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## Identity Politics

In 1977, the term *identity politics* in its contemporary form was introduced into political discourse by the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a group of black lesbian militants that had formed in Boston three years earlier. In their influential collective text “A Black Feminist Statement,” founding members Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier argued that the project of revolutionary socialism had been undermined by racism and sexism in the movement. They wrote:

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. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.

The statement brilliantly demonstrated that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” and proclaimed the necessity of articulating “the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers.”<sup>1</sup> Black women, whose specific social position had been neglected by both the black liberation movement and the women’s liberation movement, could challenge this kind of empty class reductionism simply by asserting their own autonomous politics. As a way of conceptualizing this important aspect of their political practice, the CRC presented the hypothesis that the most radical politics emerged from placing their own experience at the

center of their analysis and rooting their politics in their own particular identities:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.<sup>2</sup>

Now this did not mean, for the CRC, that politics should be reduced to the specific identities of the individuals engaged in it. As Barbara Smith has recently reflected:

What we were saying is that we have a right as people who are not just female, who are not solely Black, who are not just lesbians, who are not just working class, or workers—that we are people who embody all of these identities, and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality . . . That's what we meant by identity politics. We didn't mean that if you're not the same as us, you're nothing. We were not saying that we didn't care about anybody who wasn't exactly like us.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the CRC demonstrated this perspective in its actual political practice. Demita Frazier recalls the emphasis the organization placed on coalitions:

I never believed that Combahee, or other Black feminist groups I have participated in, should focus only on issues of concern for us as Black women, or that, as lesbian/bisexual women, we should only focus on lesbian issues. It's really important to note that Combahee was instrumental in founding a local battered women's shelter. We worked in coalition with community activists, women and men, lesbians and straight folks. We were very active in the reproductive rights

movement, even though, at the time, most of us were lesbians. We found ourselves involved in coalition with the labor movement because we believed in the importance of supporting other groups even if the individuals in that group weren't all feminist. We understood that coalition building was crucial to our own survival.<sup>4</sup>

For the CRC, feminist political practice meant, for example, walking picket lines during strikes in the building trades during the 1970s. But the history that followed seemed to turn the whole thing upside down. As Salar Mohandesi writes, "What began as a promise to push beyond some of socialism's limitations to build a richer, more diverse and inclusive socialist politics" ended up "exploited by those with politics diametrically opposed to those of the CRC."<sup>5</sup> The most recent and most striking example was the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, which adopted the language of "intersectionality" and "privilege" and used identity politics to combat the emergence of a left-wing challenge in the Democratic Party surrounding Bernie Sanders. Sanders's supporters were condemned as "Bernie Bros," despite his widespread support among women; they were accused of neglecting the concerns of black people, despite the devastating effect for many black Americans of the Democratic mainstream's commitment to neoliberal policies. As Michelle Alexander wrote in the *Nation*, the legacy of the Clinton family was a Democratic capitulation "to the right-wing backlash against the civil-rights movement" and "Ronald Reagan's agenda on race, crime, welfare, and taxes." The new brand of Clinton liberalism ended up "ultimately doing more harm to black communities than Reagan ever did."<sup>6</sup>

The communications director of Clinton's campaign, Jennifer Palmieri, said during an MSNBC interview about the anti-Trump protests following the inauguration, "You are wrong to look at these crowds and think that means everyone

wants fifteen dollars an hour. Don't assume that the answer to big crowds is moving policy to the left . . . It's all about identity on our side now."

To be fair, Palmieri is not solely to blame for this error in judgment. In fact, she was really just expressing a classical and inescapable tenet of liberalism. Judith Butler has explained that "identities are formed within contemporary political arrangements in relation to certain requirements of the liberal state." In liberal political discourse, power relations are equated with the law, but as Michel Foucault demonstrated, they are actually produced and exercised in a range of social practices: the division of labor in the factory, the spatial organization of the classroom, and, of course, the disciplinary procedures of the prison. In these institutions, collectivities of people are separated into individuals who are subordinated to a dominating power. But this "individualization" also constitutes them as political subjects—the basic political unit of liberalism, after all, is the individual. Within this framework, Butler argues, "the assertion of rights and claims to entitlement can only be made on the basis of a singular and injured identity."<sup>7</sup>

