



**Barbara Smith**

**5/3/2016**

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**CTM:** We are talking to Barbara Smith, today is...

**LC:** May 3<sup>rd</sup>

**BS:** 2016

**CTM:** Barbara we are so delighted that you are doing this with us, doing this conversation with us and I know we both have long histories, knowing you and reading you actually, so its really amazing.

**BS:** It wonderful, we have known each other for so long and I'm just so glad that I could fit it in.

**CTM:** You know when we first met, it was when you invited me to the Women of Color, that meeting, Women of Color, we were going to make an institute. Women of Color Institute for Radical Research and Action.

**BS:** That's correct, WOCIRRA. I'm seeing the acronym and I couldn't remember what it stood for.

**CTM:** You remember that?

**BS:** Absolutely, we were at Blue Mountain.

**CTM:** So to start we want you to just begin by asking you this question about what brought you to feminist work and activism.

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**BS:** Well I think because of having grown up during the Civil Rights Era like my age, we were talking about age, perfectly matched the major developments around racial justice in this country. As far as my being old enough to be aware of what was going on and those major events were like markers in some ways in my growing up years. I had the opportunity just a few months ago earlier this year to meet Carlotta Walls LaNier, who was one of the Little Rock Nine. She came here to the University of Albany to speak for their annual Martin Luther King Celebration, it was February 1st. And I was asked to be one of the two moderators for the question and answer period. Afterwards I was so excited to meet her because I remember quite well when Little Rock happened. I was in elementary school, late elementary school. They were in high school. She was only fourteen when she entered Little Rock. Because she was so smart, she was a fourteen-year-old Sophomore. Be that as it may, as I say, having grown up of during that transformative era and having a family that was racially conscious, etc. I think that that primed me in some ways for being drawn to eventually feminist politics although when I first heard about the Women's Movement, I didn't even understand what it could possibly be about, because my impression was, and it probably is not a wrong impression, is that it was really the concerns, it reflected the concerns and issues of privileged white women. And as an African American woman, it was like "What?!". I really didn't get it because from my vantage point it was like "What did they have to complain about?" I mean we are doing everything, we are going to work, we are cleaning up their houses, we are taking care of their children, we are running from their husbands and their brothers who tried to sexually assault us and sometimes and do often succeeding, within the confines of domestic work, so what did they have to complain about? They don't have to go to work, you know, I cannot have imagined the life of not working because not everybody, I knew, every black woman, everybody in my family worked. So it was not a question of whether was I going to have a job, it was what kind of job was I going to have? And of course, my family, because we were so focused on my sister and I getting a higher education; that was their way of saying, "We know you will be working, but at least you'll be working at a level that may be fulfilling to you. And also might be easier for you to maintain yourself."

So anyway, so as I said I didn't really get it. I was still in college when I met my first, the first person I ever met who said she was a part of Women's Liberation. She was not from my college; she was from somewhere else. I went to a women's college, as you perhaps know. And in some ways that did not make sexism as blatant or as visceral as it might have been had I been at a co-ed school. And I actually chose a women's college with that in mind. That was not the only reason I went to Mount Holyoke, but the thing is that I thought "Wow, if I'm going to be desegregating a predominantly white campus, at least it would be nice to be somewhere they don't assume I am inferior based upon my,"—as we called it in those days, "sex" not gender—"based on my 'sex' as opposed as well as of course because of my race." It would be nice to get rid of one of those factors. So in any

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event, virtually as soon as I got out of college that is when I first began to have my own, as we used to call them “clicks,” and those are like a click of the light bulb going on and saying “Oh, so that’s what it’s about.”

