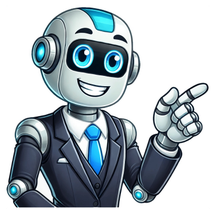
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Combahee river collective statement

The Combahee River Collective Statement, written in 1977 and first published in Zillah Eisenstein's book "Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism" in 1979, serves as a foundational document in Black feminism. Its impact can still be seen in US politics today, and it is considered one of the first documents to define "identity politics." The statement's descriptions of interconnected systems of oppression are also integral to Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. This month's Annotations series features the statement alongside related scholarship from the time period and current discussions. We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting since 1974, working to define our politics and engage in political work within our group and with other progressive organizations. Our general stance is to struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, recognizing that these systems intersect and create conditions for our lives as Black women. We see Black feminism as a logical response to the manifold oppressions faced by women of color. The upcoming paper will discuss four major topics: the genesis of contemporary Black feminism, our politics, organizing challenges, and Black feminist issues and practice. Our origins are rooted in the historical reality of Afro-American women's struggle for survival and liberation, which has been shaped by their experiences as both racial and sexual minorities. We acknowledge the key role that Black women have played in resisting white male rule throughout history, from Sojourner Truth to Ida B. Wells Barnett. Black feminism emerged as a distinct movement in the late 1960s, building on the work of Black women and other Third World and working women within the American women's movement. Despite their involvement from its start, racism and elitism often obscured their participation. In 1973, Black feminists formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) to address these issues. The connection between Black feminism and movements for Black liberation is clear, with many activists involved in Civil Rights, Black nationalism, and the Black Panthers. This experience shaped their politics, which prioritize anti-racism and anti-sexism. Personal experiences of individual Black women's lives also played a key role in the development of Black feminism, as they faced unique forms of sexual oppression and marginalization. The lack of conceptual frameworks to understand these issues hindered their ability to develop effective resistance strategies. However, this awareness has driven many Black feminists to create and apply feminist theories and practices to challenge systemic racism and sexism. Our struggles against oppression have guided us towards an anti-racist, anti-sexist stance. This has evolved to address heterosexism and economic exploitation under capitalism. At the core of our politics lies the understanding that Black women are inherently valuable and deserving of liberation. Our autonomy as human beings is a necessity, not just for the benefit of others but because we need it for ourselves. What's striking about our position is that no other progressive movement has prioritized our specific oppression or worked towards ending it. Even naming the hurtful stereotypes attributed to Black women (such as mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger) and acknowledging the cruel treatment we face highlights how little value has been placed on our lives over four centuries of bondage. We recognize that only we can work consistently for our liberation because no one else cares enough. Our politics are rooted in a love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community, which allows us to continue our struggle. This focus on our own oppression is encapsulated by the concept of identity politics. We believe that radical politics stem directly from our identity, as opposed to working solely to end someone else's oppression. For Black women, this idea is especially radical because it challenges the notion that anyone else's liberation is more important than ours. We reject pedestals and the expectation to walk behind others. Being recognized simply as human beings, on an equal level, is enough for us. We also understand that sexual politics under patriarchy affects our lives just as much as race and class do. Often, we struggle with the intertwining of these oppressions in our lives, such as the history of rape used as a political weapon against Black women by white men. While we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men but do not advocate for fractionalization demanded by some white separatists. As Black people, we need solidarity around the fact of race, which is not necessary for white women in their relationship with white men unless it's negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We work together against racism while also working to address sexism within our community. We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples requires the destruction of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe in organizing work for the collective benefit rather than profit. Resources should be equally distributed among those who create them. However, we're not convinced a socialist revolution without addressing these intertwined oppressions would truly bring about justice or equality. Not only will a feminist and anti-racist revolution ensure our liberation, but also developing an understanding of class relationships is necessary to address the specific challenges faced by Black women. We must acknowledge that racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working lives, going beyond Marx's economic theory. Our consciousness-raising sessions have shown that we have taken a step further in linking personal and political issues, highlighting the impact of race, class, and sex on our experiences. By exploring the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression, we've identified the need to examine the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. For instance, discussing how Black male peers attacked our intellectual interests led us to recognize the "smart-ugly" label, which symbolized the cost of developing intellects at the expense of social lives. We reject Lesbian separatism due to its limitations and exclusions, particularly regarding Black men, women, and children. As Black women, we're wary of biological determinism and instead focus on societal norms and oppression. Organizing around Black feminist issues has proven to be a challenging task for us, even mentioning our identity can be met with hesitation or discomfort in certain settings. We've attempted to identify the underlying causes of these difficulties, particularly considering the continued growth and strength of the white women's movement. In this section, we will discuss the general reasons behind our organizing struggles as well as the specific stages of building our collective. Our primary obstacle is the cumulative effect of multiple oppressions that we face simultaneously. Unlike groups with racial, sexual, or class privilege, we lack even minimal access to resources and power. The psychological burden of being a Black woman cannot be overstated, making it difficult to