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## **Black Feminist Methods of Activism are the Tool for Global Social Justice and Peace.**

**Abstract:** We use the method of conversation as a tool of living activist struggles to end social injustice. We draw on Black feminism to create an intersectionality of diverse activist voices across time and space. We insist on an intersectional acuity to analyse Global alienation, subjugation and exploitation. We use examples from activist contexts such as the Trade Union and Rape Crisis movements. Our conversation speaks of the tensions and risks of solidarity and organizing across difference. We use Gramsci's idea of the 'interregnum' to look at the in-between space of protest and transformation. We argue that the 'interregnum' is an opportunity to build solidarity for Global justice. In the context of intersectional racism, we ask, can the racial grief of Black women speak? We like Lorde's idea that 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Lorde, 1988: 332). We argue that the relationship of Black feminism to oppression, constitutes its revolutionary potential, and this distinguishes Black feminist activist methodologies from other methodologies as the tool for Global social justice and peace.

**Key words:** Black feminism; interregnum; alienation; intersectionality; solidarity; Global; Trade Unions; Rape Crisis

### **Introduction**

Our examination of activist struggles to end social injustice was born out of and is structured in the form of a conversation. The methodology of conversation has its foundations within the Black feminist idea of 'the transformation of silence into language and action' (Lorde, 1977a). We come to this conversation with over eighty years of combined activist experience, which have been sustained by, and continue to rely on our conversations (real and imaginary) with activists across time and space. Our imaginary conversations are a response to our longing to be in communion with activists from the past; all those, countless times, we have yearned to

have the likes of Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective at the kitchen table or standing side by side on the picket line! Rarely a day passes without us being in communication with the documented struggles of Black feminist, activists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, Claudia Jones, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Sojourner Truth (to name but a few). In times of isolation and exhaustion they are our comrades. In tough times, when there doesn't seem to be a road map that fits with the destination of social justice for all, we find that being in conversation with the documented cartography of anti-capitalist Black feminist activists is a theoretical, political and methodological practice of linkage (Nayak, 2017; 2019).

In an effort to demonstrate how our/ your, activism can be both nourished and challenged by being in dialogue with activist struggles across historical, geographical and disciplinary borders; we offer an experimental pedagogical intervention, which constructs an imaginary conversation between activists across a temporal and spatial spectrum that juxtaposes a range of visions, standpoints and theoretical approaches. This 'breaking bread' (hooks and West, 1991) with activist struggles, is a method of demonstrating the relevance and translation of activist's work in Global and historical contexts. This imaginary conversation straddles the fictional and non-fictional to disrupt the distinction between the imaginary and the real; in the sense that the actual words of the scholars cited are juxtaposed within a fictional frame in order to confront non-fictional activist struggles. In our experience of activism, imagination has a vital function in the refusal of the constraints of received ideas. Imagination is a precursor to transformation. We use Gramsci's idea of the 'interregnum' to look at the 'in-between space' of protest and transformation. We pick up on Gramsci's warning that in the space where 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born . . . a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (Gramsci, 1971:276). We argue that the 'interregnum' is an opportunity to build solidarity for Global justice. Thus, we offer this imaginary conversation as a deliberate transgression of fixed, ideological borders. Borders, of all kinds, be they material,

ideological, geographical, historical and emotional, function to create fragmentation and fear. Borders are detrimental to social justice. The deconstruction and refusal of borders is the struggle of activism for liberation. In terms of our resistance of borders, our methodological approach of this imaginary conversation refuses the, 'historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel' (Lorde, 1980:117).

### **Introducing Ourselves as Activists**

Outlining our personal activist journey and positionality enables us to think about what methods and goals bind us and separate us as activists.

Suryia Nayak - I describe myself an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial-imperialist Black feminist activist; it's my primary purpose in life and constitutes the fabric of my day to day living in how I think and act. For over 35 years my activism from the local to the Global includes: feminist grass-roots movements such as Rape Crisis, and Women's Aid; Asian Women's Refuges; work with asylum seekers and refugees; the Trade Union; and numerous applications of education as liberation to raise consciousness about the psychological impact of oppressive social constructions.

