (Childs 2005, 554)

So, what role do Black men play in Black feminism, and is it a positive or negative role? The women of The Combahee River Collective briefly address this in the statement. They say that they "feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand" (CRC 2015, 4). Now the question becomes: how has The Combahee River Collective been inspired to make changes for Black men surrounding Black feminism? More specifically, how have The Combahee River Collective's efforts of integrating Black men into the Black feminist movement been successful? And how have they not?

As stated earlier, the 1960s and 1970s were filled with changes as it pertains to The Civil Rights Movement, The Black Panthers, and Black nationalism, all of which inspired many of the collective's political ideologies. However, The Black Panthers in particular are rarely brought up in Black feminist discourse. In a groundbreaking collection of essays, Devon Carbado (1999) explains how The Black Panthers actually fought to integrate feminist thought into their politics, despite the fact that it is described as a patriarchal, heteronormative organization (360). Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of The Black Panther Party, also touches on the importance of Black men aligning with Black feminists and lesbians in one of the essays in this pioneering anthology. In a roundtable discussion titled "Ode to Our Feminist Foremothers: The Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project on Collaborative Praxis and Fifty Years of Panther History," four Black women historians use the intellectual legacy of the Combahee River Collective to explore intersectionality in the Black panther party. They explain that Newton argues that gay, women, and anti-racist efforts are all part of the same movement whether they know it or not. To reach liberation for all, he demands that Black men align themselves with Black women, gay people, and lesbians through their activism, discourse, and community (Phillips et al. 2017, 360). I believe this position can be further connected to the Combahee River Collective's socialist ideals because socialism thrives when the community is centered.

The Black Panther Party and The Combahee River Collective both believe in socialist politics, and like true socialists, they believe that a socialist revolution is also a feminist and anti-racist revolution. By thinking of politics as coalitional, multifaceted, and intersectional, liberation will be guaranteed (CRC 2015, 4). As socialists, The Combahee River Collective needed progressive men such as Newton to actively fight for the liberation of Black women. However, this has not been an easy thing to achieve because while Black women *struggle with* Black men against racism, they also *struggle against* Black men about sexism (CRC 2015, 5). With this being said, Black men must align themselves with the Black feminist movement to truly reach empowerment. Black men were always placed at the forefront of Black movements, and they still are today with initiatives like #BlackLivesMatter. Noted, Black men are disproportionately impacted by racial injustice. Unjustly labeled as martyrs, a large number of people know names such as Emmett Till, Eric Garner, and George Floyd. While saying their names are powerful, and these men should have their names screamed by all, the attention given to Black women that have been killed by the police is not nearly as common or broadcasted.

Like The Combahee River Collective, Bread and Roses was also a socialist organization that believed liberation would not be possible until all, with an emphasis on women, were free. Wini Breines (2002, 1102) cites the doctoral dissertation of Kristine Rosenthal, *Women in Transition*, to share their statement of purpose, which reads as follows:

> Bread and Roses is an organization of socialist women. We believe that a socialist revolution is a necessary precondition to the liberation of women, although we know that we will not be liberated unless we continually fight against the oppression of women. For this reason, we believe that a woman's movement must be autonomous in order to fight against male supremacy as it exists in all institutions, and in its structural basis, the bourgeois family. We believe that capitalism has to be overthrown to create a socialist society, which means one free of all forms of exploitation, racism, imperialism and male supremacy. (Rosenthal 1972, 59)

While theoretically, this statement sounds great, it was very difficult trying to get men to agree with this statement of purpose. The women of Bread and Roses discuss how sexist attitudes are so ingrained in the movement, and out-arguing men have caused

exhaustion beyond belief (Breines 2002, 1103). This calls for further examination of the role that Black men played in perpetuating sexist attitudes which affected Black women, much like the members of the Combahee River Collective. The women of the Collective believe that "sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race," which parallels sentiments in the Bread and Roses statement of purpose. Specifically, Black women are demanding that politics do not belong under the patriarchy because as long as sexual politics and patriarchy are intertwined with one another, Black women will never be able to conduct politics without also considering how their class, race, and any other part of their identity impact the decisions being made.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding the liberation of Black feminists and lesbians has a long, complex history shaped by many different stakeholders. Work done by the Combahee River Collective has been an immense inspiration. Black women have forwarded socialist ideals in unique ways, such as with profit-making ventures like Lockett's business and inclusive mindsets. Further, The Combahee River Collective's socialist orientation give a look into what an intersectional world would look like for Black women, and how the women of the Collective addressed intersectionality even before the term was coined by Crenshaw in the late 1980s.

