Women's Resistance and Activism

by Marcia Wharton-Zaretsky

L'auteure nous dit comment le rôle de parent et l'engagement dans la communauté peuvent aider à développer la conscience d'une activiste radicale chez les femmes noires.

Black women's activism has been a "conscious" attempt to effect meaningful political and economic change within their communities and the larger society. Some Black women have taken on the activist role for the very survival of themselves and their communities.

Oral history is distinctive in that it offers a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between experiences and the development of counter-discourses among Black women who are often on the margins of history. Black women anti-racist activists often deploy their experiences of oppression to mobilize anti-racism or anti-oppression action among workshop participants. A key question is how have the personal experiences of these women shaped and impelled their anti-racist activism? The answer may be in the culture of Black women's resistance which ultimately defines their activism. Black women's activism therefore, has been a "conscious" attempt to effect meaningful political and economic change within their communities and the larger society (Collins). Some Black women have taken on the activist role for the very survival of themselves and their communities.

The purpose of this article is explore what constitutes the Black woman activist without essentializing her. The subject of this discussion, although a Black woman and activist like myself, draws from a social context quite different from my own. Joan Arbor (not her real name) is a Black lesbian woman of working-class, African-American background, living and working in Canada. I am inserting myself into this piece as a straight, Black, middle-class woman, born in Britain and raised in both Britain and Canada in white, middle-class suburbia. Although my subject and I have differing backgrounds, we draw upon a dialectic of identity or aspect of self that is shared with other Black women activists within "western"[1] society.

Born and raised in the United States, Joan Arbor has for the past several years been working in Toronto as an anti-racist educator, therapist, and community organizer. Although Joan Arbor and myself come from different backgrounds, it is our shared identity, that of the Black woman activist, that I wish to interrogate within the North American context. Through studying the threads of Arbor's life, Black women, including myself, can chart the process whereby we come to voice.

In exploring Arbor's life, the key question I interrogated was, "How are individuals who are outside of the dominant discourse(s) able to have voice, and challenge power relations?" I have divided her response into two sections, family and educational experiences, although for the Arbor family many of these experiences overlapped.

Family experiences

One of the first questions I asked Arbor was about her childhood environment. Her answer provides rich insight into the evolving self-defining Black woman.

> *Well I had five sisters but my five sisters were mainly in the first part of the family. So, I have four sisters and one brother in that. Then I have a couple of brothers and then a sister and then more boys. So I grew up having five sisters and five brothers but I grew up with seven male persons. I had my father and six brothers. And two of those brothers died. I grew up in a really male-dominated household. So, I was like ten and my sister was 16 and she didn't want me anywhere near her. [laughter] And by the time I was 12 she was away at university. I was always trying to get to my sisters in a household of boys—intense, adolescent, loud, big boys!*

As Arbor continued to elaborate on her family life experiences, one becomes aware of the importance of class and its impact on her family life. Furthermore, her mother's application of "middle-class values" significantly shaped the "knowledges" available to her children.

> *My mother interestingly enough had a strong value about class that I have actually only understood in the last five years because she didn't express class in ways that I recognize other people to express class.... One of her values was that we read well and we speak well, that we were able to dress ourselves well in any financial situation. These were the three values that she insisted upon. There were two other values which went with that—you had to have excellent food and serve an excellent table, and sleep in an excellent bed.*
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> *We got up at 5:30a.m. in the morning, we had prayers, we had a family motto, we had a family song, and we had to discuss being Black and what it meant to be Black. And when we returned home we were supposed to discuss if anyone interrupted our concept of self. But she wouldn't say: did someone interrupt your concept of*

self? What she would do is say: You are not ordinary, you are extraordinary, you're Black—it means this to be Black.

Arbor's mother called upon a long tradition in the Black community of creating a safe environment for the development of a Black identity that was whole. Within this very structured setting, Arbor and her family were given clear instructions of the value of their "Blackness" and were corrected when they capitulated to the dominate discourse on "Blackness." The discourse on Blackness that Arbor's family relies upon suggests that there is a Black consciousness that is an independent unifying force outside of the dominant consciousness.

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Although Joan Arbor describes herself as being introverted, without voice, her family, particularly her mother, gave her tools of critical thinking, writing, and reading which provided her with the confidence to become a "self"-defining Black girl/woman. In Arbor's experience then, the development of self is seen as the role of the community and the family. Individual members of the Black community are not abandoned to the dominant discourse(s) on "Blackness," rather they are encouraged to create positive concepts of Black identity that run counter to racist discourse(s) on "Blackness."

