



Angela Robertson

11/6/2015

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LEC: Okay so today is November 6th. We're in Toronto. Friday, November 6th and we are meeting with Angela Robertson and we are so thrilled that you are here. We are really happy that you can do this with us. And we're going to talk with Angela about her long history as a feminist in radical black feminism. So the first thing we want to ask you Angela, is, tell us a bit about how you came to feminism.

AR: Ahan. I think for me talking about feminism is also about locating myself and my history—so, I came to Canada in '81—so, kind of the position of immigrant. But I grew up with a grandmother, because my mother came to Canada before, as part of the Caribbean Domestic Worker Scheme, which is a precursor to what we have now in Canada called the Live-in Caregiver Program and that program was one whereby, the state, as part of providing support to women in Canada to enable them to participate in the economy, is that the state basically created a program to buy the services of women elsewhere in the south, particularly the Caribbean, the English-speaking Caribbean, to come to be domestic workers. So my mother came in that. So that left me growing up with grandmothers, and particularly a grandmother who...naming names...Violet Harris, aka Aunt Kitty. So my aunt Kitty, I saw her working all her life and...cutting cane, cleaning schools, cooking in school cafeteria. And at an early age I recall going to those places, particularly the schools, when she cleaned in the evenings, to help her clean—so, have grown up seeing women working hard, and in labor—in hard labor. And knowing that my mother came in the context she did, when I came to Canada in '81 to join her, I also saw the nature of her work and heard from her, her experience as a woman in this country, coming through that particular program. The experiences that she had as a black woman and as a black woman in that particular location, as a worker.

CTM: How old were you when you came?

AR: So, I came at fourteen. So, that really informed I think, what then I didn't have language for as feminism, but had an appreciation for about women's labor, about the inequality and the indignities that racialized women and again, not having the language then, but having the language of black women face. But also how that also got compounded when you overlay issues of poverty and low-income earners. So, that was really what informed my early coming to an appreciation around feminism and/or an awareness around...an intense awareness around women's inequality. When I came here, soon thereafter, I kind of...as I said knocked heads with other like-minded immigrants and then later joined a group called the Black Women's Collective. So, just on the cusp of ending high school into university...and the Black Women's Collective was the place that gave me language around feminism and a feminist politic, for the values that I had but I didn't have a name to put to it.

CTM: And this was the late '80s?

AR: This was the late '80s. This was the mid-late '80s.

CTM: And were you involved in that, too?

LEC: Mm-hmm.

AR: So that was really the place that really anchored me around feminist activism and it was an activism that, through the Black Women's Collective that really was a place connecting all of the dots about who I am in the world. So, it connected the dots about blackness, about black women's place, about women's place, it connected the dots around immigration and around immigrant status.

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It was an organization that was doing what later we, you know...in terms of what...Crenshaw gave us the language of intersectionality. But we were doing that work because we were a group of women concerned around racism and police violence, because we saw the impact of that in our communities. We saw the impact of schemes like the Caribbean Domestic Worker Scheme and out of those kinds of organizing, we had efforts like Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to Stay, meaning if the labor of these women was valuable enough for the state to benefit from, those are women who should be entitled to this thing called citizenry in this place called Canada. So, it was that early place—

CTM: Do you think the collective was socialist? Was actively socialist?

AR: Yes. We had a thing called—

LEC: More than that.

CTM: Little more than that? Communist?

AR: Yes, because we had a thing called a constitution/manifesto.

LEC: Exactly.

CTM: Ahan! Okay...

AR: [Laughter] So, where we had a several page document that we called our constitution that really kind of laid out the terms of our engagement as women working together and our expectations of each other, but also was clear in articulating what are the things that were our values and what are the things that we, through our movement, was going to work for and against. So, we were clear about racism, patriarchy, colonization, hegemony. We were clear about issues of democracy—

LEC: And liberal feminism not working for us.

AR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I came to feminism with that group of women, in a lovely time for my life, which really I think, gave me lots of anchor.

CTM: Mm-hmm.

LEC: Yeah...tell us a bit about how you think your work as a feminist...and this is a lovely history to build off of this, how do you think that has impacted women in this city and this country? How would you say...what do you see that impact as? And I like how you speak in terms of a collectivity. It's you as a person we are speaking to now but we are speaking to a history.

