RESTING IN GARDENS, BATTLING IN DESERTS: BLACK WOMEN’S ACTIVISM

by Joy James

Reminding you
Sister
It's okay to rest your feet
from battles
But lay in gardens
warmed by sun
Not in spreading deserts
near convenient wells

– Audre Lorde

Introduction

The above epigram is taken from an inscription by Audre Lorde for The Black Unicorn. Lorde is one of many black women writers, including Toni Cade Bambara, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker, who have greatly influenced the growth and development, the genius, if you will, of womanist or black feminist theory and activism.

Tens of thousands of black women have furthered democratic politics and social justice through their activism and analyses. Black feminist politics display a radical singularity. In its revolutionary tendency (only one of many trajectories within black women's activism) one finds the framework for an alternative to liberal antiracist and feminist politics. Black women have tended incredible, secluded gardens within the expansive wasteland of this dysfunctional democracy.

What often distracts attention from the fruits of black women’s labors are depoliticizing representations that obscure their contributions to democratic politics. Often commercial and stereotypical portrayals of black females center on fetishized and animalized sexual imagery; consequently, blacks, females, and politics become effaced or distorted. Racial and sexual caricatures corseting the black female body have a strong historical legacy. Progressive intellectuals and activists satirize denigrating stereotypes that recycle vilifying images of black females as "tragic mulattas," tricksters and femmes fatales. Nevertheless, commercial images of America’s sexualized attraction as well as aversion to black females eclipse images of black female political agency in conventional culture. Deconstructing representations of black females as sexual deviants and of images that promote antiblack and antifemale contempt and violence has been a primary concern of black women writers and activists in the United States for centuries.

The political agency of black women still seems to be infrequently referenced, perhaps because black males remain the most influential petitioners and pugilists in contemporary American race politics. (Their ideological span stretches from the reactionary positions of California’s anti-affirmative action czar Ward Connerly and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’s anti-civil rights activism, through the liberalism and reconciliation politics of historian John Hope Franklin who headed Bill Clinton’s President’s Race Initiative, to the neoradical-
ism of elite black academics.) Although exceptions have occasionally been made for very extraordinary women, historically, the image of “freedom fighters” has been masculinized, a fact that furthers the erasure of black women activists.

**Historical Legacies**

[We find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women’s extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes...Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.]

– The Combahee River Collective Statement

**The Search for Antiracist and Feminist Community**

The search for antiracist and feminist community can be measured by the heroic efforts of ancestral and activist African American women. Most Americans are unfamiliar with the history of militant black female fighters, yet their stories are readily available. Memoirs such as *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells; Angela Davis: An Autobiography; and Assata: An Autobiography* touch a raw nerve among those who become politically stressed or polarized when facing radical and revolutionary social justice battles. (Paradoxically, political autobiographies expand an intellectual base for progressive struggles while simultaneously providing a comfort zone that validates for the consumer society, images of revolutionaries marketed as commodities through publications for consumers.) Reading such narratives reveals rebellions that democratized American politics. Tens of thousands were and are inspired by Ida B. Wells’s crusade against lynching, Ella Baker’s organizing for civil rights, Angela Davis’s support for prisoners (beginning with the Soledad Brothers in the late 1960s), and Assata Shakur’s revolutionary battles in the black liberation movement (a movement eventually destroyed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s illegal counter-revolutionary program, COINTELPRO). The works of women such as Wells, Baker, Davis, and Shakur, although not consistently “radical” or “revolutionary” — and containing contradictions — pushed beyond conventional politics. Seeking liberation, each offered models of black female resistance to political, social, state or gender dominance.

Following the unique political maneuvers executed by Wells at the turn of the previous century, African American women continuously organized and shaped liberation leadership, leaving significant imprints on the movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

**Black Women** who uniformly considered themselves “antiracists” but not necessarily “feminists” nevertheless expanded antiracist women’s politics, community development, democratic power, and radical leadership. Given the primacy of movements in the formation and articulation of black female militancy, history plays a central role in contemporary analyses.

In the 1960s, black women participated in the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress on Racial Equality, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the Black Panther Party. Emerging from the black liberation and antiracist movements that helped to redefine radical action, in the 1970s, black women’s organizations such as the Combahee River Collective issued cogent manifestoes that articulated a revolutionary black feminism.

Reviewing radical and revolutionary politics for contemporary struggles we see legacies alive and changing in the activism of prisoners rights advocates and environmental organizers. At a time of mass, militant unrest, through bold confrontations with state authority, black women activists forged prototypes for late-twentieth-century, and early twenty-first-century, black female radicalism.

Of the many branches of black feminism extending from battles for a liberated African and female existence in America, the most imaginative and transformative are rooted in black female radicalism. It is impossible here to offer a comprehensive
survey of the ideological diversity or plurality of black feminist activisms or the more subtle differences found even within radical black feminism. Yet it is essential that we examine the limits of liberalism or civil rights advocacy, as well as black women’s challenges to state power and antiradicalism within conventional feminist and antiracist politics.