Also important to recognize is that Joan Arbor's self-defining standpoint is affected by her birth order. She is the only girl in the last part of a very large family. The impact this has had on Arbor's activism is consistent with Karen Brodkin Sacks' study in which she found family dynamics had a direct impact on the type of activist role women, Black women in particular, took on. Arbor's gendered position was reinforced in the family by the limited "sisterly" contact she encountered.

Another tradition that is found in many Black families is the importance of reading and writing. The fierce connection to reading and writing within the African-American family is borne straight out of the reaction to slavery, in which slaves were not allowed to read or write and those that defied this regulation could face death. After slavery, Blacks who could not read or write were at the mercy of tricksters who could cheat or deny them their rights because of their inability to read. Many African-Americans talk about the self-teaching that occurred within their families because of the distrust they felt towards state schools. To individuals like Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and Patricia Collins, reading and writing are seen as critical to the development of a voice that can critique dominant discourses as well as serve as a liberatory tool for the larger community.

Arbor's words confirm this:

And my mother had more education so she had really strong values in those regards. She was still of that generation that you communicate all those principles but also that you must pass it on, right, so that's the key piece. It's a strong value that if you are just educating yourself then you are not educated because that means that the whole race is not going to survive.

Arbor's mother was able to access important knowledge out of the dominant discourse(s) like her "class values" and convert them into tools in which her daughter would be able to "pass" within any social strata she found herself in. The other thread of strong value, consistent with historical studies written on Black teachers, is the concept of racial uplift.[2] Racial uplift stresses that Black people have not been helpless people of slavery but have had agency in resisting their oppression. Black women have borne a large role in this resistance. Blacks freed from slavery have not only worked to "rescue" the rest of the race but to liberate Blacks from their inferior social status. In addition, they have worked, upon their liberation, educating Blacks in order that to improve their chances of participating economically and socially at par with whites. Joan Arbor's mother integrated the concept of race uplift into the structure of her family life in a pragmatic and dynamic way.

Educational experiences

The distrust of the educational system was strongly integrated into how the family viewed mainstream learning institutions. Arbor states:

Well interestingly enough my parents didn't expect white people to educate Black children. They didn't have that belief, they didn't have that expectation. When I went to school we moved to an integrated neighbourhood which was in the early '60s. I was born in 1956. They felt it was really important to go to a school that was integrated because you would be able to get the books, the resources, and have the physical access you needed in order to learn.

But that was not an environment that would necessarily nurture your learning. I was really nurtured in some strange sort of way to be educated at home. And, if those grades were not reflected at school, then it was assumed that there was some kind of trickery happening at school because you're educated at home and you go to school to demonstrate that you have been educated.

Arbor's parents also attempted to construct a "safety net" within their school setting in order that issues around race could be dealt with swiftly and effectively. This discourse runs counter to the dominant discourse on "Blackness" which devalued Black people. bells hooks believes that in order for Blacks to embrace their Blackness they must decolonize their minds and break with white supremacist thinking that suggests that they are inferior, inadequate, and marked for victimization.

Arbor's mother gave her two important counter-discourses, a discourse on freedom and a discourse on feminism. Although Arbor's mother had given up her life to her husband, she gave Joan Arbor the personal power to make choices that were for herself.

The Arbors also imbued in their children a love of learning that was independent of the dominant educational discourse(s). This provided them with the ability to critique every aspect of the educational system because they kept their mental autonomy. Arbor's critical imagination, nurtured within a family discourse on Blackness and womanhood, centred her as a radical subject. Karen Brodkin Sacks states: "I had a strong hunch that women learned the values and skills to resist oppression at work from their families" (88). What makes Arbor a radical subject is her ability to be conscious or aware of where her activism skills originate.

Radical subject

In further exploring the rich and complicated dynamics of Joan Arbor's childhood, I discovered that the sexual abuse of Arbor and her sister affected her relationship with her mother. She elaborates below:

Her relationship to me was—if there is no barrier between us, if he did something to me I would tell. And what was wild was that he did molest me and I did tell her but I told her in my 20s. Which freaked her out, because her idea was that I would tell her as a little kid. She was enraged when I told her that. So, she had a lot of stuff around being married, taking responsibility for a man she couldn't control, and then being blamed for somebody else's behaviour. So she didn't give me analysis and said this is feminism. She just said make sure you take care of your own business, emotionally, physically, whatever.

Arbor's mother had imbued in her daughter a strong sense of self and independent spirit. Her mother also tried to save Arbor from her sexually abusive father by developing a close connection with her daughter. Although she failed, Arbor's mother did provide her with a strong connection to women and the ability to take control of her life. Arbor's mother gave her two important counter-discourses, a discourse on freedom and a discourse on feminism. Although Arbor's mother had given up her life to her husband, she gave Joan Arbor the personal power to make choices that were for herself. For Joan Arbor, the discourse on feminism came from a lived experience that was both horrific and joyful. The sexual abuse by her father and the domination of her brothers over herself and her mother gave her a critical concept of male power and patriarchy. However, she also was privy to the warmth and power of the bond that exists amongst Black women and later sought to recreate it in all facets of her life.