AR: Yeah, because in coming to this conversation I thought there isn't...the work that I've done has been part of a movement, has been part of a collective process with other women, working for something different. So the things that I think we have...that I have been a part of with other women...and where my role and my work has contributed to that collective effort has been around what I call...three different ways. So, looking at structures...supporting women, women's work, women's place; looking at issues of what I call policy and documentation; and then the other piece for me is around everyday activism. So when I think about the issues around structure I think about the work that I've done in working with homeless and low income women, in an organization called Sistering that still continues to provide support to homeless and low-income women. And that piece of work and work like that became important and continues to be important, because it's about a space...creating space to provide tangible support to respond to gaps in the material conditions for women, and particularly homeless and low income women. So, part of the work that I think I have done has been about creating space so that homeless and low-income women can have basic needs met. So things as basic as shower facilities, laundry facilities, shelter, clothing, those basic things that I think even those of us in feminist

movements take for granted because we have those things to take on to do the struggle that we do. But there are women who don't have that to even be a participant in the feminist-activist project in the way that sometimes we think it should happen.

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The other piece of this structure work has been just also been an ally with sisters around violence against women movements, in ensuring that shelters, rape crisis centers, crisis hotlines are present and sustained to enable women who need to flee violence and who have experienced patriarchal violence to get the support that they need. The piece around policy and documentation was also another...you know, as much as I work in social services now, but my work didn't begin in social service. I think I began working with a group of feminists who were doing feminist publishing, when there was a thing called feminist publishing, and small press...and that was again, in the '80s. So I feel that some of the work that I was privileged to be a part of that came as a result of feminist activism in this country, was working at what was then called Women's Educational Press, Women's Press, at a time when Canadian feminist publishing was challenged by racialized women about not documenting, not creating space to document our lives. And so, I came to feminism and came to feminist publishing at a time when I could be an ally and be in feminist publishing to create those spaces and to support that kind of production. So during the time that I was at Women's Press, we published Linda Carty's work. We published Beth Brandt, Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, Carol Camper, Dionne Brand, Beth Brandt, Lee Maracle...so it was a time where Canadian feminist publishing was being challenged and I was privileged to be part of that process to...NourbeSe Philip, in terms of authors, poets—

LEC: And getting women of color work out there. There was no place else to get it out.

CTM: Yeah, because Kitchen Table had already folded by then.

AR: Yes, it was just at the time. So, Kitchen Table, Firebrand...was also around...just around that time. Kitchen Table had just folded and Firebrand was just taking up. So participated in that process and was also around at the time where feminist activism happened, so then we also got the creation of women's services, that was now funded by the state, which has its own challenges, yes? So, was at the place where we were kind of advocating for public resources to be invested in this thing called women's services. I think something happened in that project...in that we got those services, we got those funding, but then it came with what the state always prescribed...is the criteria. And then, I think things that started out of feminist activism, became co-opted and the activist pieces of it got lost, so some of the services that began out of feminist activism now became just "charity services", and not social change movements, and part of movement building. So that was one of the

pieces I think we still struggle with. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So the other piece that I think I've been a part of and continue to be a part of is you know what I call everyday activism, which is just being relentless in naming the places where women continue to experience inequality and the places where there is differential impact of that inequality on racialized women, indigenous women, low-income women, women with disabilities, women from LGBT communities. So just being I think...continuing to be part of those steady activist places...that's also about protest.

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Because I think I've not been around for a long time and then you realize that shit, I've been around for a long time. But I consider myself still young [laughter]...in the movement. But, long enough that I can now play a role as a mentor with other women...with younger women, to ensure that transformative agenda around social change continues and that women who are...young women who are doing that work are supported in doing that work...and that I see that as well as part of that everyday activism...because other than that then, it's like the work is done and we have done it and I think what we have seen is that the work isn't done because it morphs and changes and becomes a bit more pernicious, almost.

CTM: Yeah, because the state has become way more pernicious.

AR: And therefore there needs to be a continuing wave of women, continuing. So I see kind of that mentorship work as part of that everyday activism. To keep that wave continuing. Yeah, yeah.

CTM: And do you see generations coming along after you that are taking it up in some of the same radical ways?

AR: Yes, yes, yes, yes. So, the challenges...I think some of the things we face as challenges...and you know, unintended consequences, right? So, unintended consequence in that we advocated for public funding and public investment in building women's services to respond to women's inequality. We got that. Not to the degree that maybe we wanted, but we got that at some point. And, in fact what happened with the unintended consequence is that the state really co-opted our voice. The state co-opted our voice and then they began to prescribe what our activism and our advocacy should look like, which I think muted us. And we were then faced with the no-choice choice of do we mute our activist voice in order to continue to get sustained funding to provide the support for women who are low-income, who are fleeing violence, or do we kind of throw that off and then lose that base of support for those women? So I think we were caught in this bind place and in a way the state won.

LEC: ‘Cause that was a major struggle then, because the state neutralized the struggle.