The word *subject*, Butler points out, has a peculiar double meaning: it means having agency, being able to exert power, but also being subordinated, under the control of an external power. The liberal form of politics is one in which we become *subjects* who participate in politics through our *subjection* to power. So Butler suggests that "what we call identity politics is produced by a state which can only allocate recognition and rights to subjects totalized by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status." If we can claim to be somehow injured on the basis of our identity, as though presenting a grievance in a court of law, we can demand recognition from the state on that basis—and since identities are the condition of liberal politics, they become more and more totalizing and reductive. Our political agency through identity is exactly what locks us

into the state, what ensures our continued subjection. The pressing task, then, as Butler puts it, is to come up with ways of “refusing the type of individuality correlated with the disciplinary apparatus of the modern state.”<sup>8</sup>

But we can’t possibly achieve this if we take these forms of individuality for granted—if we accept them as the starting point of our analysis and our politics. Clearly “identity” is a real phenomenon: it corresponds to the way the state parcels us out into individuals, and the way we form our selfhood in response to a wide range of social relations. But it is nevertheless an abstraction, one that doesn’t tell us about the specific social relations that have constituted it. A materialist mode of investigation has to go from the abstract to the concrete—it has to bring this abstraction back to earth by moving through all the historical specificities and material relations that have put it in our heads.

In order to do that, we have to reject “identity” as a foundation for thinking about identity politics. For this reason, I don’t accept the Holy Trinity of “race, gender, and class” as identity categories. This idea of the Holy Spirit of Identity, which takes three consubstantial divine forms, has no place in materialist analysis. Race, gender, and class name entirely different social relations, and they themselves are abstractions that have to be explained in terms of specific material histories.

For precisely that reason, this book is entirely focused on race. That is partly because my own personal experience has forced me to think of race beyond the easy theological abstraction of identity. But it is also because the hypotheses presented here are based on research into the history of race, racism, and antiracist movements. Of course, studying any concrete history necessarily requires us to deal with all the relations constitutive of it, and thus we will encounter the effects of gender relations and movements against gender-related oppression. But I make no claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of

gender as such; to do so would require a distinct course of research, and to simply treat gender as a subsidiary question to race would be entirely unacceptable. There is already much work along these lines to consider. Butler's *Gender Trouble* is itself one of the most prescient and profound critiques of identity politics as it exists within the specific discourse of feminist theory. In Butler's own words, her critique "brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate."<sup>9</sup> But here I focus on race, and I will be primarily concerned with the history of black movements, not only because I believe these movements have fundamentally shaped the political parameters of our current historical moment, but because the figures to whom these movements gave rise are at the apex of thinking on the concept of race. There is also the matter of my personal contact with black revolutionary theory, which first exposed me to Malcolm X and Huey Newton's critiques of the precursors of identity politics. Following their practice, I define identity politics as the *neutralization* of movements against racial oppression. It is the ideology that emerged to appropriate this emancipatory legacy in service of the advancement of political and economic elites. In order to theorize and criticize it, it is necessary to apply the framework of the black revolutionary struggle, including the Combahee River Collective itself. These movements should not be considered deviations from a universal, but rather the basis for unsettling the category of identity and criticizing the contemporary forms of identity politics—a phenomenon whose specific historical form the black revolutionary struggle could not have predicted or anticipated, but whose precursors it identified and opposed.

Malcolm's analysis was cut short in 1965 when he was assassinated by the cultural nationalists of the Nation of Islam,

with whom he had broken after connecting with revolutionary anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia, which he constantly invoked in his speeches. He had deepened his structural analysis of white supremacy and the economic system on which it rested. As Ferruccio Gambino has demonstrated, this is not surprising when we look at Malcolm's life as a laborer—as a Pullman porter and a final assembler at the Ford Wayne Assembly Plant, where he encountered the tension between the workers' antagonism toward the employer and the restraint imposed by the union bureaucracies.<sup>10</sup> "It's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism," Malcolm said in a 1964 discussion. "You can't have capitalism without racism. And if you find one and you happen to get that person into conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don't have this racism in their outlook, usually they're socialists or their political philosophy is socialism."<sup>11</sup>

The Black Panther Party followed through on Malcolm's growing practice of revolutionary solidarity and his critique of the Nation of Islam's cultural nationalism, which they called "pork-chop nationalism." The pork-chop nationalists, Huey Newton argued in a 1968 interview, were "concerned with returning to the old African culture and thereby regaining their identity and freedom," but ultimately erased the political and economic contradictions within the black community. The inevitable result of pork-chop nationalism was a figure like "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who used racial and cultural identity as the ideological support for his brutally repressive and corrupt dictatorship of Haiti. Newton argued that it was necessary to draw a "line of demarcation" between this kind of nationalism and the kind that the Panthers espoused:

There are two kinds of nationalism, revolutionary nationalism and reactionary nationalism. Revolutionary nationalism is first dependent upon a people's revolution with the end goal

being the people in power. Therefore to be a revolutionary nationalist you would by necessity have to be a socialist. If you are a reactionary nationalist you are not a socialist and your end goal is the oppression of the people.<sup>12</sup>

Another leader of the Black Panther Party, Kathleen Cleaver, has reflected on how the revolutionary nationalism of the Panthers led them to understand the revolutionary struggle as a specifically cross-racial one:

In a world of racist polarization, we sought solidarity . . . We organized the Rainbow Coalition, pulled together our allies, including not only the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the youth gang called Black P. Stone Rangers, the Chicano Brown Berets, and the Asian I Wor Kuen (Red Guards), but also the predominantly white Peace and Freedom Party and the Appalachian Young Patriots Party. We posed not only a theoretical but a practical challenge to the way our world was organized. And we were men and women working together.<sup>13</sup>

That's an obvious conclusion when you understand socialism the way Huey Newton did: as "the people in power." It can't be reduced to the redistribution of wealth or the defense of the welfare state—socialism is defined in terms of the political power of the people as such. So not only is socialism an indispensable component of the black struggle against white supremacy, the anticapitalist struggle has to incorporate the struggle for black self-determination. Any doubt about this, Newton pointed out, could be dispelled by studying American history and seeing that the two structures were inextricably linked:

The Black Panther Party is a revolutionary nationalist group and we see a major contradiction between capitalism in this country and our interests. We realize that this country became



very rich upon slavery and that slavery is capitalism in the extreme. We have two evils to fight, capitalism and racism. We must destroy both racism and capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

This was not, however, a new insight of the Black Panthers. While I was growing up, the civil rights movement had been rendered palatable for mainstream audiences, and I had sought out the more militant-seeming legacy of Black Power. But thanks to the work of scholars and activists who have practiced fidelity to the revolutionary content of the civil rights movement, it is becoming evident that recognition for an injured identity cannot possibly describe this movement's scope and aspirations. Nikhil Pal Singh writes in his important book *Black Is a Country* that the reigning narrative of the civil rights movement "fails to recognize the historical depth and heterogeneity of black struggles against racism, narrowing the political scope of black agency and reinforcing a formal, legalistic view of black equality."<sup>15</sup>

As the historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall elaborates in her analysis of the "long civil rights movement," Martin Luther King Jr. has been rendered an empty symbol, "frozen in 1963." Through selective quotation, Hall observes, the uplifting rhetoric of his speeches has been stripped of its content: his opposition to the Vietnam War, through an analysis linking segregation to imperialism; his democratic socialist commitment to unionization; his orchestration of the Poor People's Campaign; and his support for a sanitation workers' strike when he was assassinated in Memphis.<sup>16</sup>

When we move past the misleading and restrictive dominant narrative, it becomes clear that the civil rights movement was in fact the closest US equivalent to the mass workers' movements in postwar Europe. Those European movements structured the revolutionary project and the development of Marxist theory.<sup>17</sup> But the development of such a movement was blocked in the United States—and, as we will see, many

militants came to the conclusion that the primary obstacle to its development was white supremacy.

However, what makes a movement anticapitalist is not always the issue it mobilizes around. What is more important is whether it is able to draw in a wide spectrum of the masses and enable their self-organization, seeking to build a society in which people govern themselves and control their own lives, a possibility that is fundamentally blocked by capitalism. So the black freedom struggle is what most closely approached a socialist movement—as the Trinidadian intellectual and militant C.L.R. James put it, the movements for black self-determination were “independent struggles” that represented the self-mobilization and self-organization of the masses and were thus at the leading edge of any socialist project.<sup>18</sup> Autoworker and labor organizer James Boggs took this argument even further, suggesting in *The American Revolution*:

At this point in American history when the labor movement is on the decline, the Negro movement is on the upsurge. The fact has to be faced that since 1955 the development and momentum of the Negro struggle have made the Negroes the one revolutionary force dominating the American scene . . . The goal of the classless society is precisely what has been and is today at the heart of the Negro struggle. It is the Negroes who represent the revolutionary struggle for a classless society.<sup>19</sup>

