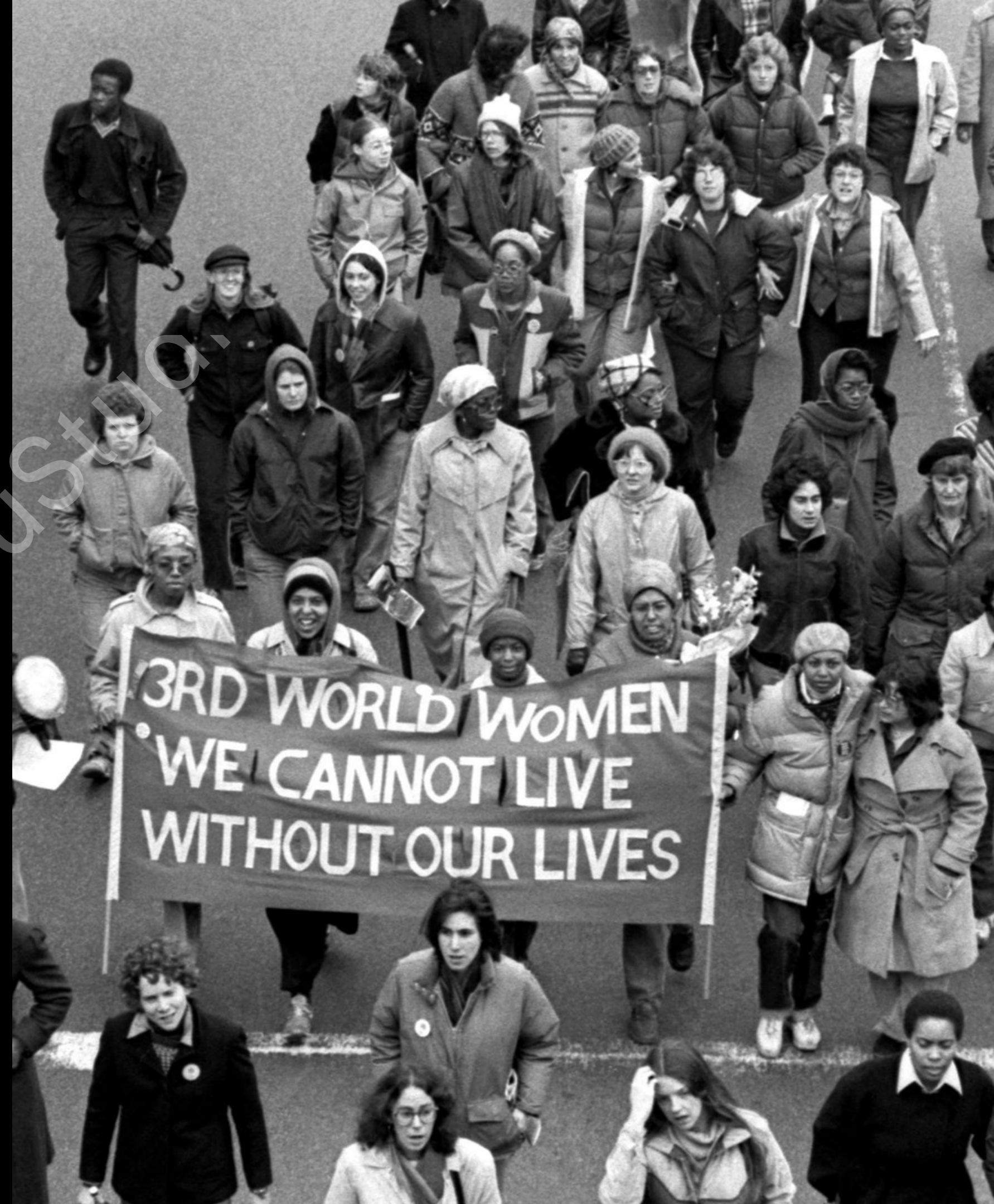


"Black (Queer) Feminisms in
Flux:

The Combahee River
Collective, Identity Politics
Intersectionality, and the
End and Future of Black
Feminist Politics