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This is a story about my senior year being home for Spring Break in Cleveland. Where I grew up and not really, although I had applied to graduate school and wanted to go to graduate school. I thought, “Keep my options open,” I also wanted to travel and I thought, “Well maybe I could work for an airline and then I would get free travel,” and in those days, free or reduced travel. So in those days, we didn’t have that Hub and Spoke System, so we actually had a series of offices and also carriers of the major airlines and there were also a lot more airlines back then. So I actually went and interviewed at the Pan-AM office in downtown Cleveland. There is this white man probably not much older than I, and he... I talked to him and then he gave me a test. And I told him I had no desire to be a person working on a plane. I did not care to do that, I didn’t even know that there were Black women who were doing that at that time, probably not. But I didn’t mind the idea of being a... desk person...a counter person, whatever they call them, that works with passengers in a nonmoving environment. [*Laughs*] Behind the counter...so anyway I took the test and I aced it and I’ll never forget the conversation that followed then. And I said something about, I was smart enough to talk about to him about management and say well...he told me what I would likely be able to do as a woman working for the airlines. I said ‘Is that a pathway to management? A higher position?’ and he said ‘No.’ And I said, “Alright,” and I said, “Then I am going to graduate school, because what is the point?”. I think he was quite surprised about how well I did on the test, but the idea that I would do so well on the test and yet he would still tell me that I would not be in line for a higher position so and I had really no interest in the corporate world, I just wanted to travel which I got the chance to do, but as I said things evolved. At that time I identified as being heterosexual, at least publicly I did, I am not talking about what was going on in my mind and heart, but the thing is those kinds of interactions in relationships with men...also the expectations around heterosexual womanhood, particularly black womanhood, was supposed to be. I really bristled at all that because my feeling was, I didn’t go to Mount Holyoke and my family didn’t sacrifice that the way they did and I didn’t study as hard as I had my entire life to be able get in to college, and education to be second place. Now this is the time of very intense Black nationalism in the Black Movement in the country and the politics had shifted from civil rights to Black nationalism and we know some of the incredible pronouncements that were made during that period and the expectations about Black women needed to walk three or seven steps behind when Kwame Ture known as, previously known as Stokely Carmichael, that is what the position of Black women in the movement...what should it be and he said, “Prone”.

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He meant supine but either way you were on the ground so it was just like... I didn't think I was ever to be able to be politically active during that period I had been very involved in the movement against the war in Vietnam which was unusual for a Black woman but because of being at an all-women's campus there was more latitude for what we were allowed to do. We were the leaders of our organization so the thing is we didn't have to get permission from another group of people who were the same age as we were but male about what we thought was important to do so I had been involved in the movement against the war in Vietnam, to end the war in Vietnam and I tried to continue that when I started graduate school at the University of Pittsburg and there was a major mobilization against the war in Vietnam in Washington in the fall of 1969 which I did indeed go to and I was talked about like a dog, like a dog by Black people on my campus affiliated with the Black Studies program. I don't know who was in the department at that time to their mind, Vietnam was a white issue.

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And it's like, really?! Who is being sent over there from our nation? Predominantly men of color who did not have economic opportunities in any other context. So disproportionately, who was fighting the war was people of color and everybody who is dying on the other side were people of color, but yes, it is a white issue. Peoples' minds began to evolve but all these things were happening, and there were some women at the University of Pittsburgh who were interested as many of us were in that age group and in that era of beginning to explore Women's Studies. Now these were white women in the English department and I of course was in the English department and they approached me about what they were working on and we had some conversations but again it's like it's just not clicking totally because it not about a Black women's experience and it also is not about my experience. But by 1970, well '72, it was really important because by that time I had gotten my Master's and gone to the University of Connecticut and I took a course, a seminar, in Women's Literature. This was fall of '71. This was one the first graduate course ever offered in Women's Literature in the entire country. So I took that and I told my professor that I wanted to do my seminar paper on Black women, on a Black woman writer. She had nothing to suggest. Now I was quite familiar with African American literature by that time because I had done undergraduate independent studies that's the only way because there were no Black Studies at Mount Holyoke at that time, but I had done a major paper my senior year about four African American writers, they were all male. And by that time, by the time I got to grad school, by the time I started working on my doctorate it was like I was interested in taking a seminar in Women's Literature, obviously, and just like the title of somebody's book, *All The Women Were White* [Laughs]. And so, she couldn't help me. She gave me Gerda Lerner's wonderful book, the documentary history of... *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. I loved it but these were not literary documents. This was not literature; this was