The most recognized political activism remains in conventional politics. Despite exclusionary practices set by racism, sexism, and class bias, African American women have made gains in the “public realm” of electoral politics and appointed office; these are the political victories most often seen and celebrated in antiracist feminist politics. The 1992 election of Carol Mosely Braun as the United States’ first black woman senator (whose politics often fell short of progressive), and the re-elections of Democratic leaders Maxine Waters (who helped to publicize the connections between the Central Intelligence Agency and cocaine trafficking in the Iran-Contra scheme), Cynthia McKinney (active in human rights advocacy in U.S. foreign policy), Corrine Brown, Carrie Meeks, and Eleanor Holmes Norton to the U. S. House of Representatives, stand as key examples of black female progress in electoral political power. Outside of congressional halls, black women also have mobilized the “private realm” of local and religious communities, neighborhood schools, and cultural centers. Directly or indirectly opposing institutional control, and social and state neglect or violence, they have informed American political culture by leaving indelible marks in antiviolence campaigns, resource redistribution for underresourced communities, youth and women’s groups, and labor and civil rights activism. Both the highly visible congresswomen and the nearly invisible community activists shape models of political progressiveism.

Black women activists and feminists are not uniformly progressive, although they all invariably face marginalization and opposition fueled by white supremacy, corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Radical or revolutionary black feminisms also face resistance from liberal and conservative feminisms and antiracism. Black feminist politics negotiates the “internal” opposition of antiradicalism among feminists and antiracists and the counterfeminism evident among some radicals.

Battling with state power, patriarchal culture, as well as antiradicalism and counterfeminism among progressives, subordinate women have forged a feminist politics through militant antiracist movements. Discomfort with black feminist speech and activism in its most radical expressions — those which confront exploitation tied to militarism, corporate dominance, and neoimperialism stems from and fosters restricted notions of “feminism” and “antiracism.” Difficulties in accepting black feminisms on their own terms may stem from not only sexism and racism but a lack of familiarity with critiques of monopoly capitalism and neoliberalism.

Given our economic and ideological diversity, we cannot in good faith posit black women as a class. A homogenized view of women of African descent allows conventional politics to elide historical black militancy. There is no “master” narrative that frames the concerns of all black women and their organizations. The multiplicity of ideologies reveals varying degrees of political efficacy and risk for social change; this diversity is often obscured by the “framing” of feminism in ways that either erase the contributions of radical black women or depict a homogeneous black feminism as an (corrective or rebellious) appendage to either antiracist or feminist struggles.

Resistance has historically challenged and shaped black female praxis across a broad ideological spectrum. Black women’s autonomy from the pervasive dominance of neoliberalism and corporate culture, however, opens new avenues for political activism.

Continuing Crusades

Today, black women’s struggles center on related but seemingly diverse issues, such as reproductive rights, environmental racism, childcare and health issues, sexual violence, police brutality, and incarceration. Key intersections along the American politi-
cal curve of antiracist, feminist activism include community, ideology and identity, revolutionary iconography, state punishment, sexuality, black male patriarchy and pro-feminism, economic resources, social and racial justice.

One area for concentrated focus has been the assault on affirmative action and the expansion of the prison industrial complex. Combined, these form a twinned hydra for racial, economic, and gender repression. A resurgent neoconservatism hostile to "racial preferences" in education and employment acquiesces to racial bias in imprisonment and state execution. The state of California, which leads the nation in incarceration, spends more on prisons than on schools. Of the nearly two million incarcerated in U.S. jails, prisons, and detention centers, over 70% are people of color. The Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project has noted that blacks convicted of committing similar offenses as whites are eight times more likely to be incarcerated.

Black women are increasingly becoming active around human rights abuses tied to policing and imprisonment given the destructive impact official and unofficial policies have on their families and themselves. A few striking examples illustrate the gross inequality and abuse rampant in the prison industry and state policing: the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution legalizes slavery for prisoners; anyone convicted of killing a white person is four times more likely to receive the death penalty, particularly if she or he is not white; over 65% of juvenile offenders sentenced to death since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976 have been either black or Latino. One of the few democratic nations to execute minors and the mentally retarded, the United States has executed more youths than any other country.

Although they are a minority of the prison population, women, particularly women of color, are increasingly facing the punitive powers of the state. In March 1999, the Amnesty International Rights for All campaign issued a report, Not Part of My Sentence: Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody, documenting the abuses of women in U.S. prisons and jails. By June 1997, there were 138,000 women incarcerated in the United States, triple the number since 1985 and ten times the number of women imprisoned in Spain, England, France, Scotland, Germany, and Italy combined. Most of the women incarcerated in the United States are nonviolent offenders convicted of economic crimes or drug use. Eighty percent are mothers, eighty percent are poor; and the majority are women of color. The less common violent offenses are generally connected to domestic violence. Racial bias in sentencing means that women of color incarcerated for nonviolent and violent crimes will increasingly make up the growing population of incarcerated females. Serving time, this population of caged women finds itself subject to new forms of physical and sexual abuse; and, although the Convention Against Torture, which the United States ratified in 1994, defines rape of women in custody by a correctional officer as torture, the United States government has engaged in virtually no monitoring of the conditions and situations of imprisoned women in respect to human rights violations.