Additionally, the discourse surrounding intersectionality is skewed when looking at Black women's positionality, or lack thereof in the mainstream White feminism. Identity politics, a term defined by the women of the Collective, explains the only way Black women were able to have a space to express themselves and their politics. Although White women set out to understand identity politics, their understanding of identity politics was explained in a way that benefited White women and their White "feminist" agenda. I put feminist in quotes because I believe that being a feminist is to be inclusive, and these types of White women were not feminists, it is more accurate to label them as "pro-White women." More than the obstacle that is themselves, White women caused a rift in Black communities due to interracial relationships with Black men. Unfortunately, some Black men did not see a problem with this. Comparatively, more progressive men like Newton called for the liberation of lesbians, gays, and women; after all, they are all a part of the same movement. Knowing this, we can see the position held by progressive Black men—Newton, for example—and Black feminists and how solidarity between the two groups can be a

powerful force. On the other hand, you have unprogressive Black men that may stand with White women who are separatists.

If I have learned anything, it is that intersectionality should bring people together, not fractionalize communities. I have realized how expansive my feminism is as a Black feminist, but I have also been reminded that I live in a world where my feminism will sometimes only be appreciated by other Black feminists. It can be difficult to accept this, but there is a power in knowing that other Black feminists, as expansive as I am—if not more—will be engaging in discourse and thought in such ways as I have done in this critical essay. There are a plethora of stories that can be told about living life as a Black feminist, but there would not be a space for this storytelling without groups like The Combahee River Collective, without identity politics, and without identity itself. Ideas such as identity politics have helped me grow as a feminist in ways that I could not have imagined. I now know that I am free to create a space of my own if one is not provided for me, and I think that is amazing. Nevertheless, there are parts of the statement that I believe need to be critiqued as much as any piece.

I would specifically like to touch on the section about standing with progressive Black men. In particular, I want to question how this mindset can lead to exclusionary violence. Sure, it would be nice for Black women to be able to count on Black men, to stand up for Black women if other men in the room are apprehensive to listen to their perspectives. But is that what we should call a solution for ending Black women's oppression? I do not believe that Black women should have to count on Black men to aid in the fight for liberation, especially considering how often Black men have let Black women down. However, this dilemma confuses me because I think of myself as an intersectional feminist, especially because I do not think Black feminist liberation can be separated from Black male solidarity.

Am I just being pessimistic? Does this make *me* a bitter Black woman? The Black woman who just can't seem to "get over it"? What is even more unfortunate is that I do not think I might ever know the answer to these questions because I would either be forced to (1) agree with what the world paints me out to be—a bitter Black woman or (2) come to a conclusion in my own head; a conclusion that makes me feel content. Despite knowing what could cause such a feeling of contentment, I will continue to search for my peace with Black men's roles, or lack thereof, in Black women liberation. With a continued journey being what looks like my final option, I am left uncertain of what the future

holds. Still, I remain optimistic about the horizon because of initiatives like The Combahee River Collective. As Black socialist feminists, members of the Combahee River Collective were able to address powerful topics such as intersectionality before the term was even coined, and it just amazes me how Black women are capable of telling the future. My prediction? Black feminism still has a long way to go despite the progressiveness seen in many Black feminist spaces.

In the Black community, a large portion of Black men have actively participated in misogynoir and violence against Black women. Today, the media shows how the #BlackLivesMatter movement has moved towards using other hashtags like #ProtectBlackWomen because of the lack of concern placed on the lives of Black women. Tellingly, The Combahee River Collective Statement states, "We realize that the only people who care enough about us [Black women] to work consistently for our [Black women's] liberation is us [Black women] (CRC 2015, 4). This is relevant in non-academic spaces as well. For example, the popular rapper Megan Thee Stallion brought up Breonna Taylor, a Black woman gunned down by police while she was sleeping in her home, in one of her songs (Stallion 2020). The lyrics go "now here we are, 2020, eight months later and we still ain't got no fuckin' justice for Breonna Taylor." It is important to add that Megan also had her own encounter with gun violence when she was shot in the foot by rapper Tory Lanez, a Black man. Rather than being met with support during this time, a large group of Black men blamed Megan for the incident and did not support her despite Tory being found guilty in 2021. I think this is very powerful because I am writing this critical essay in 2021, almost 2022, and still, nothing has changed in regard to the level of respect Black women are given. It has been so, so very long without change. How much longer are Black women expected to endure this violence, and will anyone help support them during the meantime? #SayHerName gives me hope but there is still a long way to go.

In the end, Black feminism spans a plethora of disciplines, and activism can be seen in the streets, in the archives, and even in popular rap songs that we hear today. The most important takeaway I have is that with the power of community and identity politics, the women of the Collective were able to voice many concerns held by Black feminists in the 1970s, with their words going on to inspire Black scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. The work done by the Collective remains relevant in today's society. For example, within the contemporary sphere of popular culture,

Black artists like Megan Thee Stallion embody the values and feminist ideology put forth by the Collective. Politically, there are broader questions to be answered, such as how The Combahee River Collective's existence assists with the formation of other Black social movements, like the Black Lives Matter Movement. In particular, is the Black Lives Matter Movement sufficient enough to fight for *all* Black lives, with an emphasis on Black feminism and lesbianism? There are still several questions that need answers, but as long as a Black feminist such as myself continues the fight, I think we will be alright.

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