Chris Sheehy - My main vehicle for transformation has been Trade Union activism. I was recruited into Trade Unions, over forty years ago, when as a white working-class woman, living and employed in Liverpool, Trade Unions were accessible collective organisations. Trade Union solidarity, was relevant, a source of pride, and an antidote to my individual feelings of frustration, alienation and the shame of poverty. Feeling one belongs, that one can, or should enter the Trade Union movement, and be confident that Trade Unions represent the working class in the broadest sense, fighting to eliminate the hardships and injustice in working class lives, was not, and still is not yet the experience of all. I recall Jimmy Reid (1972), a Glasgow Ship worker and Trade Unionist, speaking about alienation,

and for me it resonated. I describe myself as an anti-racist, anti-capitalist, Trade Union Feminist. Intersectional racism is alienating. White activists need to examine ourselves and acknowledge and address our alienating structures, methods and behaviours. Black Feminist theory, including intersectionality fulfils a Trade Union and working class, labour movement requirement; it offers a conceptual and reflexive framework for workers' socio-political and economic rights, within a Globalised world. By definition intersectionality is inclusive, and has the potential to imagine and inform, collective action, solidarity, and radical change. The traditional model of Trade Unions serving factories, docks and mass worker settings for semiskilled and skilled, white male workers, is outdated (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Holgate, et. al., 2006; Kirton and Healy, 2013; Rubery and Fagan, 1996).The Global economy (Moghadam, et. al., 2011); increasing workplace diversity; the precariat; and, since 2013 increased numerical dominance of women and their intersections, are features of the current UK Trade Union movement (TUC, 2013).

### **Reflecting on Our Process**

Sharing and reading the words of activists out loud to each other has been our habit for over two decades, of knowing each other. Drawing on our previous experience of using the tool of 'conversation' (Nayak and Sheehy, 2018) we worked together, jointly choosing and negotiating the quotes and their position to construct this conversation. We remained in continual dialogue before, during and after creating this conversational piece. However, working across our positional subjective differences, in terms of race and different contexts of activism was complex. We had heated, painful and tearful exchanges about what voices and themes and were foregrounded. The process brought us into close proximity to the inevitable interdependent losses of intersectional racism. At the same time the process enabled a rigorous, honest sharing of our joint and separate activist struggles and

commitment to ending social injustice. In Lorde's words, our experience of creating this conversation 'formed a bridge between [us] which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between [us], and lessens the threat of [our] differences' (Lorde, 1978: 56). We agreed that the section of the conversation on sustaining hope, energy, love and compassion through times of exhaustion and despair would be constructed using only Black women's voices. In this section, Black women's self-care in the context of intersectional racism is foregrounded. The conversation that follows intersects testimonies of struggle as a methodology, which activists can adopt as a form of Global historical solidarity of activism to end social injustice.

### **Strategies, Contexts and Political Accountability**

**Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward:** "the chief question to be examined must inevitably be the relationship between what the protestors do, the context in which they do it, and the varying responses of the state" (Fox Piven and Cloward, 1979: xx)

**Suryia Nayak:** In my experience, the context and responses of the establishment become dislocated from the thinking and shaping of our activist actions. Consequently, too often, the constraints on our activist actions and outcomes become internalized; this fuels burn-out, reinforces feelings of failure and risks cessation. The relationship between the establishment and what we do as activists is complicated by the inherent tension that it is the establishment that we are both dependent upon and fighting against. Context includes our personal domestic responsibilities like paying bills, raising our children, being unwell and generally staving off pressures on multiple fronts. Context also includes prevailing social structures such as, patriarchy, racism and capitalism. The constraining dynamics between, what we do, context, and the responses we receive, must be explicit in evaluating all of our activist work.

Recriminations, fragmentation and exhaustion must be re-positioned from ourselves to the source of the problem, namely context and establishment responses.

**Angela Davis:** “In the heat of our pursuit of fundamental human rights, black people have been continually cautioned to be patient. We are advised that as long as we remain faithful to the *existing* democratic order, the glorious moment will eventually arrive when we will come into our own as full-fledged human beings. But having been taught by bitter experience, we know that there is a glaring incongruity between democracy and the capitalist economy which is the source of our ills.” (Davis, 1971:39, emphasis in original)

**Chris Sheehy:** The incongruity is that the establishment uses all manner of force when the oppressed lose their ‘patience’ and respond in the same vein. A meagre amount, if any, commitment is given to interrogating injustice.

