



Building Effective Black Feminist Organizations

Tamara Jones

I want to have us think a little bit about how we build political organizations that are capable of enacting and sustaining Black feminist work over the long haul. The fact is we're often attempting to carry out Black antisexist work within organizations that incorporate traditional, even quasi-corporate, decision-making leadership structures and practices. That's just the reality. There is no value statement attached to that being good or bad. That's just a fact, right. We've got our executive directors, our presidents and vice presidents, our boards of directors for certain types of groups that are out there doing this work, and our organizing environment is significantly shaped by institutions that do not necessarily support Black feminist goals. Many Black antisexist organizations adopt internal hierarchical structures that would seem to challenge some of the fundamental values of Black feminism. Often this is the

result of fulfilling the requirements necessary to get recognized by the government as a legal nonprofit or satisfying the mandates of the philanthropic organizations that fund us. Our fiscal relationships with these organizations also mean that we are subject to their regulations and policing. That's a fact of doing this work. So the question is, how do we maintain a critical transformative edge to our politics when we are building that politics in an organizational environment that is shaped by institutions outside of our community that don't necessarily want to see us survive on the terms that we are defining for ourselves?

Moreover, we often find ourselves in the peculiar position of being in partnership with the very institutions that are also the target of our political resistance. So what kinds of organizations will allow us to build a critical Black feminism despite this resource dependency and institutional embeddedness? My

analysis of this question draws on an established literature that comes mostly out of social movements, that looks at social movement organizations. However, that literature, in the political science and social science fields, I would argue, largely fails to promote or provide compelling answers to the dilemmas I've just described.

Last, my own personal experiences both creating and working within organizations doing antisexist work in communities of color underscore for me the importance of thinking through this question of the interrelationship between Black feminist values and the ways in which we go about doing the work. So let me start by drawing out some of the organizational and political challenges that I think are contained within one of the most important elements of Black feminist thought: intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality, a term popularly theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has been used to draw attention to the multiple forms of discrimination that define Black women's lives. Initially focused on the dual system of race and gender oppression, Black feminist thought has extended its analysis to include issues

of class exploitation, heterosexism, and homophobia, to name just a few.

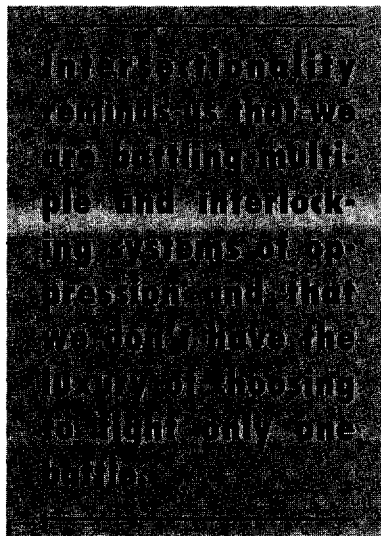
Intersectionality reminds us that we are battling multiple and interlocking systems of oppression and that we don't have the luxury of choosing to fight only one battle. Thus, as Debra King noted in her earlier essay, ironically, Black women are often in conflict with the very same subordinate groups with which we share some interests. Our allies are often also those against or with whom we struggle, in-

