

You're listening to *A People's Anthology*. Produced by Boston Review, this is a new podcast that highlights and explore key texts from US history, with our first six episodes surfacing a few important documents related to the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 70s.

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This is episode five, on the Combahee River Collective Statement from 1977. introduced by read by Beverly Smith, one of the original members of the collective and one of three co-writers of the statement.

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The Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974 in Boston by a group of black, queer Marxist feminists. They named their group after Harriet Tubman's raid on the Combahee River in South Carolina that freed 750 enslaved people.

The collective is best known for their eponymous statement published in 1977, which has gone on to become one of the most widely read documents on black feminism of the past 50 years. Not only do they outline the importance of black women's liberation, but highlight organizing projects that can secure it, and the oppressive systems that are hindering this work.

In particular, the statement is renowned for its description of oppressions as "interlocking" or happening "simultaneously," with their treatment both as black *and* as women *and* as poor people combining and creating a new level of exploitation. It's an update on the "triple oppression" that Claudia Jones laid out in Episode One.

The collective doesn't just couch this intensified oppression in theoretical terms—instead their analysis has clear reference to their daily lives. Here's Beverly Smith.

*One of the main sources is our lived experience. What we all experienced individually and in some ways as a group as black women.... We living our lives had had some similar overlapping experiences in this country and elsewhere -- because in fact, there are probably some balck women not born in this country who could identify with what's here.*

These personal experiences come from the Collective's working lives — some were social or youth workers, and Beverly Smith herself worked in the health clinics around the city, including at Columbia point — where they met victims of domestic violence.

*In the statement we talk about opening a refuge for battered women. Well I remember sitting by the river and having a discussion about how I had seen a woman at the clinic where I worked who told me and showed me how she had been physically abused. In this particular case, her partner he had burned her with cigarettes... and she held out her arms and showed me the burns.*

*And I remember talking with the women in the group that was becoming the collective about my experience and telling them I had no where to send her. There was nothing! There was nothing. And that's why the few of us at that time were sort of ambitious enough, bold enough, to think -- well maybe this is what we should do.*

It's also important to note that the statement had a debt to other radical movements of the late 60s and 70s, and in addition to their feminist heritage, the collective considered themselves socialist activists.

*Another place it comes out of -- and this may sound somewhat obscure -- but it comes out of history. It comes out of the history of that time. So this was written in 1977, and omen in a variety of ways in the late 60s, early 70s - what's called the second wave of the women's movement - were realizing and expressing in different ways, there's something that's off here. Of course, again specifically thinking about this country, liberation movements owe a huge debt to civil rights movements. Because the civil rights movement was something that was one of the major political movements of the time.*

*The other major strain was the anti-war movement. The Vietnam war was happening you know over there, but also implicitly in our country, and being pursued by our country, and there was a mass of young people who were there to respond. A huge huge movement. I think those origins are very important, so we had like a template of what political organizing looked like and what could be done. Not only that - and I think this is mentioned in the statement too - is that many of us were involved in those other, earlier movements.*

*We learned about political organizing by being very actively involved - AND at the same time we also realized that there were some problems in those movements that we were participating in. So I feel like if it hadn't been for those political movements that I mentioned, it's quite possible that black feminism would not have developed.*

In the last several years, Black feminism has become a guidepost for activist politics and strategies, particularly within the Black Lives Matter movement. But Beverly was also quick to point out the blindspots of the statement -- particularly their line "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free."

*I guess I wanna say that at this point in time, as opposed to 1977, I don't think this covers everything. Where does this leave trans people? What about people with disabilities? Those needs just would not be met. They wouldn't be met. Also, there's all kinds of folks with all kinds of ethnicities - including white -. And... it's just not in there.*

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[You can read the full text of the statement [here](#)].

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You've been listening to episode five of A People's Anthology, featuring the Combahee River Collective statement.

The text was read and introduced by Beverly Smith, one of the original members of the Combahee River Collective and one of three co-writers of the statement. Our theme music is by Marisa Anderson.

A People's Anthology is a production from Boston Review, a political and literary magazine both online and in print since 1975. Visit us at [Bostonreview.net](http://Bostonreview.net).