Presented by Kwyn Townsend Riley, and
Dr. Jaimee A. Swift

Queer Teach-In
James Madison University
Wednesday, October 4th, 2023



Overview of Presentation

- Introduction of Presenters
- Whose Black Feminism It It Anyway?
- Interrogating a Black Queer Feminist Lens
- Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism
- Iterations of Intersectionality: Understanding Past and Present Black Feminist Interpretations
- Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Banned Books, Stop Woke Act, and Right-Wing Attacks: The End and Future of Black Queer Feminist Politics
- Solutions/Offerings
- Questions/Closing





Kwyn Townsend Riley

- Kwyn Townsend Riley “Kwynology” is a poet, speaker, and organizer from the Southside of Chicago. She has been writing for as long as she could remember and first performed on the mic in high school and has been in love ever since. Her writing helps others heal as well as herself. As a Black woman, she has experienced many poems to preach on: racialized violence, womanism, gentrification and womanhood, homophobia and more. She has performed all across the world from Germany to California. As a speaker, she has interviewed for CBS, WBEZ, Windy City Live and the Late Night Tammi Mac Show.



Dr. Jaimee A. Swift

- Dr. Jaimee A. Swift (she/her) is the executive director and founder of Black Women Radicals, a Black feminist advocacy organization dedicated to uplifting and centering Black women and gender expansive people's radical activism in Africa and in the African Diaspora. She is also the creator and founder of The School for Black Feminist Politics (SBFP), the Black feminist political education arm of Black Women Radicals. The mission of the SBFP is to empower Black feminisms in Black Politics by expanding the field from transnational, intersectional, and multidisciplinary perspectives. She is the co-author, with Joseph R. Fitzgerald, of the forthcoming biography of Black feminist icon and founding member of the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith. Swift is an Assistant Professor of Black Politics at James Madison University.



Whose Black Feminism It It Anyway? **bell hooks** + *Feminism is for Everybody (2000)*

- bell hooks (September 25, 1952 – December 15, 2021) was an African-American author and activist who was Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College.
- She is best known for her writings on race, feminism, and class.
- hooks published around 40 books, including works that ranged from essays and poetry to children's books. She published numerous scholarly articles, appeared in documentary films, and participated in public lectures.



...HOW DO WE MAINTAIN
SELF AND BEING?

Whose Black Feminism It It Anyway? bell hooks + *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000)

- hooks makes it clear that the feminist movement is not about women "hating" men, but it is to address sexism, end sexist exploitation and the ways in which we all - irrespective of gender(s) - been politically socialized into white supremacist patriarchal culture.
- Revolutionary feminists v. reformist feminists
Revolutionary Black feminists overlooked in mainstream media and understandings of feminism.
 - Reformist feminists: gender equality
 - Revolutionary feminists: transformation, end to patriarchy, racism, and sexism
- Feminist movement is not solely about getting "...women gaining equality with men in the existing system" but transforming the system (p. 3).