AR: Yeah. Then also what happened...and here in Ontario...is we got a progressive government, provincial government, and a government that most of us social democrats were aligned with...in terms of they were aligned with many of our vision, in opposition. And then we got them as government and so we saw a number of feminists, myself included, hired in that government...which brings...you think it’s an opportunity to make change and to influence the state but, the state machinery doesn’t change that way...at least in my experience.

LEC: In capitalism, you’re right.

AR: And because the state machinery I think will always need protest.

CTM: Yeah. No, it has to be pushed all the time.

AR: It has to be pushed. And it doesn’t mean we don’t have allies on the inside. But we always need the push from the outside. And the number of the folks in the movement were now on the inside.

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So there wasn’t really a push from the outside. So I think we experienced a kind of a muting at that point.

LEC: That’s the power of neoliberalism, eh?

AR: Yes, yes.

CTM: Yeah, but it’s also a lot of what’s happened in Europe, right? With what they call the femocrats, which is a complete...

LEC: Incorporated.

CTM: Incorporation of feminist struggle into governmental structures.

LEC: And in liberal settings, because Ontario, Canada is one of the most liberal...

AR: So, I think we have that. The other thing that I think we have also had as a movement, as a struggle, as an issue...is we’ve lost a number of our sisters in the struggle to ill health, death, chronic illness, mental health and I think what it tells me is that...and you know bell hooks came to this when she did the book on love...I forget the title. But...that there is a piece of work that we were not mindful of around this thing that...you know we call self-care. The ethic of self-care as activists...is that

we didn't invest a lot in that...which meant that we were working relentlessly against the relentlessness of patriarchy and inequality.

CTM: And that, too, is a patriarchal model.

LEC: Yeah.

CTM: Completely.

AR: Exactly. Exactly.

CTM: So, we were reproducing that state model.

LEC: To the benefit of the state.

AR: To the benefit of the state! So the fact that a number of us have died, or the fact that a number of us are not well emotionally because of the grinding that happens in that struggle, also benefits that patriarchal project. So I think that one of the things that for me, as a movement, that we need to build into our activism is this ethic of self-care. I don't know what it looks like all the time but I know that it needs to be there.

LEC: A caring for each other and a caring for self.

AR: Yeah. Because the relentlessness of the project that we need to do means that we need to be equally relentless about this thing called self-care.

CTM: Maybe we need to think about practices. Collective practices.

LEC: Yeah, because all of us do it one on one, two on three, but we need to do it collectively.

AR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So those are some of the things that I think have been stumbling blocks for us.

LEC: That you would call serious challenges.

AR: That I would call serious challenges...I think the other challenge that we had...that we still have...is about again, privilege, and the privileging of voice. And the differential access to the benefits of feminist activism. And by that I mean when we fought for employment equity in this province, the fight for employment equity was led by largely, I would say, racialized voices. A large number of racialized feminists, as part of that project. When we got employment equity for the time that we did is what we saw was that it wasn't the voice...the benefits from that project was not reflected in terms of racialized women—is that in terms of racialized men, white women benefited from that project. So I think...I use that as an example, just

about the differential way in which the feminist project and the successes of the feminist project has not been equally shared and that I think continues to be a challenge because we still need to look at issues around class and voice.

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And I think wrestling the beast called class remains a piece that I think we...it's still unfinished business. Or it's business that requires continuing spotlight. And sometimes we get shy, about naming class and class privilege and how that shapes out our own benefits. In terms of, I think, where we are...what I think about what has been happening now, so in terms of my type of feminist activism in the '80s and what's happening now and back to I think an earlier comment about kind of...so, how does it look now...what's the hope? And I am quite hopeful. I am quite hopeful. I think—Black Lives Matter—the young folks who are leading Black Lives Matter are young feminists. They're a large number of young feminists. And maybe, for me, it's in the Ontario, Toronto context...it's a large number of young feminists who are leading that work...and who are like, back then in the Black Women's Collective, connecting the dots about women's labor, racism and police violence, poverty in neighborhoods that produce conditions that bring the state in conflict with black youths. So they're making those kinds of big connections. The other place that I see a feminist zeal is in the aboriginal...the indigenous communities...where the movements, and particularly in Canada around the murdered and missing indigenous women, is a large number of indigenous feminists and indigenous women who are speaking about indigenous women's inequality and the state's manufacturing of indigenous people's inequality and indigenous women's vulnerability, to violence that they've been relentless. They've just been relentless, and not shy, you know, in taking up space. So, makes me kind of hopeful...hopeful...hopeful...hopeful. And I think the...one could say is it still present, is it still here...you know, the 1%, the movement around looking at the economy and poor people's place in the global economy is again...there are a number of young feminists who are a part of that project. And environmental movement, I think it's there. I think it looks different than when I was in that kind of activist space in the '80s because there is no longer collectives...women's collectives, where you can say that there is a concentration of women in this feminist organization...in that we don't have those things in the same way. And I think maybe that's part of the new challenge...is how to...how to think about the spaces of feminist activism differently. And maybe I want to harken back to the re-creation of a Black Women's Collective. And that's not how the organizing will look anymore and I have to also think about what can be sometimes a kind of a western feminist chauvinism about what feminist organizing should look like...and what feminist liberatory activism or practices should look like, yeah.