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history. It was very helpful but then my aunt who had been my legal guardian after our mother had died at an early age, she died suddenly in the Fall of '71. I took incompletes in the courses that I was taking at the time and then I moved to Boston and continued to commute to the University of Connecticut. I also got a job working at an improbable place, Phillips Academy at Hanover because that was a summer job. Because they had what was called, an A Better Chance program. A Better Chance may still exist, its again of kids of great promise into independent schools that go to private schools and they would have these preparatory programs for them at different campuses in different locations to get them ready for the private school experience. So I had worked in an A Better Chance program at Mount Holyoke when I was in college and now I was working as a teacher in an A Better Chance program at Phillips Academy in Hanover. Ms. Magazine came out in, I believe in the summer of '72 and I was a charter subscriber. And reading it, and it says and I knew who Alice Walker was because I read everything, so the thing was that I had read her first novel. I had already read her first book of poetry, which is titled *Once* and also I had read poems in *Harper's Magazines* so I knew who she was and so she had written something for the magazine in it and it says that she was teaching on Black Woman's Literature at Wellesley. And I said, "Wow," because I was living in Boston, or I was going to live in Boston and I wrote to her and I asked if I could audit her course. I told that I had taken this Women's Literature seminar and I hadn't finished it and I still needed to write my paper. She let me audit her course. By that time though she was not teaching it at Wellesley, she was teaching it at UMass Boston. So that was even more convenient; downtown campus. So I could almost walk and probably did from where I lived in the South End over to where she was teaching the course. And that really changed my life because I got introduced to the greats: Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, who was my favorite at the time, and a lot of other writers.

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And so I was able to figure out my paper topic for that incomplete course but I also said in what some might think is typical Barbara fashion...I said, "The next time I teach..." because I had already had teaching experience as a grad student, as a TA at both the University of Pittsburgh and University of Connecticut. I said, "The next time I teach, I don't know where it is but I am going to be teaching Black Women writers. That's what I said to myself. And in the Fall of '73, I don't know if I started going to MLA at that point, the Modern Language Association. I don't think this job came through that but I heard that there was a position at Emerson College. And I went and I interviewed for the head of the department. She was a wonderful women and she hired me. And I would be teaching Composition and she asked what else would I like to teach and I said African American Literature and Black Women Writers. And she basically said, "Go ahead do it". So literally within a year of having said and vowed that "Next time I teach I'm going to teach Black Women's Literature," I was doing it. So all of those things led to my

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feminism and then—I know that this is a long answer, I always give long answers it seems but—my sister by that time was working at Ms. in New York, and she met Margaret Sloan Hunter, who was the co-founder of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and she told me about how there was going to be a conference. This was in November, I believe. Definitely the fall of 1973 and of course I said, “I will be there”. And we both went and that was it.

**CTM:** Your journey has been a real activist journey as an organizer as a political person in the world, so how did some of those ways of thinking within college settings and situations what was the connection between that and your activism?

**LC:** And that intense radicalism?

**BS:** Well, I think describing my growing up years during the Civil Rights Era, I grew in Jim Crow. That’s what I always tell people they need to understand that. Jim Crow was the law of the land at the time my sister and I came to earth. That was it. Black people had a certain status in this nation. And it was an agreed upon status. Not within the Black community, was not agreed upon, because many people track the Civil Rights Movement much earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than the midpoint. And I think that’s important to do to understand that these interventions were cycling through the century. And there were always people who stood up against white supremacy. So having that experience and knowing that my sister and I, and even more importantly, my family members were considered to be inferior or less than, there is nothing more than that to make you feel really angry. Now one of the things though I realized I have many aged peers obviously, people who are my exact same age definitely many even more people who are from my generation, most of them didn’t turn out to be radical activist, so there is a question, but from my kind of myopic point of view of my own experience it is like, “Well, of course I became an activist,” and “Of course I would explore and then embrace radical understandings of how we make change because I was living through the oppression”, but that is too simple I guess. One of the things I say when I am talking about my growing up years is that some of the most admirable people who we were exposed to—and I am talking about people of my generation—young Black people of my generation were themselves activist. So if the people you looked up to were Bob Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and Ella Baker and all people like that, just incredible people. Your consciousness is different than looking up to Kardashians and other problematic people because the consciousness isn’t necessarily there. Also I grew up in a time of major social and political change in the nation. So there are people right now who are public figures, who have what I would describe as good politics. They don’t necessarily have it in the context of massive topsy turvy, turn the society over change.