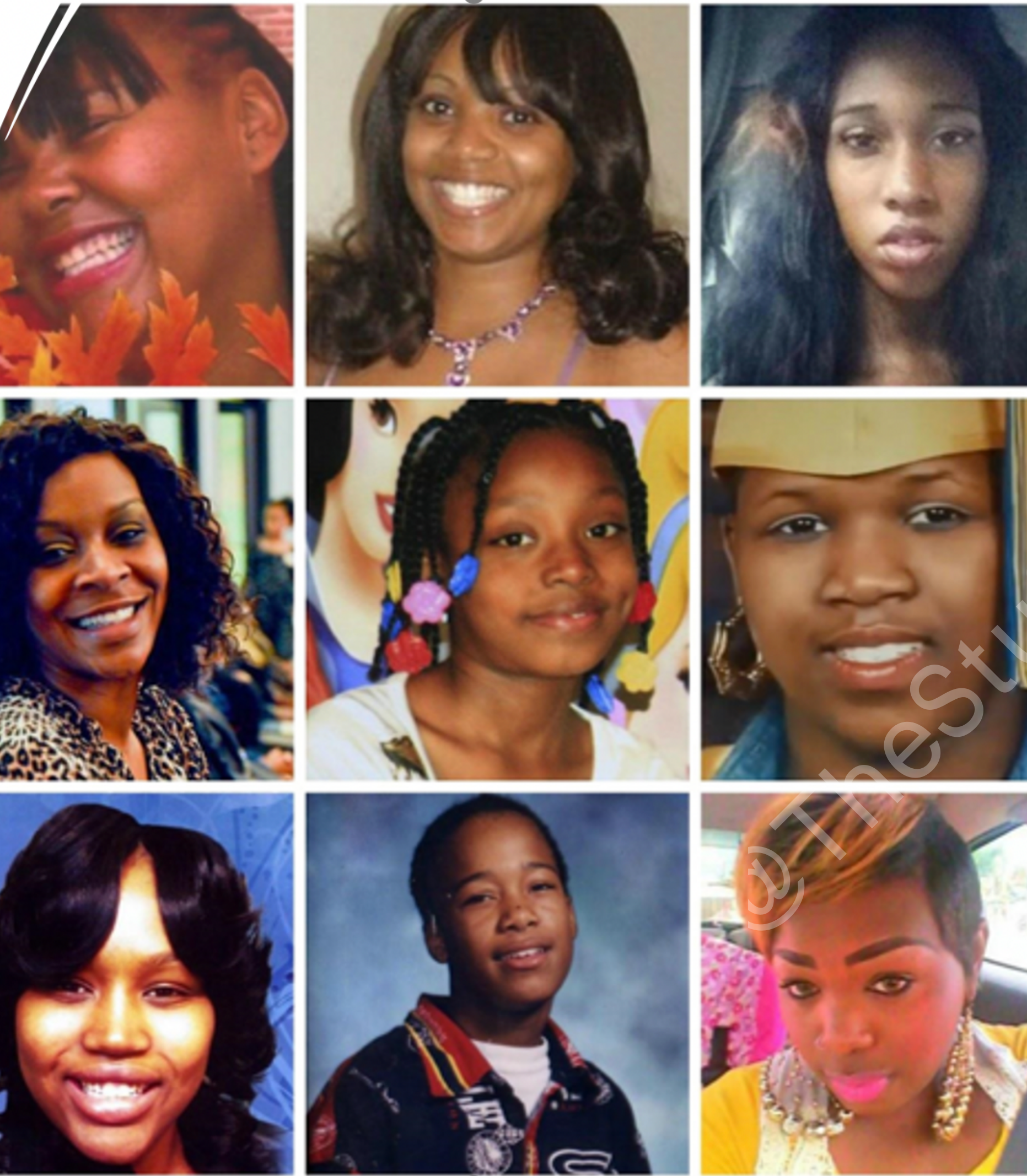


Whose Black Feminism It It Anyway? bell hooks + *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000)

"Feminists are made; not born" (p. 7).

- Importance of consciousness-raising groups to raising feminist awareness and identity.
- Consciousness-raising groups served as a portal to Women's Studies; but this began to exclude working class and poor women's perspectives on feminist theory and praxis.

"Once the women's studies classroom replaced the consciousness raising group as the primary site for transmission of feminist thinking and strategies for social change, the movement lost its mass-based potential" (p. 10).



When you hear the term,
Black Queer Feminist Lens
(BQFL):

- *What does it mean to you?*
- *What stands out?*
- *What or who is included?*
- *What or who is missing?*
- *How does it make you feel?*



Defining a *Black Queer Feminist Lens*

- Charlene A. Carruthers is a political strategist, cultural worker and PhD student in the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University.
- Founding national director of BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100).
- Author of *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (2018).

Defining a *Black Queer Feminist Lens*

"As I define it, the Black queer feminist (BQF) lens is a political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups see to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression. By using this lens, we are aided in creating alternatives of self-governance and self-determination, and by using it we can more effectively prioritize problems and methods that center historically marginalized people in our communities."

"It is an aspiration and liberatory politic that Black folks must take up for the sake of our collective liberation and acts on the basic notion that none of us will be free unless all of us are free. Organizing through a BQF lens is inherently collaborative and not antagonistic to other radical feminisms or liberatory politics and practices. It specifically honors Black feminist and LGBTQ liberation movements. Taking up a Black queer feminist praxis of community organizing recognizes those who came before us and helps us see where we want to go." -- Charlene Carruthers

Why, a *Black Queer Feminist Lens*?