The activist refuses to be indifferent to the acts and alienating consequences of structural oppression. The activist is hungry to challenge the words and actions of the powerful. In addition to offering individual support, proportionate to loss, and context, the activist, imagines social transformation, and organises using ideological persuasion, negotiation, advocacy, protest, education, and militancy, to achieve change (Sewell, 2003; Schock, 2015).

**June Jordan:** “Nevertheless, people lose their jobs or their lives and still the reaction is cooperative. We try to speak clearly and to spare the feelings of the listener. We shave and shower and put on a clean shirt for the meeting. We volunteer to make phone calls, or coffee, or submit to the outcome of a vote about what shall I do. I have been raped: Who will speak for me? What are the bylaws? The courtesies of order, of ruly forms pursued from a heart of rage or terror or grief defame the truth of every human crisis. And that, indeed, is the plan: To defuse and to deform the motivating truth of critical response to pain” (Jordan, 1981: 178)

**Suryia Nayak:** One of the earliest messages given me in ending violence against women and girl campaigns and services, was, that our refusal as women of colour to remain silent goes against every message, strategy and plan this oppressive world has for us. We are not meant to realise our power to resist and transform. We are swimming against the tide. It is little wonder that the truth of women's pain is defused, defamed and deformed – the function of which is to shut us up. In the 2012 'Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory' gathering in Manchester, Black women asked why people could not hear what they were saying, 'Do I need to be more articulate? Is it the words I am using? How can I say it clearer? How do I make it more accessible? Kimberlé Crenshaw replied, 'the problem is not a matter of how your message is transmitted, the problem is a refusal of the message.' The point is, re-position the problem!

I am reminded of the tension between talking about what needs to be done and actually doing what needs to be done! Of course, strategies, policies and mechanisms of accountability and quality assurance are necessities, particularly in a commissioned funding economy. In my experience within Rape Crisis centres, there must be vigilance around the balance between holding onto non-hierarchical Black feminist collective working practices and the requirement to construct governance structures that fit with the likes of the Charity Commission and funding bodies. In order to sustain ourselves, each other and our activism, the 'motivating truth of critical response to pain' must shape everything we do and say. This keeps the relationship between what we do, contexts in which we do it, and the responses we receive, explicit; this requires a level of conscious rigorous consistency and discipline of thinking. I argue for '[p]utting a hypervigilant anti-racist remembering to work' (Nayak, 2017: 205). I have found that having Black feminist texts like Lorde's 'Sister Outsider' (1984) and the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) present and referred to at activist meetings, gatherings and discussions, function as invaluable orientating touch-stones.



**Chris Sheehy:** Revisiting our own and others' past activism is essential; not a sentimental melancholic missing to longingly retire to past familiar struggles for reminiscence sake. Revisiting activist struggles across a temporal spectrum is for reflexive scrutiny, to identify the elements of the current crisis. This historical comparative method reveals what has been achieved and what still has to be done. Scrutiny has to enable an intersectional acuity that goes beyond a single issue frame: a Black feminist intersectional lens (Kanneh, 1998).

**Patricia Hill Collins:** "What criteria, if any, can be applied to ideas to determine whether they are in fact Black and feminist?" (Hill Collins, 2000:18)

**Suryia Nayak:** Black feminist ideas are constituted of the dialectic and the dialogical; the dialectic is that Black feminist concepts are born out of Black women's intersectional experiences of racist oppression, in order to confront that very same intersectional racist oppression. The dialogical is that Black feminist ideas are born out of a continual dialogue with struggles for intersectional anti-racist social justice – and this is what sets Black feminist methodologies of activism apart from other methodologies.

### **Solidarity: Organizing Across Difference**

**Chris Sheehy:** History is a 'moment' in time. This 'moment' is characterised by crisis: lack of solidarity across differences; inability to organise due to the perceived enormity of the task; struggling conceptually; and the establishment failing the poorest and powerless (Fanon, 2008; Jones, 2018; Sassoon, 2014).

Building inclusive, active coalitions is urgently required. Despite the crisis, the losses, the failed attempts, dialogue across difference must continue. I am conscious of having this dialogue with Black women, me a white woman, each living a different experience, and

communicating with one another about oppression, power, vulnerability, and imagining change about what is to be done, separately, and in alliance, and what we can win!.