reach political consciousness and engage in activism. Society places little value on Black women's well-being, perpetuating both racism and sexism. As one early group member noted, "We are all damaged people simply by virtue of being Black women." We're dispossessed on multiple levels yet feel compelled to struggle for the betterment of all Black women. Michele Wallace's quote from "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood" resonates deeply with us: "If we exist as Black women who are feminists, each isolated and working independently for now, it's because there is no environment in this society that supports our struggle—because, being at the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: fight the world." If Black women were free from oppression, it would necessitate the dismantling of all systems of oppression, ultimately freeing everyone else. Despite this potential for revolutionary change, feminism is perceived as a threat by many Black people due to its challenge to traditional assumptions about power relationships and roles. A Black nationalist pamphlet from the 1970s exemplifies these views, stating that men are inherently leaders due to their broader knowledge and understanding of the world, while women are naturally suited for domestic roles. Equality between men and women is seen as an unattainable ideal. Black women's experiences and perspectives often intersect with issues of racism and sexism, creating unique challenges that must be addressed within the context of feminism. The value of Black women is not diminished by their lack of economic stability, but rather, they are driven to navigate the complexities of both systems in order to survive. we were split but also the result of class and political differences. during the summer those of us who was still meeting had determined the need to do political work and move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. at the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again look for a focus. we decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. we always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. we begin functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. we had a retreat in the late spring which provide a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. currently we are planning to gather together a collectIon of Black feminist writing. We believe that politics should not justify extreme actions. History shows us that many destructive acts were done under the guise of achieving a "correct" goal. As feminists, we don't want to harm people for the sake of politics. We strive for collective decision-making and equal power distribution within our group and in our vision of a more just society. Our commitment is to continuously examine our actions through self-criticism and criticism as essential parts of our practice. A quote from Robin Morgan's introduction to "Sisterhood is Powerful" highlights the importance of understanding our roles: "I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power." As Black feminists and Lesbians, we recognize our unique responsibilities in creating change and we're prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. Our collective, The Combahee River Collective, was formed in 1974. Since then, we've been working to define and refine our politics while engaging in coalition building with other progressive groups. Our core commitment is to fight against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression. We believe the interconnected nature of these systems shapes our lives as Black women. We'll explore four key topics: the origins of contemporary Black feminism; our specific political stance; the challenges we face in organizing ourselves; and issues and practices within Black feminist communities. Black women have been pivotal in shaping their communities through various means, often working behind the scenes as well as more visibly. These individuals, including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Ida B. Wells Barnett, among others, have long been aware of how their dual identities intersect to create unique challenges and drive their political agendas. Contemporary Black feminism stems from generations of personal sacrifices, fierce activism, and tireless work by women who have paved the way for future movements. Notably, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was established in 1973 as a response to marginalized voices within the American women's movement. The connection between Black feminism and liberation movements is clear, with many of its key figures being active in Civil Rights, Black nationalism, and the Black Panthers. The need for a distinct Black feminist voice arose from personal experiences of racism, sexism, and classism that were deeply ingrained in these early movements. As women of color, they sought to create an alternative framework that addressed their specific struggles and challenged dominant narratives. This evolution was also fueled by a growing recognition of the interconnectedness between racial oppression, patriarchal rule, and economic inequality. The personal experiences of individual Black women, often marked by societal expectations and trauma, have been instrumental in shaping the politics of Black feminism. From childhood, many were aware of their differences from men and faced unique challenges as they grew older, including physical and sexual abuse. However, a lack of conceptual frameworks for understanding these dynamics hindered their ability to articulate and mobilize around their experiences. Today, Black feminist activism continues to be shaped by the economic and political context in which Black people live. The post-World War II generation of Black youth has been marked by ongoing struggle against systemic racism and inequality, making it essential to center their voices and experiences within Black feminist discourse. Historically, our group was among the first to be able to participate in educational and job opportunities previously inaccessible to Black people. Although our economic status remains at the bottom of the American capitalist system, some of us have gained essential tools through tokenism in education and employment, which enables us to effectively combat our oppression. Our initial unity came from a shared anti-racist and anti-sexist stance, and as we developed politically, we addressed issues like heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism. We reject systems of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, and instead advocate for socialism, where work is organized for the benefit of all who contribute, not just the profit of those in power. However, we believe that a socialist revolution must also be feminist and anti-racist to truly bring about liberation. As Black women, our experiences are shaped by both racial and sexual oppression, which are significant factors in our economic lives. While we agree with Marx's theory, we recognize that it must be expanded to account for the specific class position of Black women, who are often marginalized in the labor force. We have made significant contributions to feminist theory, including the concept that personal experiences are inherently political. Through our consciousness-raising sessions, we have explored the intersections of race, class, and sex, and have developed a unique style of