There were also direct connections to a specifically anticapitalist history, because in the 1930s the Communist Party (CP) had trained many of the organizers and established many of the organizational networks that became part of the civil rights movement. As Robin D.G. Kelley, whose book *Hammer and Hoe* is a major history of the Communist Party USA's antiracist work, has put it, the CP helped lay “the infrastructure that . . . becomes the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama.”<sup>20</sup>

Rosa Parks, for example, got involved in politics through the Communist-organized defense of the "Scottsboro Boys," nine black teenagers falsely accused in Alabama of raping two white women and convicted by an all-white jury. In the 1940s, a coalition of black radicals and union leaders, including figures who played a major role in the 1960s like A. Philip Randolph, formed a "civil rights unionism." Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out that their actions were founded on "the assumption that, from the founding of the Republic, racism has been bound up with economic exploitation." In response, civil rights unionists carried out a political program in which "protection from discrimination" was matched with "universalistic social welfare policies." Their demands encompassed not only workplace democracy, union wages, and fair and full employment but also affordable housing, political enfranchisement, educational equity, and universal healthcare.<sup>21</sup>

This was the first phase of the civil rights movement. As the movement developed into its most famous, "classical" period, it responded to changing circumstances and confronted strategic and organizational limits. Racial oppression was tied up not only with legal segregation but also with the organization of urban space, hierarchies of political representation, the violence of the repressive state apparatus, and economic exclusion and marginalization.<sup>22</sup> The extraordinary victories of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights mobilizations, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, did not transform these fundamental structures. After 1965, mass mobilizations would have to incorporate different strategies and different demands, and the languages of Black Power and black nationalism responded to this need.

The earlier struggles had always been complex and variegated, going beyond the now celebrated nonviolent protests of the South. Armed resistance had played a vital role in enabling the use of nonviolent tactics, and movements in the North ran parallel to their equivalents below the Mason-Dixon line. But

organizations like the NAACP, led by the elites of the black community, had tried to distance themselves from the revolutionary possibilities of the struggle, shifting funding and resources away from economic issues and toward the battle against Southern legal segregation. As time went on, this became a significant limit on the scope of mass mobilization.

But throughout the 1960s, the epicenter of the struggle began to shift to the urban rebellions of the Northern inner cities, which broke forcefully outside this bureaucratic containment. The movement was in search of new forms of self-organization that could overcome the obstacles the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act had been unable to address, and black nationalism provided a promising approach. What nationalism meant was a political perspective: black activists organizing themselves rather than following the lead of white organizations, building new institutions instead of seeking entry into white society.

The contradiction of the nationalist mobilizations, however, came in the form of what Huey Newton described as “reactionary nationalism,” represented by groups like Ron Karenga’s US Organization, with which the Panthers would later violently clash. As Newton pointed out, reactionary nationalism put forth an ideology of racial identity, but it was also based on a material phenomenon. Desegregation had made it possible for black businessmen and politicians to enter into the American power structure on a scale that had not been possible before, and these elites were able to use racial solidarity as a means of covering up their class positions. If they claimed to represent a unitary racial community with a unified interest, they could suppress the demands of black working people whose interests were, in reality, entirely different from theirs.

So the Black Panther Party had to navigate between two concerns. They recognized that black people had been oppressed on a specifically racial basis, and so they had to organize autonomously. But at the same time, if you talked

about racism without talking about capitalism, you weren't talking about getting power in the hands of the people. You were setting up a situation in which the white cop would be replaced by a black cop. For the Panthers, this was not liberation.

But that was clearly the situation we were getting into in the United States, as optimistic liberals celebrated the replacement of mass movements, riots, and armed cells with a placid multiculturalism. Over the course of several decades, the legacy of antiracist movements was channeled toward the economic and political advancement of individuals like Barack Obama and Bill Cosby who would go on to lead the attack against social movements and marginalized communities. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor calls attention to this phenomenon in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*: "The most significant transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years has been the emergence of a Black elite, bolstered by the Black political class, that has been responsible for administering cuts and managing meager budgets on the backs of Black constituents."<sup>23</sup>

Of course, the existence of elites within the black community was not new in itself. Despite their differences, both the entrepreneurialism of Booker T. Washington and the "Talented Tenth" of W.E.B. Du Bois were early investments in the political potential of the black elite. However, as Taylor recounts, the ensuing history of American politics and the development of the black freedom struggle have transformed the structural role of the black elite. As she points out in an analysis of the murder of Freddie Gray and the ensuing uprising in Baltimore, we have broken in a fundamental way from the context that produced the classical vocabulary of the antiracist struggle:

There have always been class differences among African Americans, but this is the first time those class differences

have been expressed in the form of a minority of Blacks wielding significant political power and authority over the majority of Black lives. This raises critical questions about the role of the Black elite in the continuing freedom struggle—and about what side are they on. This is not an overstatement. When a Black mayor, governing a largely Black city, aids in the mobilization of a military unit led by a Black woman to suppress a Black rebellion, we are in a new period of the Black freedom struggle.<sup>24</sup>

Within the academy and within social movements, no serious challenge arose against the cooptation of the antiracist legacy. Intellectuals and activists allowed politics to be reduced to the policing of our language, to the questionable satisfaction of provoking white guilt, while the institutional structures of racial and economic oppression persisted. As James Boggs reflected in 1993,

Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 we may have had the money but we couldn't go into most hotels or buy a home outside the ghetto. Today the only reason why we can't go to a hotel or buy a decent home is because we don't have the money. But we are still focused on the question of race and it is paralyzing us.<sup>25</sup>

Making sense of this bewildering history requires us to draw a line of demarcation between the emancipatory mass movements of the past, which struggled against racism, and the contemporary ideologies of identity, which are attached to the politics of a multiracial elite. The existence of this problem is widely recognized, but discussing it constructively has turned out to be quite difficult. Criticisms of identity politics are often voiced by white men who remain blissfully ignorant or apathetic about the experiences of others. They are also, at times, used on the left to dismiss any political demand that

does not align with what is considered to be a purely “economic” program—the very problem that the Combahee River Collective had set out to address.

However, here the term *identity politics* seems to amplify the difficulties. Often contemporary radicals are reluctant to criticize even the most elitist expressions of racial ideology, because doing so seems to be dismissing any movement against racism and sexism. Others valiantly attempt to establish a gradient of identity politics, as though there is a minimum effective dose and problems arise only when it is taken to extremes. But this logic of the gradient cannot possibly explain the emergence of fundamentally opposed and antagonistic political positions: the revolutionary grassroots politics of the CRC versus the ruling-class politics of the Democratic Party elite.

It is the haziness of our contemporary category of identity that has blurred the boundaries. Its political pitfalls have been forcefully demonstrated by Wendy Brown, who argues that “what we have come to call identity politics is partly dependent upon the demise of a critique of capitalism and of bourgeois cultural and economic values.” When identity claims are put forth without a grounding in a critique of capitalism, Brown suggests,

identity politics concerned with race, sexuality, and gender will appear not as a supplement to class politics, not as an expansion of left categories of oppression and emancipation, not as an enriching augmentation of progressive formulations of power and persons—all of which they also are—but as tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure.<sup>26</sup>

**In other words, by coding demands that come from marginal or subordinate groups as identity politics, the white male identity is enshrined with the status of the neutral, general, and**

universal. We know that this is false—in fact, there is a white identity politics, a white nationalism—and, as we shall see, whiteness is the prototypical form of racial ideology itself. Antiracist struggles like those of the CRC reveal the false universality of this hegemonic identity.

However, when identity claims lose their grounding in mass movements, the bourgeois masculinist ideal rushes to fill the void. This ideal, Brown writes, “signifies educational and vocational opportunity, upward mobility, relative protection against arbitrary violence, and reward in proportion to effort.” If it is not questioned, people of color, along with other oppressed groups, have no choice but to articulate their political demands in terms of inclusion in the bourgeois masculinist ideal.

To demand inclusion in the structure of society as it is means forfeiting the possibility of structural change. As Brown points out, this means that the enabling condition of politics is the “renaturalization of capitalism that can be said to have marked progressive discourse since the 1970s.”<sup>27</sup> It is the equation of political agency with membership in a mythical “middle class,” which is supposed to characterize everyone in American society. The middle class itself, Brown argues, is “a conservative identity,” one that refers to “a phantasmic past, an imagined idyllic, unfettered, and uncorrupted historical moment (implicitly located around 1955) when life was good.” This was a historical moment ideologically centered on the nuclear family, with the white male breadwinner at its head. Yet it paradoxically comes to embody, Brown points out, “the ideal to which nonclass identities refer for proof of their exclusion or injury.”