**Barbara Smith:** “The only way that we can win - and before winning, the only way we can survive is by working with each other, and not seeing each other as enemies” (Taylor, 2017: 64)

**Chris Sheehy:** You imagine the gains of struggle across difference when taking a socialist stance. ‘Not seeing each other as enemies’, does not negate differences, deny apprehensions and discord, or suspend healthy scepticism. Black Trade Unionists positively use models of separate organising, separate reflective spaces, to advise specific strategies for specific intersectional oppressions.

**Claudia Jones:** “We can accelerate the militancy of Negro women to the degree with which we demonstrate that the economic, political and social demands of Negro when are not just ordinary demands, but special demands flowing from special discrimination facing Negro women as women, as workers, and as Negroes ... Yes, and it means that a struggle for social equality of Negro women must be boldly fought in every sphere of relations between men and women so that the door of Party membership doesn't become a revolving door because of our failure to conduct the struggle” (Boyce-Davies, 2008: 29)

**Chris Sheehy:** My own activism included casework, organising, and supporting Black Trade Unionists’ grievances concerning intersections of racism, which disproportionately also denied the professional recognition our Black members deserved. Black members spoke about racism and how their voices were ignored, their research marginalised, their right to promotion ignored, and their Black Feminist scholarship attacked. Black members endured a shortage of Black representatives available as caseworkers, when it was important to have access to experienced skilled Black representatives who recognised the specificity of racism.

I viewed equality cases as structural oppression, and was simultaneously tenacious to ensure that individual equality cases had the strength of our union to overcome the toughest resistance, made their way on to the collective bargaining table, and were escalated and prioritised within the national Union. We represented all cases from Black members to ensure the best possible advice and strongest action. Our Black members' cases became collective campaigns, locally, regionally, and nationally; and became Union legal priorities. My experience of working on cases of intersectional racism is that they should receive expert legal advice as early as possible, to develop case law in this area. This would then constitute an intersectional strategic approach, which simultaneously addresses racism, identity and context. An intersection of strategic approaches to intersectional racism, including, from the local and national to the global, would build a context of remedy; thereby serving the need of the individual bringing the case and future collective protection for the broader membership to import a preventative function, provoking change in all workplaces. To date, I have not attended one formal employee complaint where an intersectional lens was suggested, other than when I forced the issue. Without the entirety of the workplace having proper access and ongoing inclusion, a Trade Union is lost. My learning is, when a member is assisted and welcomed; when representations of the diversity of membership is publicised; when word of mouth recommendations testify that equality is fought for vociferously; this begins to assist in building hard won solidarity across intersectional differences.

Activism includes the headache of resourcing; logistics; logistical arguments; long hours; mental and physical exhaustion; lack of sleep; witnessing hostility; prematurely ending of action; bureaucratic controls; and vicarious trauma. In my experience, activism across difference is complex to organise but vital for building solidarity.

**Suryia Nayak:** Speaking as a woman of colour, for whom Trade Union advocacy and support was instrumental in confronting racism, I ask, can the racial grief of Black women

speak? The difference between mourning and melancholia is that mourning is a grief that can be gotten over. In contrast, melancholia is a grief that cannot be gotten over. I believe that, as long as there is racism, there is no getting over the grief racism causes. So, in this racist world, I am in racial melancholia. The multiple interconnected losses of racism are far reaching. My racial melancholia, shaped by daily micro-aggressions of intersectional racism, and the specificity of formally confronting racism through available institutional processes, include: finding out, who is there for me/us and who is not; finding out, what is bearable in terms of being knocked down, disappointed and exhausted and being able to rise up again; and, finding out, how easily my self-confidence can take a bashing. Mindful that it is not the job of Black people to educate white people about racism, I was conscious of the delicate balance of exposing my levels of vulnerability and teaching white Trade Union activists about the intimate details of the damaging psychological impact of intersectional racism.

**The Combahee River Collective:** “As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak and demand accountability on this issue” (The Combahee River Collective, 1977: 270).

**Suryia Nayak:** In my experience, this was and continues to be an extra task for Black Trade Union members in relation to white Trade Union representatives, on whom I was reliant for their skills of negotiation and advocacy; a task, white Trade Union members, and white people generally, don’t confront. Furthermore, I recognize that working with cases of racism isn’t easy for anti-racist white Trade Union representatives, who have the challenge of not

retreating into defensive responses, but have to hold the emotional and material pain of the issues of racism they are working with for Black members.