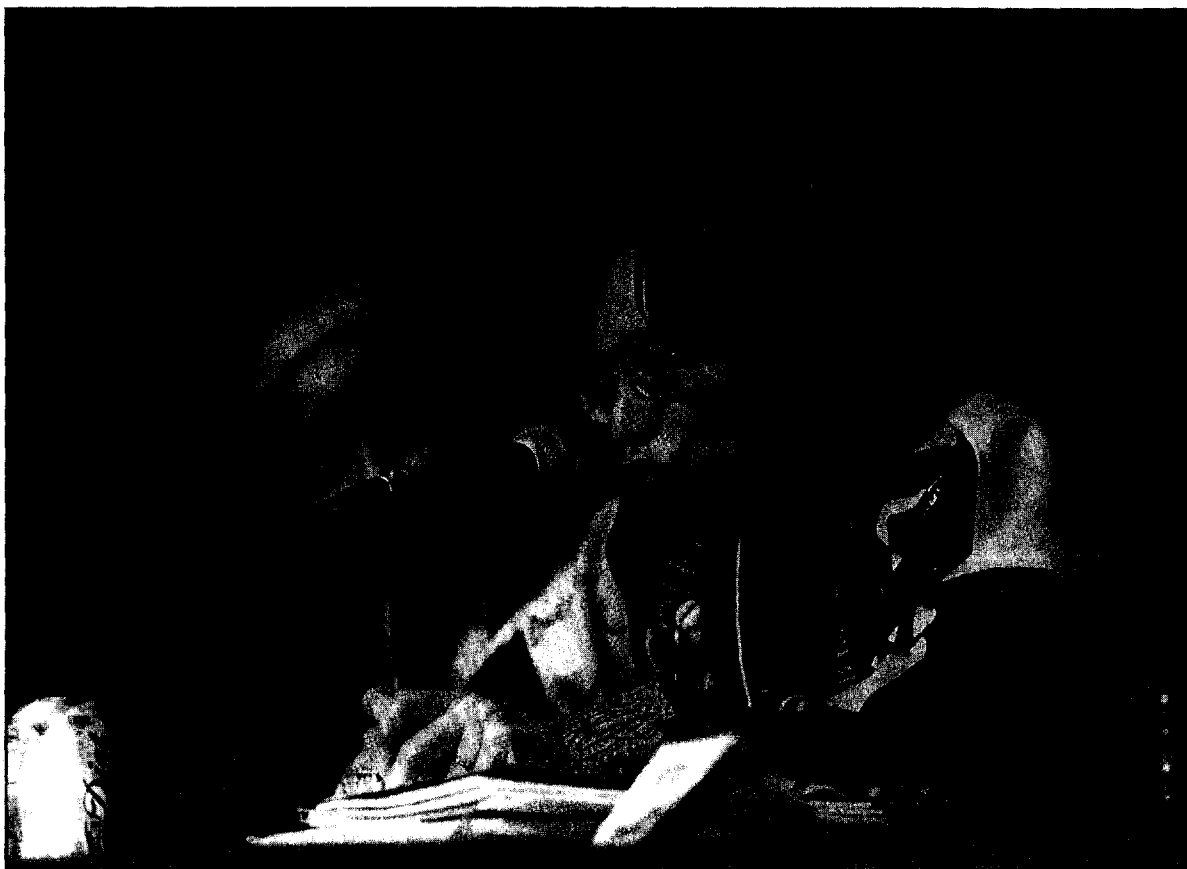
cluding at times other Black feminists who are differently located within these multiple systems. This is a crucial point for Black feminists because it means that we have to build political organizations that are capable of responding to and harnessing the power that comes from those differences among us, differences that stem from those communities within which we locate ourselves. I often find myself struggling with other Black feminist activists on occasions when I have spoken out as a lesbian, as someone who identifies herself as Afro-Caribbean not African American, and as a noncitizen, because the same way in which gender analysis challenges some people's notions of what it means to be Black, sexual identity and class and citizenship status

break open the category of Black womanhood, and that is the truly radical dimension of intersectionality. We have to create political agendas and political strategies that flourish in the face of our differences, that see our differences not as threats and points of conflict but as sources of a radically transformative power. And there are not many places where this kind of politics is being formed in this country or done, and that's one of the

challenges we face, right? How do we create this thing? How do we look back in history and find the moments in which it has been enacted and spread those models and build on them in our communities?

I am reminded of Bernice Johnson Reagon's now-famous remarks in which she discusses the politics of building coalitions, and I want to offer that I think that the notion of coalition building can sometimes be very useful for thinking about doing Black femi-





Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Tamara Jones during a panel discussion. Photo by John Smock.

nist work *among* Black feminists and *within* a Black community. Reagon uses the notion of home as a place of rest, recovery, and rejuvenation from political battle. But as Reagon herself acknowledges, and as many of us also know from personal experience, home is also a place of struggle, pain, and conflict. Black antisexist organizations reflect this double truth of home as the location of both struggle and solidarity. Intersectionality pushes us to work not only around our commonalities but across our differences as well, as Audre Lorde so often reminded us. And when the differences between us reflect differences in social power within our communities, then we have to examine whether the structure of the organizations we build reinforces the subordination of different groups of Black feminists. How do we build political spaces that

reflect our differences without recreating the power inequities those differences represent in the larger society? The conditions necessary for creating political organizations that reflect this belief in the transformative power of difference do not emerge automatically. Those conditions have to be created and tended throughout the life of the organization. Sometimes we think it is just enough if we put out a call for Black feminists to come work together and if we just get other Black feminists in the room that it is somehow just going to magically happen. What I am suggesting is that we need to examine that assumption. We need to look at whether or not that's really what's happening when we try to do the work.

So the idea of intersectionality and the political power of difference has been exten-

sively theorized, and I think there's even been good data that have been provided through biographical, autobiographical, and anecdotal accounts. But what argument remains under-examined, at least in the social sciences and definitely within political science, is how this all works on the ground and particularly within organizations. I am going to point to several areas within organizational structures that I think are particularly useful for us to examine and to interrogate as to the extent to which they are allowing us to carry out this kind [of work]: the extent to which they reflect Black feminist values.