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I happen to be fortunate to be growing up during an era like that. So consciousness of course comes from what you have an opportunity to experience, everything from the free speech movement out in Berkeley, California to The Beats or as they were called the Beatniks, so many things were happening that were not status quo. The fact that African nations and other nations, Asia, South Asian nations... were throwing off the old colonialism and that was something that was talked about again in my home. When leaders of African nations would come to the United Nations—now we were in Cleveland, but my family was really alert and they would talk about the fact that I don't remember exactly who came, I would say Kwame Nkrumah, but the thing is, I remember when Fidel Castro came. Because when he come, he went right to Harlem and that was a big topic of conversation within the Black community. That he could have stayed anywhere that he had wished in New York City, he chose to stay at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. It was the 1960s. Early 1960s and so all of these things were just kind of percolating. My politics were very much shaped by the Civil Rights Movement and I believe in non-violence. I am committed to non-violence to this day. And I think that non-violence can actually change, bring about fundamental political and social change. A lot of people don't see how that is the case because we are so mired in the other way and the way that if there is a conflict or if there is a problem you solve it through violence on the most massive of scales. We are certainly in a period like that now, worse than we ever thought could be. But the thing is that as I said that really shaped my consciousness. But when I went to college, I wasn't even against the war when I went to college. I since changed. But I met women who were in the older classes, upper class-women as they called them and the people I then most admired right in front of me were the women at Mount Holyoke who were doing political organizing and were in a group called the Civil Actions Group. So the Civil Actions Group definitely had a focus on the Civil Rights Movement and increasingly it was getting involved in the struggle to speak out against the war in Vietnam. And because these are people who I so admired, whatever they thought...it was not like I was a sheep or anything but thing is I admired them greatly. They were extremely brilliant women; they were certainly committed. They were really nice, unlike some of the women I met at Mount Holyoke. They were very open and welcoming and it was a predominantly white group because it was a predominantly white campus, but a lot of the sisters, a lot of the Black women were in the Civil Actions Group. That had an impact and was one of the most pivotal experiences for me. Well to be against the war at that time pretty much made you a radical or meant that you were a radical because it was not popular. So I was being exposed to radical politics in some ways even necessarily without a label...I went to...there was a major mobilization against the war in Vietnam in New York City in 1967, the Spring of 1967. It was a march, I don't know where the march had started but it had ended at the United Nations and Martin Luther King spoke at that march. He had spoken a few days earlier, I believe at the Riverside Church—that famous address that he gave about Vietnam and making

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those connections between what people understood to be his agenda and what was actually a much more global and expansive agenda. But one of the key things for me, actually becoming a radical, who had read some stuff was when I transferred to the New School for Social Research my junior year. And being at Mount Holyoke was really hard because of the racism and class elitism and the fact that we were fish out of water.

**CTM:** Both you and your sister where there?

**BS:** Oh no, when I say we I'm talking about other Black women. My sister went to the University of Chicago. And she was experiencing very similar things. Almost all of us who went to these private, these formally, primarily or predominantly white elite colleges during that period and ones that were not necessarily considered to be so elite, but my sister and I were at elite colleges were experiencing similar things.

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One of things that we experienced that we bristled at most, and this includes of course my sisters at Mount Holyoke is that we were assumed not to be qualified to be there and that was just so debilitating because we had worked our whole young lives to be qualified to be at such a place. And in some cases, our qualifications were better than the white young women we were in school with, but because they were white so that was a qualification in and of itself. So anyway I transferred to the New School for Social Research. By that time, I definitely identified as a radical. It was a new program, a new college program called the New School College and you had to choose either the Humanities track or the Social Sciences track. Because I had planned to be a sociology major or at least thought be a sociology major at Mount Holyoke. I thought, "I just haven't taken that many literature courses and maybe I should," ...and I also like Social Science so I thought "I am going to take...do the social science track because I think I am better qualified for it and I am quite interested in it,". So that's what I did and as it turned out that was really, really, really significant because unbeknownst to me I know in hindsight that I was being taught by...the teachers in that program were some of the best young left academics in the country and that's the perspective from which they taught. So I got to read the original sources—Marx, Hegel and Freud that's who I most remember, but others of courses. But the things like if you can work your way through those people that gives you a lot of confidence...We didn't get grades, we weren't being graded, that's great. We were doing it with a huge amount of passion. Another thing about is that there were students from all over the country. It started...the program was only Junior-Senior year. The New School College was only for juniors and seniors at that time. So these were juniors and seniors who had transferred out of places like Antioch, Reed...University of Wisconsin. There were certain campuses that were known for having much more progressive politics and much more progressive culture than Mount Holyoke...There they were and when I went to our first meeting for the whole class, for everybody.