**Barbara Smith:** “There are ethical principles that you can see in any significant political intervention in history. You will see - one of the things that you should see in positive movements move forward toward justice – not toward power - because there are many interventions that were just about the accrual of power, where you didn’t really have that mentality and that principle of “We must all be in this together.” But if it’s a forward movement towards justice, you will see that people with different backgrounds and different places in a social structure actually at times come together” (Taylor, 2017: 64-65)

**Suryia Nayak:** I believe that showing and articulating my vulnerability due to my experiences of intersectional racism, strengthened the quality of my interactions with the white Trade Unionist who was helping me, which in turn strengthened the quality of how we were able to represent my grievances. Once I batted away insidious creeping suspicion that predominantly white Trade Unions use cases of racism, including my own, for the status, profile and power-base of the Trade Union movement, I do believe that we had solidarity across our differences in a united demand for justice.

**Audre Lorde:** “Our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change . . . The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us . . . the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house [ ] Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from

ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival” (Lorde, 1980: 123)

### **The Interregnum**

**Antonio Gramsci:** “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1971: 276)

**Chris Sheehy:** I understand the term ‘interregnum’ to mean, a gap, a pause, an ‘in between’ position, loss of confidence in the old. The conditions of an ‘interregnum’ are consistent with an established power dying, not dead, and hence ‘crisis’ and fracture. The transformation of social, political, economic relations is yet to be initiated, plans for transformation will meet resistance, and repressive reaction before the old order replaced.

**Suryia Nayak:** Taking the concept of the ‘interregnum’ into the lived experience of activism, we must think about an ‘interregnum’ functioning intersectionally on a material, structural, psychological, macro and micro level. The importance of placing the idea of an ‘interregnum’ under the lens of intersectionality, is that inhabiting an ‘interregnum’ space is inevitably a multidimensional context. In this intersectional frame, the sum of the variables is greater than the sum of the material (resources), plus the structural (institutional/organizational apparatus), plus the psychic (the emotional toll), and these operate simultaneously on a macro (national and international) and micro (daily interactions) dimension; where the macro level is reproduced on a micro level. The lens of intersectionality, offers high resolution pictures of the multifaceted nuances of the difficulties felt in a borderland space, where ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’. This level of scrutiny is vital for building strategies to survive and

transcend the 'interregnum' borderlands. For example, in the early 1990s, I worked to establish a Black women's Rape crisis service in a predominately white women's service. Drawing on the legacy of Black feminism with the support of a Black feminist activist called Andrea Tara-Chand, I had an objective, yet to be 'born', and sure enough, just as Gramsci warned 'in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear[ed]' (Gramsci, 1971: 276). On a macro organizational level, morbid symptoms were manifest in the membership and structure of this Rape Crisis collective. Within months of designing and delivering a Black feminist Rape Crisis volunteer training course, one by one, for their own legitimate reasons, the existing white women volunteers and paid workers of this established Rape Crisis service left. In addition, the new Black women members questioned the viability of the existing collective structure in regards to transparency of power and responsibility.

I hung onto the belief that these 'morbid symptoms' were not a measure of the legitimacy or value of the objective, methodology and outcome of creating a Black women's Rape Crisis service. As Black women, the internalised 'injurious interpellations' (Butler, 1997:104) of racism can too quickly become equated with the morbid symptoms of being in the in-between space of giving birth to a new way of doing things. It is no coincidence that the final stages of labour, before giving birth, is called the 'transition' phase; contractions are intense and the woman's body makes the shift, from opening the cervix, to the beginning of the baby's descent. It is a painful, exhausting stage, typified by physical symptoms of shaking, nausea and vomiting, interwoven with feeling overwhelmed.

On a micro level, such was the power of this Black feminist Rape Crisis consciousness raising process, that the Black women on the course, including Andrea and myself, experienced our own personal, psychological 'interregnum' and our own particular 'variety of morbid symptoms'. For example, we all started to question, the power dynamics in our marriages and personal relationships; our silences; the inadequacy of language to express our

sensuality and sexuality; the putting up with aspects of our lives that went beyond compromises; and our internalised racist hatred and harm of self and each other. On a collective and personal level, this was/is not an easy questioning – hence the ‘morbid’. The training created a space of thinking and feeling as Black women together, where old, established patterns of thinking and feeling were fading; for example, the equation of ‘vulnerability as weakness’ and the yet to be born, equation of ‘vulnerability as strength’. Through deep connection with the activism of Black feminist theory, we gained increasing confidence in questioning the ‘cannot’ in our lives and ultimately Gramsci’s idea that ‘the new cannot be born’.