Of course, the injury of exclusion from the benefits extended to the white heterosexual middle class is a real injury. Job security, freedom from harassment, access to housing—all of these are meaningful demands. But the problem is that “politicized identities” do not pose these demands in the context of



an insurgency from below. The very structure of the politicized identity is to make a demand for restitution and inclusion; as Brown points out, “Without recourse to the white masculine middle-class ideal, politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion, their claims to the political significance of their difference.”<sup>28</sup>

I grew up in a world entirely shaped by this renaturalization of capitalism. I sensed that there was something unsatisfactory about politicized identity but could not quite find a way to deal with it, beyond a sort of weak dialectical ambivalence. After all, I couldn’t possibly dismiss the fact that while “black faces in high places” might not mean liberation, seeing them was still profoundly meaningful for those who had suffered the psychological traumas of a racist society. In my formative years, everyone I saw on TV who looked like me was a cab driver or an Arab terrorist. (I still don’t understand why they have Indians play Arab terrorists. Why not at least a Pakistani terrorist?) Every president had been white and, despite my lack of interest in Obama, his electoral victory made me think of the black people who had died fighting for *just the right to vote*; the thought moved me to tears. Was the multicultural bourgeoisie with its ideology of identity a necessary evil—a component of the cross-class alliance that would be required to fight racism?

At times, I thought so. But as I continued to participate in social movements, I was forced to change my mind. By launching a critique of identity politics, then, I have no intention of deviating from the legacy of the Combahee River Collective or the mass movements against racism that have shaped our contemporary world. It is, rather, an attempt to deal with the contradictory reality that we cannot avoid confronting.

In its contemporary ideological form, rather than its initial form as a theorization of a revolutionary political practice, identity politics is an individualist method. It is based on the individual’s demand for recognition, and it takes that

individual's identity as its starting point. It takes this identity for granted and suppresses the fact that all identities are socially constructed. And because all of us necessarily have an identity that is different from everyone else's, it undermines the possibility of collective self-organization. The framework of identity reduces politics to who you are as an individual and to gaining recognition as an individual, rather than your membership in a collectivity and the collective struggle against an oppressive social structure. As a result, identity politics paradoxically ends up reinforcing the very norms it set out to criticize.

While this redefinition may seem drastic, this kind of shift in meaning is typical of political language, which does not always clearly align with political practice. A word like *nationalism*, for example, ends up revealing irreconcilable divisions. It eventually requires modification, and we may end up deciding that it has to be abandoned in favor of new and more adequate terms. Indeed, nationalism was precisely the epistemological obstacle that drove Barbara Smith to the kind of politics that would frame the CRC. She recalled:

I went to a major antiwar mobilization in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1969 . . . I thought it was the last demonstration I'd ever go to; one of the reasons being black people back at Pitt had so many nasty things to say about the fact that I was involved in what they say was a "white" entity, namely, the antiwar movement . . . it was a very hard time to be a politically active black woman, who did not want to be a pawn . . . I actually imagined that I would never be politically active again because nationalism and patriarchal attitudes within black organizing was *so* strong.<sup>29</sup>

The CRC's initiating purpose was precisely to overcome these degrading and depoliticizing divisions. "I firmly believe there has to be space for us all in our myriad identities and

dimensions,” Demita Frazier would later reflect. “You run the risk of having an identity become crystallized and contained and requiring everyone to be conformists.” This tension also existed within the CRC. Class differences internal to the group were a challenge in maintaining democratic forms of organization, Frazier recalls:

Class was another huge issue that we looked at and yet in some way could not come to grips with. We had an analysis based on our own socialist leanings and a socialist democratic view of the world, and yet, when it came right down to it, we had many women who felt excluded because they felt they didn’t have the educational background and privilege of the leadership.

Just as significant was the question of relating to other groups, especially other feminist groups. The women’s liberation movement had been perceived as white from the outset, and part of the purpose of the CRC was to insist that black women could articulate their own feminism. But this did not necessarily mean maintaining rigid divisions from white feminists, or indeed forming a crystallized black identity. In Frazier’s own words:

One of the things that has always troubled me is that I wanted to be part of a multicultural feminist organization, a multicultural feminist movement, and I never felt that the feminist movement became fully integrated . . . It isn’t that Combahee didn’t work in coalition with other groups, but we weren’t able to make those linkages across culture and make them as firm as I hoped they could be.<sup>30</sup>

The problem of coalitions is felt acutely by anyone who has experienced the trials and tribulations of political practice. My own experiences with the rise and fall of coalitions convinced

me of the perspective of the scholar of black British culture Paul Gilroy: “Action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of ‘race.’”<sup>31</sup>