- A belief in a radical inclusion of ALL Black people.
- If our pursuit of liberation does not include liberation for Black folks who are most marginalized, it is not true liberation.
- A BQFL lens allowed understand that our identities make us vulnerable to multiple types of oppression. Therefore, liberation for all Black people can only be realized by lifting up the voices and experiences of historically silenced and vulnerable groups within Black communities.
- Specifically, queer, trans*, femme, poor, disabled, and undocumented bodies are the ones most vulnerable because they are traditionally marginalized groups within already marginalized communities. It is in taking a Black Queer Feminist lens that one recognizes and humanizes Black bodies that have been made inferior.



Why, a *Black Queer Feminist Lens*?

“Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”

- bell hooks





Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism

- The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a Black feminist lesbian socialist organization active in Boston, Massachusetts from 1974 to 1980, named after the Combahee River Raid led by Harriet Tubman in 1863.
- Emerged from the National Black Feminist Organization (1973-1975).
- The Collective argued that both the white feminist movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and even members of the Black Women's Movement were not addressing their particular needs as Black women and more specifically as Black lesbians.



Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism

- The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), written by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier is a key document in the history of contemporary Black feminism and the development of the concepts of identity politics and intersectionality.
- The statement also introduced the concept of interlocking systems of oppression, including but not limited to gender, race, and homophobia, a fundamental concept of intersectionality.



Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism

- Coined by the Combahee River Collective, "...identity politics as a framework that came "directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (CRC, 1977)..
- According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, one of the observations of identity politics was that "...oppression on the basis of identity—whether it was racial, gender, class, or sexual orientation identity – was a source of political radicalization" (Taylor, 2017, p. 8).

Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism

“Above all else, Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s may because of our need as human persons for autonomy...Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. 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. We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race...”

“...We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.”

- The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977

Combahee Taught Me: On Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Radical Left Socialist Black Queer Feminism

"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

- The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977





Iterations of Intersectionality: Understanding Past and Present Black Feminist Interpretations

- Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 in the article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine” to describe how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories.
- “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.” – Kimberlé Crenshaw
- “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Woman” (1949) by Claudia Jones; “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” by Frances Beal (1969); The Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries Manifesto (1970).

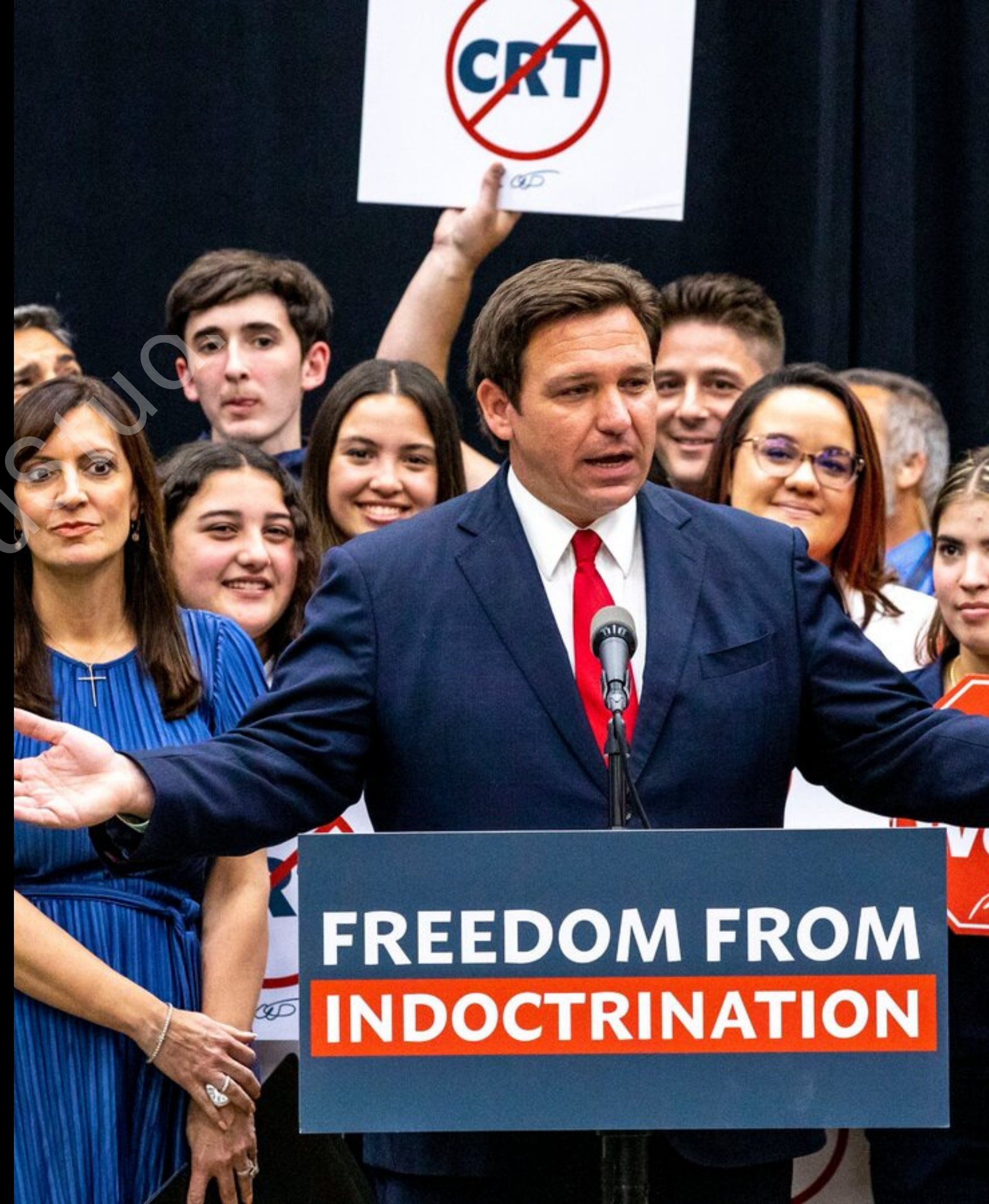
Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Banned Books, Stop Woke Act, and Right-Wing Attacks: The End and Future of Black Queer Feminist Politics