**Antonio Gramsci:** “The question I ask is ‘[w]ill the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this way, necessarily be resolved in favour of a restoration of the old?’” (Gramsci, 1971:276)

**Chris Sheehy:** To avoid ‘a restoration of the old’, we use this interregnum to build something solid, to struggle for socio-economic and political justice, Globally. Our songs and beliefs are hopeful, but, in truth, there isn’t the solidarity that is anywhere near what is required.

**Dan Gallin:** “Comrades: The European labour movement is today the target of an onslaught not experienced since the 1930s. This is not a passing phase. There will not be a return to what was considered normal social relations in the thirty years after the war. The project of contemporary capitalism is the destruction of the labour movement, in Europe in North America and eventually everywhere else. Their project is the reorganization of world society without organized labour. What they want is a society of slaves.” (Gallin, 2014:258)

**Chris Sheehy:** We undermine fellow workers across the world, we buy cheap disposable clothing, made in unsafe sweat shops, where workers receive barely enough to exist, then we



discard the same products, our planet is further threatened. As a Health and Safety Rep, recalling dialogue with comrades seeking justice since Bhopal, reminds us, we fail to organise around workers safety Globally. Our comrades, in the sweat shops are driven harder, and we are further alienated from one another. We, as workers witness other workers and their communities' suffer for profit. Deregulated Corporate production of antibiotics, clothing and chemicals, means that safety is compromised to secure profit. The premises go on fire, exits are not visible, cheap goods are piled high and block exits, workers die, families and communities are devastated, the planet suffers, we all suffer further alienation, and solidarity moves further from our grasp.

**Angela Davis:** “But having been taught by bitter experience, we know that there is a glaring incongruity between democracy and capitalist economy, which is the source of our ills . . . The people do not exercise decisive control over the determining factors of their lives. Official assertions that meaningful dissent is always welcome, provided it falls within boundaries of legality, are frequently a smokescreen obscuring the invitation to acquiesce in oppression” (Davis, 1971:39)

**Suryia Nayak:** The ‘smokescreen’ is not just a mechanism of the oppressor; smokescreens are alive within spaces of activism. It brings to mind Bhabha’s’ idea of ‘sly civility’ (1994: 93-102), whereby, well intentioned mission statements, posters on walls, books on shelves and fair trade products in kitchens, constitute smokescreens that obscure silent ambivalence towards the giving up of privilege. In my experience of feminist collective working, where anti-hierarchical structures are a defiance of patriarchy, the ‘invitation to acquiesce in oppression’ (Davis, 1971:39) is a tricky ‘smokescreen’, because it functions under the guise of feminist equality. However, the division of labour: who washes up; empties bins;

photocopies; and lifts boxes, in contrast to, who chairs meetings; who takes and is given space to have voice; and who represents the organization externally, replicate unequal relationships of power and appropriation that collective working is meant to address. In short, activist or not, we are all implicated, because oppressive social structures create oppressive psychic structures (Nayak, 2015:1, 51; Oliver, 2001:34).

**Audre Lorde:** “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only of the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships” (Lorde, 1980: 123).

**Suryia Nayak:** It is incumbent upon activists to trace the ‘oppressor within each of us, in every encounter, in every conversation, in every meeting and decision making process we find ourselves in. On a practical level, it is the habit of asking the question of ‘how are we/you experiencing power in this meeting/encounter/space?’; ‘How are we/you experiencing difference in this meeting/encounter/space?’; ‘How are we/you experiencing appropriation or colonization of voice, position and labour in this meeting/encounter/space?’

## **Risks**

**Chris Sheehy:** From the Match Girls in 1888; the Dagenham women in 1968; the Grunwick Strike in 1978; and the hundredth Anniversary of Maternity Rights for Working Women in 2019, struggles in the work-place, have never been a stranger to women, and girls, and neither has activism.