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Because...it was a relatively small group of people like maybe 100 or less, I remember being in this auditorium at the New School and looking around and thinking “These are the most dissident, some of the most dissident in the entire country. Because unlike me they were actually on campuses where there was a radical culture, radical activism to a greater degree than at mine and yet they were dissatisfied. So I thought this was a good place for me. So all of those things had impact. I went back to Mount Holyoke for my senior year and did graduate from Mount Holyoke. By that time, I designed an interdepartmental major in both sociology and English and that meant because it was interdepartmental and designed by me with my advisors, there were no stated requirements. Which doesn’t mean that I didn’t study very hard and didn’t do a whole lot of work, I did a huge amount of work. It’s just that I didn’t have to take, like say a 17<sup>th</sup> century British Literature...I did by the time I got to grad school, yeah right. [Laughs] Be that as it may...that really had an impact. And then also just beginning to understand the role of capitalism and oppression both in this country and how it connects with racism and racial oppression and white supremacy and then also how it connects with oppression globally. So all of those things began to make sense to me.

**CTM:** Because that perspective and pulling all those different sort of experiences and histories and moments you have now talked about, its pulling all those things together is what gives you the kind of perspective, the kind of framework that you then end up using and ends up in the Combahee Collective Statement as well, which is...I remember how revolutionary that was because actually brought capitalism into the picture in relation to a feminist—

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**BS:** A Black feminist context. Right. One of the first clear statements of Black feminism declared that this was also anti-capitalist politics. That’s fierce. That’s incredibly meaningful because we were not about bourgeoisie feminism, not at all. In fact, we riled against that and really did not want to be involved with that.

**LC:** And anti-racist at the same time.

**CTM:** Anti-racist and anti-homophobic.

**BS:** Intersectionality. I also wanted to say that I’ve talked a lot about admiring other activists, the Civil Rights organization that I most admire was SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). SNCC was a radical organization and I just idolized SNCC. I was just, “Oh my God, I wish I could be in SNCC!” and I wished I could go to the South. I was so aware of how different it was from other civil rights organizations, although I never had the opportunity. I was actually involved in CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality) in Cleveland as a late teenager before I went to college and doing some reading, just fairly recently, I realized that CORE was considered to be to the left of, I think of, the

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Southern Christian Leadership Conference for example. So I had great exposure working with CORE.

**LC:** So reflecting on that history and that work, Barbara what would you say...How do you imagine, how do you see your work over the last four decades...and thinking of now, that history and now what's happening now, impacting women's lives, thinking, imaginary—where do you see that located?

**BS:** Well that's a really good question. Before I answer it though it's kind of related to your question, I wanted to say something about what Chandra just said about how all these different experiences had impact upon my politics and helped to then shape the politics of the Combahee River Collective, etc. What I wanted to say is that it also counts for why it's hard for me to have a conversation sometimes with people who I meet these days because they have no idea about what the background is and why I believe the things I believe and why I think the things that I believe are still operative and important. Because this is a time of great political fervent in this nation and the world. I think I see a lot of inspiration and I feel a lot of optimism around Black Lives Matter and the Dreamers and some of the other kinds of organizing. The assertion...the importance of the "T" in LGBT and of identifying trans-identity and challenging trans-phobia. So I see a lot of things that are happening that I really relate to and that I think are really important. But again, sometimes I feel like...because of not having a shared history with people and because of ageism there, just not that enough of a dialogue about "Why do you believe the stuff that you believe and why did you do this and why did you think that?" That's one of the reasons why I am so glad of having this conversation and have it be documented because it might be helpful for people who want to find out more about origins, et cetera. So you asked and I want to make sure that I address the question that you asked about how do I see the work that I have done over the last four decades and...?