- More than 1,600 books were banned in 138 school districts across 32 states between 2021 and 2022, according to a report by PEN America.
- The vast majority of challenged and banned books feature BIPOC or LGBTQ+ characters, discuss gender, sexuality and race in America, or are written by Black Queer, and POC authors.
- Terms like “Identity Politics” as coined by the Combahee River Collective, have been distorted and coopted by right-wing conservatives.



Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Banned Books, Stop Woke Act, and Right-Wing Attacks: The End and Future of Black Queer Feminist Politics

- Kimberlé Crenshaw is among top American academics and authors recently stripped from the latest draft of the advanced placement (AP) African American studies course being piloted in US high schools, after Florida's rightwing governor, Ron DeSantis, led an aggressive backlash against it.
- The Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act, a legislative proposal that will give businesses, employees, children and families tools to fight back against woke indoctrination.
- The Stop W.O.K.E. Act will be the strongest legislation of its kind in the nation and will take on both corporate wokeness and Critical Race Theory.



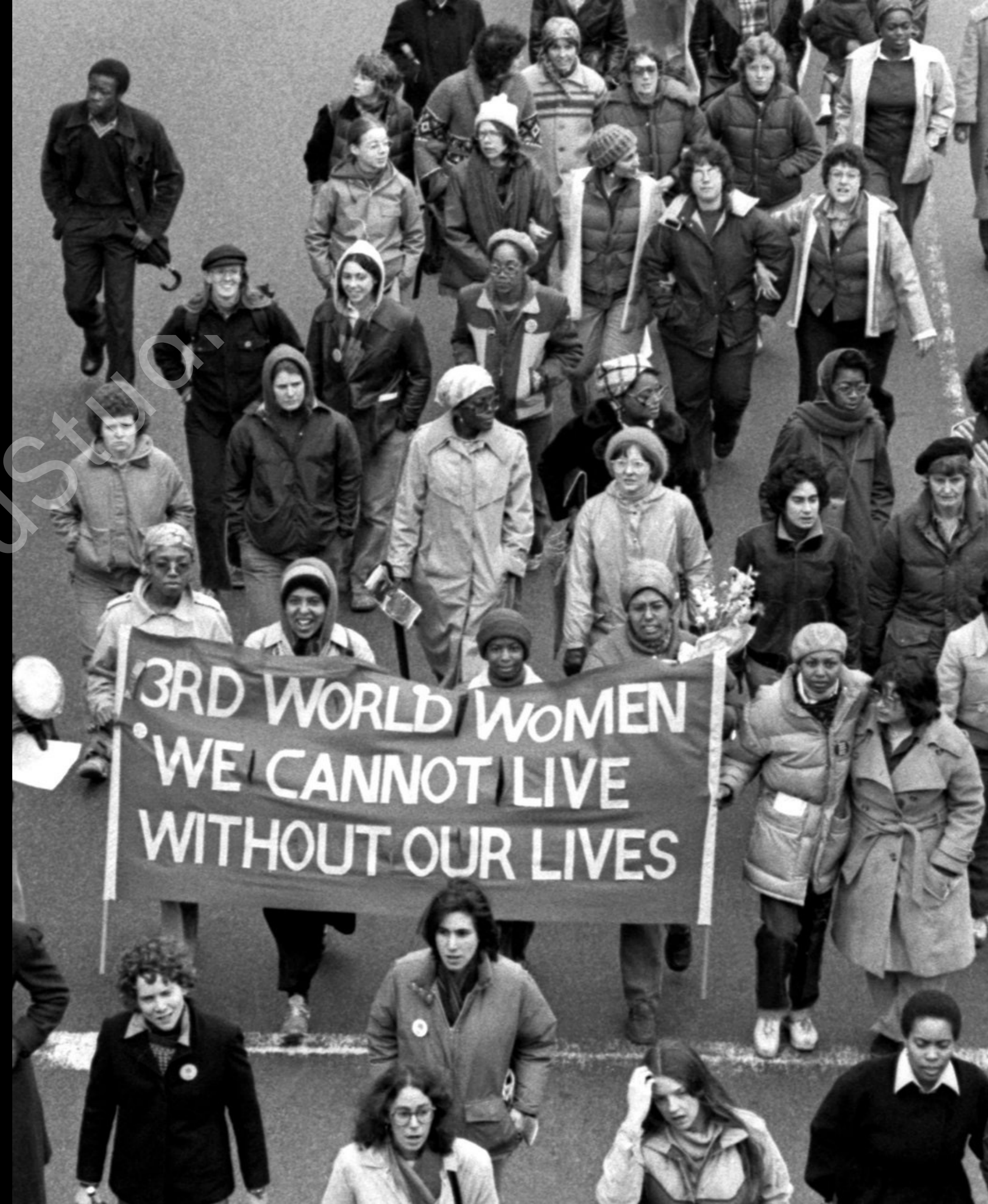
Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Banned Books, Stop Woke Act, and Right-Wing Attacks: The End and Future of Black Queer Feminist Politics

- According to the Human Rights Campaign, over 540 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures, a record.
- Over 220 bills specifically target transgender and non-binary people, also a record;
- 45 anti-LGBTQ laws have been enacted so far this year, including:
 - Laws banning gender affirming care for transgender youth: 13