The Global reality is that there is a feminisation of labour, and poverty; an increase of women involved in workplace organising; and in the UK women and their intersections are

more likely to be in a Trade Union than are men. Trade Unions, Union women, Union Feminists and their intersections, have fought, are still fighting for and have delivered partly for women on pay; equal pay; sex discrimination; health; safety and maternity rights; the eight hour day; the weekend; migrant worker pay; and trafficking and modern slavery. Globalisation impacts upon Trade Unions; other International labour organisations and forces change; this both offers challenges and opportunities, recognising that the movement will not attract or retain activists whose interests are not driven forward in a purposive way.

As a Trade Union Branch leader, I was the mouth piece, the delegate, not the decision maker, when delivering formal notice of strike action. I publicly led on actions: organising picket lines; campaigns of non-compliance; refusing changes to working practices; speaking out on cases of inequality; responding to the press; taking legal action. I was the one in a large room containing the most powerful individuals in the organization, and alone had to deliver the word 'No!' Tasks, which evoke strong feelings of risk and responsibility.

I remember the Manchester march of 2013, to where the Conservative Conference was being held, with in excess of 50,000 people defending the NHS. At the conference centre we met a battalion of armed police, with shields, guns, batons, helicopters circling above, and large dogs, barking, straining to get free. The press concentrated upon a small group they'd apparently heard shouting abuse. The right to demonstrate; to protest; to speak out, has been constantly under attack throughout leftist history. I remember, the 1984 Miners' Strike: the attempt to starve and make homeless those communities; the news of what happened at Orgreave, staring in disbelief at the images of horses and baton charges. I remember Hillsborough 1989, staffing the public help line, the families' quarter of a century battle for justice and truth for the 96. I remember the TUC, 'March for an Alternative' in 2011, to end austerity; I remember, the anti-fascist marches in London in 1993, witnessing riot gear and batons. Activists were vilified, blamed, and families wait for justice, some die waiting.

Evidence revealed the reactions of the British establishment, the falsifications and the cover ups (Jones, 2018). The intersectional lens, when used in the analysis of protest, makes it clear that where there are protestors, re-classified as the enemy and view peaceful dissent as a threat, then the mix can be venomous. This does not stop us; resistance is our privilege and sustains us.

**Toni Cade Bambara:** “It may be lonely. Certainly painful. It’ll take time. We’ve got time. That of course is an unpopular utterance these days. Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We’d better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships Mouth don’t win the war. It don’t even win the people. Neither does haste, urgency and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement [ ] if your house ain’t in order, you ain’t in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain’t out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings with your mate is shit. Ain’t no such animal as an instant guerrilla.” (Cade Bambara, 1969:134 – 135)

**Sustaining hope, energy, love and compassion through times of exhaustion and despair.**

**bell hooks:** “There is a quality of heartbrokenness in many of our lives.” (hooks, 1993:65)

**Suryia Nayak:** My mother tells me that from around 9 months old, I insisted on walking everywhere refusing to go into my pram. This set the scene for my life; characterised by a fierce independence and insistence of standing on my own two feet. For decades, I believed that survival meant working more, harder and faster; I equated sitting still with being a sitting target. In this equation, exhaustion was a warning sign, not to stop, but to keep going. Rest equalled danger. In this equation, the yardstick of my worth and legitimacy was my capacity to serve others. Burnout, equated with failure, was not an option! I have realise that, for

years, my work as an activist, for example, within organizations to end violence against women and girls functioned as a, perversely legitimate, cover for lack of care of myself, albeit in the service of empowering other women to care for self.

**Aurde Lorde:** “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988: 332; Ahmed, 2014)

**Suryia Nayak:** The idea and habit of caring for myself/ourselves is a double bind in a world where, the discourse of self-care is a multi-billion pound industry, whilst Black women continue to be made ill by their intersectional experiences of racism. Understanding the difference between self-indulgence and self-preservation takes sustained reworking of my/our internalized racist messages of what we are. I currently have a raging tooth infection and my antibiotic prescription instructions state, ‘take one tablet three times a day. Similarly, I have formed the habit of taking a daily dose of Black feminist thinking to counter the infection of intersectional racism; listening to Black women’s poetry or song or reading Black women’s writing. I know, because I have monitored it, that I get ill from the symptoms of intersectional racism if I stay too long away from Black feminism. Activist self-care resources include, *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977); *Feminist Manifestos: A Global Reader* (Weiss, 2018); *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building* (Smith, 2014); *Civil Wars* (Jordan, 1981); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983); and *The Interference Archive* (2019).