**LC:** Connecting that to what you just said and what you had said before is why I asked the question. How do you see as related to what's going on now and how young people think about that missing history they don't know?

**BS:** Well I think...I feel I am very fortunate on many levels. The best fortune that I had was to be born under the family that I was born into. So that's a great fortune.

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Another element of being very fortunate is being born at the time that I was born, so that I could live throughout all those eras. When I think about then what I have done over the last four decades or so, I think about what Audre Lorde, who was a dear friend of mine, what she would say when often generally almost always when she spoke was this, "I am Black, Lesbian, Woman, Warrior, Mother, Poet, doing her work. Are you doing yours?" And my feeling is that I am not all of the things that she mentioned. But the thing is

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that...what I take from that is that “I am just doing my work, I am just getting my work done.” I feel like a combination of circumstances created a context and an environment where women like me could come together and that’s women like the two of you and the two of you. But women like us that can come together to dismantle to the degree that it was possible, at least the belief systems that were not functional and that were not accurate or inclusive. So even if we have not made a revolution yet, we have made some progress in dismantling belief systems that are not useful and that are not just. So that what we have been about and some of us do have revolution and as an ultimate goal. But the thing is that we have had to learn that it is not within our lifetimes that we can achieve that. As a child of the 60s, we thought that we would have everything taken care of by the time that we were 30 because after all you could not trust anyone over 30. So by the time we were 30, everything would have been taken care of. Then of course reality had hit and Reaganism came in—Nixon then Reaganism, the grief, the grief...Margaret Thatcher...globalization of the economy, all kinds of stuff. All kinds of things that just are so not correct and so not humane. But we keep on pushing. Now what does that have to do with what’s happening now? As I said these are very exciting times. I think those of us who are really radical and really committed to fundamental change, one of the things that should characterize us is optimism, political optimism. Because if you don’t have that you can’t really function. And you have to pull it from where you can because if you read the newspapers, objective reality doesn’t necessarily lead you to optimism. Just the facts don’t necessarily lead you to optimism. The hope does. And the understanding that people all over are struggling. I went to the Bernie Sanders rally here in Albany a few weeks ago. And sitting behind me was this dear young family, they were white young people. To me that is one of things that about the campaign is that it brings people together who might not necessarily ever encounter each other and that was just an absolute example of young white, perhaps lower-middle class, working family with their wonderful little girl and an old Black woman. But we are all there for the same reasons. I thought that was really inspiring. That whole thing was inspiring.

**CTM:** So are you seeing in this campaign, a level of mobilization? And what do you think also we should be doing like to mobilize more women? More women of color? More feminists?

**BS:** Well, I am working on that. I think you probably know that from having introduced Dr. Zillah Eisenstein. I pulled her in to this because a few weeks ago, really only a few weeks ago, probably about five weeks ago now, I was invited to serve on the national LGBTQ steering committee for the Bernie Sanders campaign. We did as much as we could to try to bring a more complex version of feminism to the campaign.

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Zillah was particularly good at that. Because of the fact that I have held elective office and I have worked on many campaigns at this point including my own, I have a sense of what a campaign is and what it isn't and what it can and cannot do. So I think that Zillah was more effective well besides her brilliance and the way that she has herself defined what intersectional feminism should be. I think she was even more effective than I in pushing those things because of her deeper understanding in a substantive analytical way but also because my perspective was, "It's a campaign." There is only one objective in a campaign, which is to get the person to win. So if the good things that are not relevant to that one goal, you have to constantly assess can we do those good things in relationship to the goal, which is to get the person to win. I understood the campaign side of what they were trying to accomplish in a very visceral way because of having been through it myself, a number of times. Not just in my own campaign but also others. We done the best we can. I have heard more than one story about this period that doesn't it remind of when we were in the New Left. When we were young. Yes! Zillah has said that, my friend Amber Hollibaugh, who is an incredible lesbian feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist activist of many years. So we've said this is all just too familiar and why shouldn't it be, cause it's the same guys. It is the same guys!