The interplay of Joan Arbor's race and gender was also an important development in her emergence as a radical subject. This is illustrated in her response to the question "How did being sexually molested by your father affect you as an activist?"

In a lot of ways. I've never had a male boss, you know what I mean. The only way I've ever worked with men is when my employee is underneath me or as consultants, or in an environment where I have as much power as them—and which I could leave if I elected to. So I have never been directly under the control of a man in any of my working environments. It also translated into me seeing it all connected—from the civil rights for Blacks to the conflicts around women's issues to the issues around labour.... So I never saw them as separate. I saw them as integrated because of how strongly and powerfully they were affecting my life.

There were many factors that contributed to Joan Arbor's ability to gain her activist voice. Her highly structured upbringing gave her counter-discourses on race, gender, education, and political action. However, at the time of her coming of age, Joan Arbor also could tap into the revolutionary discourse(s) that was coming out of the many social movements of the 1960s in the United States. Her social location was also affected by the geography of her birth and upbringing which gave her a certain ease about conflict, pain, and reconciliation. Apart from Arbor's experiences of these revolutionary movements we also see how historical events have legacies that exist "outside" of the mainstream discourse of their meaning. All these experiences affected Arbor's work as an activist.

In the early 1980s, Joan Arbor's first real job as an activist was to create a project that would provide services for lesbians of colour. Acquiring funding from the state of

California proved difficult because government officials did not believe that there were women of colour who were lesbians. However, Arbor found the conflict among women of colour, Blacks, lesbians, and white women even more challenging.

> *I would say that I didn't feel in jeopardy from being an activist until I was 30, and I designed a project for Latina lesbians.... And what I watched was the gay and lesbian community backing off because they saw it as the gay and lesbian white community. I watched as the Black community backed off because they said like hey, this is not our issue, and I watched as white women backed off because they said its not about all women. And it was a mind-blowing experience for me, because the Black women in the Black organization were particularly frightened of this program. Not only the people who would receive it but the people who would work in it. And I started standing alone and that politicized me in a way that nothing else has politicized me in my life!*

Although issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation were integrated for Arbor in practice and theory, for members of those groups involved in the project, coalition-building on a unitary political agenda created conflict and division. In addition, it served elements of those communities as well as the dominant society to keep those communities divided. Arbor was "political" and dangerous because she combined them on a personal and political level.

Arbor's family experiences and multiple counter-discourses that she had access to primed her for the moment she would stand alone. As Joan Arbor states, she was "structured" to be an activist, her development as an activist subject is an ongoing process. Her work and school experiences were the catalysts for her emergence as a Black woman activist. However, her activist standpoint was realized by the jeopardy Arbor found herself in by creating an explosive feminist program which combined gender, race, class, and sexual orientation into a unitary project. As stated earlier, a radical Black subject that holds a decolonized mind is seen as dangerous to the state, particularly when that subject challenges power relations.

Although Arbor's project gave voice to an invisible group, women of colour lesbians, left out of the discourse on gays and lesbians which was seen as white, they receded from taking responsibility for the project. Arbor's task of making them visible involved creating a counter-discourse that combined several identities together. However, this counter-discourse was feared not only by the state but by all the women involved because of issues of "difference" and power sharing. Ultimately, these issues made the limits of coalition-building evident to Joan Arbor.

Conclusion

Joan Arbor, as radical subject, was constructed out of a counter-discourse created by her family, community, and lived experiences. Arbor's self-definition was a learning task that was supervised and devised by her family, particularly her mother. The development of Arbor's radical identity was developed from the notion of Black motherhood and women mentorship that gave her a political voice. The powerful experience of her first activist job placed her in personal and professional jeopardy. It is not surprising that Arbor found that there was a limit to coalition-building. However, her own self-defining voice gave her the agency to complete the project successfully. Nonetheless, it does point to the conclusion that there is no unitary feminist subject. Joan Arbor's radical subjectivity cannot be explored through the concept of "other" or "difference," but is elucidated by an exploration of counter-discourses on Blackness, and womanhood.

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[1]This term has not been interrogated by feminists as an exclusionary reference. Normally it does not include the contributions of Natives, Blacks, and people of colour as part of the construction. For the purpose of this paper, western will be assumed to mean the exclusion of Black women.

[2]Racial uplift has been defined by most black scholars as the liberation of the Black race from oppression and, the advancement politically, economically, and socially within the North American social apparatus. For a recent study from a Canadian perspective on this term, see Henry.

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