**Opal Palmer Adisa:** “Why we walk like we’ve got bricks in our bags and will slash and curse you at the drop of a hat/ its because stress is hemmed into our dresses, pressed into our hair, mixed into our perfume and painted on our fingers.” (hooks, 1993:61)

**Suryia Nayak:** The bricks in our bags and stress hemmed into our dresses represent the inevitable anger, and pain of multiple, simultaneous intersecting losses, in racist patriarchal capitalism. I have spent decades advocating for the breaking of silence. My activism to end violence against women and girls and work with asylum seekers and refugees has been constituted of and contingent upon the radical feminist action of ‘speak out’; naming the nameless dread. And, yet, I know too well that it is possible to break silence whilst keeping silent. Working in feminist collectives enabling women survivors of sexual violence to speak out is not a substitute for speaking my/our own hurts, or hurts in our daily encounters with each other as Black women.

**Audre Lorde:** “As if we have made a secret pact between ourselves not to speak, for the expression of that unexamined pain might be accompanied by other ancient and unexpressed hurtings embedded in the stored-up anger we have not expressed.” (Lorde, 1983: 171)

**bell hooks:** “Should we be surprised that a people whose bodies have been perpetually used, exploited, and objectified should now seek to turn flesh into armor?” (hooks, 1993:119)

**Suryia Nayak:** Reclaiming the metaphor of armour; breastplate, shield, chainmail and sword of love and compassion, which fits so neatly with the idea of a warrior woman in the battle for social justice, continues to be my life long journey. In this reclamation, vulnerability as strength is my protection.

**Audre Lorde:** “There are myths of self-protection that hold us separate from each other and breed harshness and cruelty where we most need softness and understanding

1. That courtesy or politeness requires our not noticing each other directly [ ];

2. That because we sometimes rise to each other's defense against outsiders, we do not need to look at devaluation and dismissal among ourselves [ ];

3. That perfection is possible, a correct expectation from ourselves and each other, and the only terms of acceptance, . . . . [ ] no matter how good you think you are you're still a Black woman, just like me" (Lorde, 1983,:168 – 169). "I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving. You have to learn to love yourself before you can love me or accept my loving. Knowing we are worthy of touch before we can reach out for each other. Not cover that sense of worthlessness with "I don't want you" or "it doesn't matter". . . And these are enormously difficult to accomplish in an environment that consistently encourages nonlover and cover-up, an environment that warns us to be quiet about our need of each other, by defining our dissatisfactions as unanswerable and our necessities as unobtainable." (Lorde, 1983:174-175)

## **Conclusion**

The methodology of conversation is an important tool for living activist struggles for liberation. However, because, 'we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals' (Lorde, 1980: 115), communication within activist struggles is a complex challenges of activism; it brings us up close and personal to the terror of interdependency that necessitates interrogating our privilege and power positions. In the context of activism, Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), points to: Who can speak? Who is heard, in what words and frame of reference? We have demonstrated 'that the methodology of activists in conversation has the potential to create an intersectionality of diverse voices; where the "intersectional experience is greater than the sum of" (Crenshaw, 1989:140) individual voices' (Nayak and Sheehy, 2018: 28). Our conversation 'real' (between ourselves in responses to activists across historical time and geographical space), and 'imaginary'

(summoning activists to our conversation based on their writings – with which this conversation would not have been possible); firstly demonstrates the power of breaking silence through speaking out, and secondly, demonstrates the power of documenting activist struggles. Black feminist practice, existence and availability of documented activist struggles points to the act of writing/recording as a form of activism itself, in contrast to the idea of writing as a luxury or separate from the taking of action for social justice. We are reminded of Lorde’s essay, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, which speaks ‘of poetry as a revelatory distillation of [ ] spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas’ (Lorde, 1977b: 37).. We agree with the Black feminist founding member of the Kitchen Table Press, Barbara Smith, that ‘writing is crucial to movement building’ (Smith, 2014: 139). We see writing as having the potential of legitimate activist action, just as marching on the streets or taking a call from a woman on a Rape Crisis helpline.

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