**CTM:** But what is interesting is then that this is the moment then that people recall as similar to that moment. There have not been other moments in between that have sparked this level of mobilization and interest.

**LC:** But there is something kind of new still there, Barbara, about this moment. Like this is a very vile politics, intense hatred that some have said was very present in the Civil Rights Movement but it was a little more at least polite.

**BS:** Now are you talking about Trump?

**CTM:** Yeah, Trump.

**BS:** We are in significant deep trouble. I watch MSNBC every day. It's really hard to cause as Larry Wilmore said they got rid of all the Black people. I have been saying the same thing, before last Saturday at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, I have been saying the same thing...all of us have been saying the same thing. There used to be a place where we could actually, where we could see some of our friends and colleagues, sometimes we were on ourselves. We actually got to hear some things on TV that made some sense to us. But the thing is that I still watch it, it is a bad habit now. But in any event, they were talking this morning on Morning Joe, which we know where they are coming from. They were talking about this morning about how the margin between Hillary Clinton and Trump is narrowing and now it is like six or seven points according to polls. Oh my god! So the thing is this person, the most improbable, ignorant, despicable, atrocious creature on the face of the Earth. The fact that no one thought that

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such a creature could be so successful as he decimated and insulted and did hate speech...

**LC:** More than half of America...

**BS:** ...People keep talking about like he did this, he did that, he did this, he did that and yet he is Teflon. It doesn't seem to make any difference. So what he has fanned is this not very far underneath the surface...not an undercurrent, maybe an undercurrent before this cycle, before Trump emerged like this, but he...what he has fanned, what he has made possible to come up to the surface is the white supremacist, xenophobic, hate mongering core of...significant core of this nation. One of the reasons that that exists is because this country has never had any serious commitment or any commitment at all to eradicating white supremacy. It never has and maybe we'll see it, or never will, who knows? Up until this point, 2016, the United States of America has never had any serious commitment as a nation to eradicating white supremacy.

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What they have been involved with is improving race relations. Really? [*Laughs*] I mean race relations as I used to say it and still say sometimes, it doesn't make any difference in how people treat me on a one on one basis. Most white people in this country understand racism to be prejudice—prejudice and bigotry. And if you address that, if you are not somebody who is snarling and snapping at people of color at a regular basis, if you don't have a wooden cross, a can of gasoline, and a white robe stored in your garage then you are not a racist in this country. There is no other definition. So the thing is, it doesn't take much to light that flight. Because it is not really out, it smoldering and the comparisons that have been made to his campaign particularly his campaign events and George Wallace's...a couple months ago, Rachael Maddow did this sterling comparison of what happens at Trump rallies vs. what happened at George Wallace rallies, and it wasn't just about the violence. There was a picture, a photograph in The New York Times last week after the five primaries last Tuesday, you saw that? Yeah I wonder how many of us saw that? What did you think when you saw that?

**LC:** It was scary...it was scary.

**BS:** Well I assume we were talking about the Black man sweeping up...the Black man sweeping up at Trump Towers, or whatever Trump real estate where they work, and that was a picture, I don't know why The New York Times...I thought it was really interesting. You have a rally for this...crypto-racist. When I saw it, I said "New York Times, thank you, thank you for showing us where we are going to be with this fool, you know, if this fool is successful,". We will be pushing brooms and worse and it's not that—all work is worthwhile and worthy, it's not about that...We've paid too little

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attention...gave too little appreciation and credit to those who make it possible to have nice lives, like the person who cleans this room.

**LC:** Because the message...because the photo was intended to give...to collectively give a message to Black people, that's how I read it: "this is where we are going to put you". We are going to put you back there. It was fairly chilling.

**BS:** In particularly after the first two terms of the first Black president...it is so intense.

**CTM:** So just to wrap up just a little bit, say a little bit because you also worked in a lot of different kinds of feminist communities and organizations over the years, what have been some of the most important challenges? And what were, what are ways you have found to think about how to build bridges or solidarities across certain kinds of divides and differences?