In theory, human rights protections exist for both prisoners and nonprisoners in the United States under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the international conventions ban on racial discrimination, torture and ill-treatment. The government, however, places itself above the law. In 1998, the United States continued to exempt itself from international human rights obligations that granted protections to U.S. residents and citizens—rights still not available under U.S. law. Even after ratification of key human rights treaties (generally the state weakens such treaties with reservations), the United States fails to acknowledge human rights law: It refused to ratify the International Children's Rights Convention; opposed human rights initiatives banning landmines, child soldiers; and undermined the International Criminal Court (ICC). At the Rome Diplomatic Conference in July 1999, 120 states voted for and seven, including the United States, against the ICC treaty.
The above are only some of the battles which today’s progressive activists face. Conscious of both U.S. domestic and foreign policies, many black women also continue to organize and theorize around other crises and conditions that erode freedom and democratic culture and destroy life. These include racial and homophobic lynchings; the international AIDS epidemic currently devastating parts of Africa and U.S. cities; refugees and regional wars; embargoes crippling Cuba and killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children; decolonization struggles in Puerto Rico and Ireland; Palestinian statehood; political prisoners in China and other countries as well as in the United States (which has over one hundred political prisoners, but only one on death row, Mumia Abu-Jamal); the war on drugs; addictions; the international resurgence of neo-Nazis; nuclear waste and toxic dumping; incest, rape, and domestic violence; underweight babies and infant mortality; dire poverty amid the increasing stratification of wealth; and, of course, hypertension and high blood pressure.

Conclusion

In a culture that greets antiblack and antifemale violence, and the vilification and abuse of black females and their kin with considerable equanimity, many are compelled to act. Some African American women do so with distinct political intent to revolutionize rather than reform existing power structures, hoping to go to the root, to nurture and grow structural change that alleviates and diminishes oppressive conditions. Although for most Americans the recognized public fighters or advocates remain male, the Others, black female organizers, battle as outsiders, at times criminalized as cultural and political outlaws.

In these struggles, activists find that on one hand, the state has the power to extinguish a radical movement; on the other hand, it can modify and absorb that movement into the mainstream, so that it no longer functions as resistance to official policy. Sometimes the most convenient resting place seems to be in apolitical pursuits or politics that fit within conventional frame-works. Some retreat into isolationist politics of their singular, pressing cause, abstracted from other struggles which can provide important tributaries for growth and development. What we expect and demand of ourselves, society, and the state may fall short of our abilities to rethink and effectively counter corporate globalization, the stratification of wealth and poverty, the inhumane routinization of war (whether through bombing or embargo), and the increase of police powers (through the nefarious War on Drugs and President Clinton’s 1996 Omnibus Crime Bill).

Despite the institutional force and prevasive presence of state and corporate policies, black feminist activism, like other insurgent action, reveals in its organizing and analyses its own peculiar power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the revolutionary potential of black feminism such as that found among women of Jericho 98, the Black Radical Congress, the prison and death penalty abolitionist movements, of activists who take rest and respite — just not by convenient wells.

I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.

— 1 Corinthians 13:1

Endnotes

1. This epigram is an excerpt from an inscription written by Audre Lorde to the author in September 1989 in Lorde’s collection of poems The Black Unicorn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

2. Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. ...All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies (Old Westbury: NY: The Feminist Press, 1982).


4. For anthologies documenting the emergence of black feminist activism, see: Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist

5. Ibid., 6.


8. The United States was to submit a report on its compliance with the Convention Against Torture in 1995 but no report to date has been released. In response, a coalition of over sixty non-governmental organizations (NGOs) issued a report in October 1998 titled Torture in the United States: The Status of Compliance by the U.S. Government with the International Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. See Morton Sklar, editor, Torture in the United States, Washington, D.C., World Organization Against Torture, October 1998.

The report notes that the major areas of noncompliance in the United States center on: the death penalty, prison conditions and the treatment of refugee detainees; physical and sexual abuse of women in prisons; the return of refugees to situations of torture and persecution and their long-term detention under abusive conditions. Other violations noted in the report are: the United States’ failure to extradite or prosecute torturers who worked with the Central Intelligence Agency or were trained at the School of the Americas; the United States’ lack of adequate domestic implementation of the 1996 Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act; and arms sales and other assistance by the U.S. government that support torture in foreign countries (such as the sale of electronic stun gun equipment and some 10,000 shock batons to Turkey to be used against the Kurdish minority, the same equipment which Amnesty International has denounced in its use against U.S. prisoners).

9. See: the 1999 Human Rights Watch Report published on the Black Radical Congress website: subscribe brc-news to <majordomo@tao.ca>; archive: http://www.egroups.com/group/brc-news; www.blackradicalcongress.org I BRC I blackradicalcongress@email.com