 - Laws requiring or allowing misgendering of transgender students: 3
 - Laws targeting drag performances: 2
 - Laws creating a license to discriminate: 3
 - Laws censoring school curriculum, including books: 2



Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Solutions and Offerings

- Theory and Praxis: Enact a Black Queer Feminist Lens that is inclusive of the most marginalized communities, especially Black trans communities.
- Stop the performative activism. For academic and political institutions who position/promote themselves as “inclusive” or engaging in “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” or “allyship” to maintain their commitments and not only when a Black person is murdered (i.e. George Floyd).
- Challenge Revisionist Histories: In citing Saidiya Hartman, we must challenge the violence of the archive.
- The end and future of Black queer feminist organizations/institutions/maroon spaces outside the institutionalization of the University.



Black Queer Feminisms in Flux: Solutions and Offerings

- *Theory and Praxis*: Enact a Black Queer Feminist Lens that is inclusive of the most marginalized communities.
- *Stop the performative activism*. For academic and political institutions who position/promote themselves as “inclusive” or engaging in “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” or “allyship” to maintain their commitments and not only when a Black person is murdered (i.e. George Floyd).
- *Challenge Revisionist Histories*: In citing Saidiya Hartman, we must challenge the violence of the archive.
- *Sankofa as a Black (Queer) Feminist Political Practice*: The end and future of Black queer feminist organizations/institutions/maroon spaces outside the institutionalization of the University.

Questions?



Thank You!

@TheStuStuStu