storytelling that is both culturally and politically resonant. We have also examined the ways in which Black women's lives are shaped by multiple forms of oppression, including the sanctions against Black women thinkers in both Black and white communities. Ultimately, we reject separatist ideologies and instead advocate for a politic that recognizes the complexity of human experience and seeks to build alliances across lines of race, class, and sex. We criticize the socialization of men in this society, but do not believe that their biology is the root cause of their oppressive behavior. As Black women, we find biological determinism to be a dangerous and reactionary basis for building a politic, and instead seek to create a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected systems of oppression that shape our lives. Lesbian separatism's adequacy as a political analysis and strategy for those who practice it is debated. The approach focuses solely on sexual sources of women's oppression, neglecting class and race issues. ## Organizing Black Feminists: Challenges and Opportunities As part of a Black feminist collective, we have encountered difficulties in organizing around Black feminist issues and announcing our identities. Several factors contribute to these challenges, including the need to address multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. ### Lack of Privilege and Resources Unlike groups with dominant privileges, we lack racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class advantages, which limits our access to resources and power. This disparity takes a significant psychological toll on Black women, affecting their ability to reach political consciousness and engage in activism. ### Societal Devaluation of Black Women's Experiences The low value placed upon Black women's psyches is rooted in systemic racism and sexism. This devaluation can lead to feelings of isolation and disempowerment among Black women, making it essential for them to fight for their own liberation and that of others. ### The Potential for Revolutionary Action Despite the challenges, Black feminists can use their marginalized position to drive revolutionary change. By prioritizing collective freedom, we can dismantle oppressive systems and create a more just society where everyone's rights are recognized. ### Critiques of Feminism from Within Feminism is often perceived as threatening by many Black people, as it questions traditional power dynamics based on sex. This raises important questions about how to balance feminist goals with the need for community acceptance and support. Because men have a natural ability to defend and protect their families, women cannot replicate this role—they are biologically designed to function differently. The idea of gender equality is abstract and unattainable in reality, as men themselves are not equal in terms of ability, experience, or understanding. Men and women can be seen as having different values, like gold and silver, which may not be equal but still hold great worth. Recognizing that men and women complement each other is crucial, as a family requires both a man and woman to thrive. The material circumstances of many Black women make it difficult for them to challenge societal norms and arrangements that bring them some stability. Some Black women have a deep understanding of sexism and racism but cannot risk fighting against these systems due to the constraints of their daily lives. Black men often react negatively to feminism, as they may lose valuable allies in their struggles and be forced to change their treatment of Black women. The idea that Black feminism divides the Black struggle is a powerful deterrent to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement. Despite these challenges, hundreds of Black women have been involved with our group over three years, driven by a strong desire for empowerment and a sense of possibility. Initially, we focused on building relationships and raising consciousness, but as time passed, we began discussing ways to organize and create change. Given text paraphrased Here is a paraphrased version of the original text. In an attempt to address the economic situation and develop our own analysis, some members returned in the fall, only to experience several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements. Initially thought to be caused by a Lesbian-straight split, these issues were later found to be rooted in class and political differences. During this time, those who continued to meet recognized the need for political work and moving beyond consciousness-raising and support groups that served only as emotional outlets. At the beginning of 1976, when some women stopped attending due to disagreements over politics and class, a new focus emerged. With the addition of new members, the group decided to transition into a study group, leveraging their shared reading experiences and writing papers on Black feminism for group discussion. They began functioning as a study group while also exploring the possibility of launching a Black feminist publication. A retreat in the late spring provided an opportunity for both political discussion and interpersonal resolution. Currently, the group is planning to compile a collection of Black feminist writings, aiming to demonstrate their politics to other Black women through writing and dissemination. This endeavor stems from the realization that individual Black feminists are often isolated and that their small numbers necessitate collaborative efforts. The group's commitment to inclusivity drives their focus on issues affecting not only Black women but also Third World and working-class individuals. They recognize the interconnected nature of oppression, which is exacerbated by the simultaneous presence of race, sex, and class factors. This understanding informs their involvement in various projects, such as workplace organizing, hospital picketing, rape crisis center establishment, and advocacy for welfare and daycare concerns. The collective's work on issues like sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, and rape highlights the pervasiveness of oppression. They have also conducted numerous workshops and educationals on Black feminism at various venues, including college campuses, women's conferences, and high school events. Recently, they have addressed racism within the white women's movement, acknowledging the need for greater understanding and action to combat this issue among their counterparts. Their aim is to organize around issues that simultaneously involve race, sex, and class factors, such as those affecting Third World women in the workplace or Black communities struggling with inadequate healthcare. As we strive for a deeper understanding of race, culture, and Black history, we recognize that dismantling racism within the white women's movement is a responsibility that lies with white women themselves. While we will continue to advocate for accountability on this issue, our politics are guided by the principle that the means cannot justify harmful ends. We prioritize collective decision-making and non-hierarchical power distribution within our group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. Through self-reflection and critical examination, we continually assess the development of our politics.

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