The first is the question of accessibility or transparency within the organization. How easy is it to see how power moves in the orga-

the doors and get it, and once they read it will understand everything, right? So what are the ways in which the organization is making itself accessible to the community and the constituents that it's serving?

The next is accountability. And I know that accountability is something that we talk about a lot, but what I want to suggest is that we might want to extend the way we think about accountability in organizations doing this work, to move away from a focus on the product and to think about how we can hold the process accountable. Because I think what still happens sometimes is that, within organizations, a lot is invested in coming up with the campaign or the plan and then we are going to take that back to the community

and allow them to react to that and have feedback to that. And of course, what happens is that there are criticisms and somebody always sees themselves left out. Okay, we can't go back and radically change this product because it will take too much time, too much money, and the deadlines are too close, right? So what we need, I think, instead, is to be-

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nization? Is it clear to everyone who is making the decisions, how they are getting made, where they are getting made, when they are getting made, and how does the community come to know what the organization is doing? I have participated in organizations that have defined themselves as feminist, not necessarily Black feminist, but feminist, where the primary outreach is still through their annual report, still is through these published documents. They are comprehensive, they are well written, you know, but they are these annual reports, and if you walk in there is a stack of them in the reception area and it's expected that the community will somehow kind of know that it's there and come through

begin looking at how we can hold ourselves accountable both to the communities that we are serving, the mission statements that we have often written to guide what it is that we are supposed to be doing as we create the politics, as we move through.

Third, I want to point to leadership development. I really like what was said earlier in the panel about the need to move away from leader-centered groups. We need to move toward group-centered leadership, and I think one of the ways in which that is going to happen is if we are taking seriously the kind of training, development, resources that all organizations are going to need to provide to the people coming through the doors and the

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people who are working there. Are we training people for leadership within Black feminist organizations? Is that really happening or do we think if they just read Audre Lorde and go to enough conferences that somehow it all will just kind of sink in and they will know how to do the work?

within the organization. I think that we really need to focus on that. I think often we are unprepared for disagreements and real differences that come up when we ask people to talk. We are bowled over, seriously, and we have no action plan that is going to help move through those moments of difference in our work. So the notion of communication, the

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Fourth, communications. Communication modes within our organizations: A lot of times activists and organizations are confronted with the need to open up the floor to communication, and the response is to just have an open mike kind of model, right, call a meeting and everybody can just say their piece and we'll get everything out in the open. And I want to suggest that that's just a starting point, but often we treat it like that's the whole process right there—that once everybody got a chance to say what's on their mind, then, hey, we've been democratic and we've helped build transformative foundation and we can somehow move along. I think that we do need to push on the underlying assumption behind that kind of approach to political communication in our organizations to examine the way in which actually that format does not empower those who find themselves in the minority, either within our communities or within the room, that we need to look at the way that power still manifests itself in these seemingly democratic moments

way in which communication works within the organizations currently and really what those modes of communicating have to say about power within the organization, who's empowered to speak, and how prepared we are to deal with the differences that come out of what people have to say.

Last, I do want to point to something that I think remains underdiscussed within political work, and that's the role of healing and wellness in our political work and in the organizations that we build. We acknowledge that working for collective wellness is a big part of Black feminist politics, but I'm not sure that that commitment to healing and wellness is integrated in the political organizations that we build, and I think that remains one of the weak points of our politics and practice. I know that this is language that some of us are more familiar with in terms of spirituality, religion, and self-help, but I will now make the argument that this is fundamentally political in practice, not just in terms of health issues that we are organizing around, but the ability

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of our organizations, having once acknowledged the differences among us, having once created spaces for us to articulate that difference, having encouraged us to engage in struggle with each other—that we also have a responsibility to acknowledge that that struggle also creates a need for recovery. And we do need to ask the question, where are the places for healing within the political organizations in which we are doing our Black feminist work?

I am going to end here for now. In the interest of time, I have not given many concrete examples to demonstrate these points. Rather, I hope the details will emerge in our open conversation.

Just to recap briefly, I think the goal here really is about building a progressive move-

ment that's going to bring about justice for all communities. Black feminism for me is a starting point. It allows me to deepen the analysis of how race, gender, class, citizenship, all of these different things that shape Black communities, how these issues work in that context. But also recognizing, as I do that, that there are other communities out there that are also being beat down, and that ultimately I am trying to create a politics, as a Black feminist, that is going to link up with those other movements. Black feminist politics pushes us to deal with differences, differences within our community and differences across communities. That is the contribution and the focus that I think is most promising about this next wave of Black feminist scholarship and Black feminist politics.