**BS:** Well that's a great question and potentially a painful one. Although I am not personally feeling a lot of pain in that regard at this point. I always have been a part of small organizations. I really like being a part of small grassroots organizations. And they have been effective organizations. I think that I really subscribe to what Bernice Johnson-Reagon wrote in her article that is at the end of my book, *Homegirls*. Purposely placed at the end of my book, *Homegirls*, and that is, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century". It was actually a speech, given at Yosemite Women's Music Festival, probably...sometime in the early 80s or late 70s and that's how I discovered it. I heard it as a tape, an audio tape and I said, "Gotta have it for this book". And what Bernice says is that you can't assume that your political organizing, where you do that is your home place. You have to have another place, where you will get fed, where there will be some food, there will be milk in the bottle and that's not going to happen when you are out there struggling. She says it...anybody who wants to find out the answer to the question is, should just read the essay because she talks about how turning the century that is turning from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she says we are going to have to work with some people that we just don't like that much...it is going to make us uncomfortable. We are going to have to vomit over that a little bit...that we're going to be in situations...she was predicting the kind of coalitions that we did indeed build.

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The AIDS epidemic might be a great example of that. One of the many reasons, let me count the ways, I actually despise Ronald Reagan is because he was, himself, responsible for the death of people who were dear to me. That's what I believe and feel because I know the word AIDS was not spoken for most of the years in his administration, and the research and the kinds of interventions that could have happened had he not been such a homophobic dog--and those who were with him—because at the beginning of the epidemic, AIDS was seen as a solely gay disease. It wasn't even called AIDS, it was

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called GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency. That was the early '80s, I lived in New York as the AIDS epidemic began to manifest and because of the incredible struggle of people in the early days of the movement, we now have a completely different perspective and understanding about what this is, this is a disease, it is not a punishment; unless you are some right wing nut, you don't see it that way. People understand that diseases are not punishments; they are diseases. And that anyone—my understanding is that the largest demographic as far as increase of those who are either HIV positive or who actually have full blown AIDS is people of color, and women of color. So we had to reshuffle our understandings. And I have seen great improvement in particularly my African American community and in the African American church community around these understandings. It is always about continuing to push and being clear. One of the challenging things that I was involved in is across identity lines, was actually Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Because we made a commitment from the very beginning that we would be a press for all women of color and we had many, many deep conversations about who was a woman of color and how did we define that and what we came to was that a woman of color was someone who identified with the indigenous people of her land or who belong to usually recognized groups. So that way a woman from Argentina whose heritage is actually European but who identified as Latina and who identified again with the indigenous people of her land, we understood that person was within...

**CTM:** The umbrella. So, it's a political definition.

**BS:** And it was complicated, it was not about phenotype and genotype. Phenotype is how you looked, genotype is actually who you are, or what you are. So the pink flowers that actually don't have...they are the same as the white ones, except that...you see what I'm saying? It's not how the flowers look, it is about what is their genetic makeup, now we aren't getting into a senseless biological anything, but it is like trying to understand like a bigger scope. And some of the people in the room who are helping to make those leaps of understanding were Audre Lorde, who I have already had mentioned, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Myrna Bain. Some really, really smart people and some really, completely sincere and committed people. I would be sometimes—when Kitchen Table Press was down in New York City—I would be at Kitchen Table Press meetings that were conducted almost entirely in Spanish, I didn't know what was happening, I didn't know what was going on, I just had to trust that yeah, I probably agree with what is being said even though I don't know what is exactly being said [*Laughs*].

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I mean, but that's a leap, you know? People assume because I have these multiply disenfranchised identities, they assume that it is easy for me to make those leaps across difference. It is not easy. It never has been and it never will be. But you have to have an

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open heart and an open mind. You have to have also deeper understandings of how power and oppression are connected so you know what you should be struggling for and who you should be aligned with. I always talk about how I connect with people whose politics I share, as opposed to people whose identities I share. because not everybody whose identity I share can I have a conversation with, nor would they want to have one with me. But the thing is, it's about the politics that we share, and also that willingness to continue to struggle.

**CTM:** This is a wonderful place to end. Thank you Barbara so much!

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*Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.*