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CTM: So this is a perfect, kind of, segue into thinking...so what...how would you characterize what it would take now to build certain kinds of solidarities and alliances across borders?

LEC: Yeah, because that question about the grave ethnic and class divides that you touched on earlier...how do you see...what do you see as the possibilities of going beyond...

AR: So you know, maybe it's because I grew up with, you know, folks like Linda Carty, and other gals in the Black Women's Collectives. So I am a gal who is rooted in material condition...about women's place in the world and I think that when we look up women's place in the economy, globally...so wherever women are, in the global economy, we are still the poorest, we are still marginalized, our labor is still not valued as part of the key ingredients in building community, in building society, in building nation. So I think that when we think about the possibility of what we can organize around, is I think that women's place in the economy...or the fact that we don't have one, or where we are located in that economy, is a place to organize around. And, as much as globalization is doing what globalization is doing is I think in response, we too, need to do kind of a globalizing organizing in response to what's happening in the economy in the context of globalization. The other piece that I think is another organizing piece, is the whole issue of violence in women's lives. Because again, no matter where we are, as much as North American states would want to tell us that violence is less here and more elsewhere, is we know that violence is very present in the lives of women globally. And I think that there is...that is an issue around which there can be, should be, must be much more concerted mobilizing. Because I think it should be everybody's concern that in Canada there are over twelve hundred murdered and missing indigenous women; that it should be Canada's...women's in Canada concern that in the places where Canada is as peacekeeper and/or as defenders of democracy is that rape and violence continue to be used as a weapon of war. So I think that violence against women is kind of the other issue that I think can be a centralized organizing project for us globally.

CTM: Do you see some of this happening?

AR: Ahhhh— not to the extent that I want to, no. I see it in spurts, but not in a sustained way. And what would it take? I'm not sure what it would take, but I feel that what is missing to maybe make some of that happen...and maybe it's the thing that I long for...is feminist organized spaces. Doesn't need to look like the Black Women's Collective but I think spaces that feminists organize and that part of that project is about connecting across national boundaries, as a deliberate strategy.

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CTM: And maybe an ethic of care. That becomes central to those. Because how often do we talk about needing and wanting those within the academic spaces that we occupy, which, however radical they end up, they still don't do the work that's necessary because they're not grounded or anchored in a feminist ethos of care. So, it's a very...yeah...which tells me sometimes that you know I don't know how much work we have done in terms of the sort of psychic economy of...

LEC: We've ignored that part. We've ignored that. You know it's so interesting, Angela, when you talk about when we were trying to get to across race-class-ethnic divides and across national borders and you made such a good point about the state kind of project being...it has co-opted so much of what's been underground by feminists, and it's been so successful that the state has crossed those borders and that feminism needs to...it reminds me of labour, yeah? And the thing we used to talk about capital. Capital can pick up those...we call them like, in the Caribbean...Free Trade Zones.

AR: Free Trade Zones, yes...and take it anywhere.

LEC: State within a state...dump them here, dump them...and the corporations can pick up overnight and leave. But labor can't, because labor failed to organize internationally. So when you have the woman in Sri Lanka making the shirt for the Gap, and the woman in Toronto making the shirt for the Gap, and they both not having any kind of decent union or wages...they need to go across because capitalism has already done it, right? So this is a similar kind of thing...that these divides that you're talking about...that we wanted to get you to think through...that those have been here...that why you feel a harkening for the Black Women's Collective kind of thing...but we did coalition building politics, which seems like not necessarily the case now, or even possible, because so many of those women, like you said, they have been incorporated into the state structure.

AR: Yeah, and I think that we need to begin...we need to intensify this alliance building. And I think that because women's labor is central to some of that organizing, as we talk about globalization and how it positions the woman making the Gap shirt in Sri Lanka, the woman who's buying the Gap shirt in some Joe's Fresh or kind of Lob Lowe's situation...you know, kind of, mall situation here is...I think that there is work for organizing...there is unfinished business for organized labor...and I'm talking union labor. And I think that organized labor here in North America, has been also built through feminist activism and has been supported through feminist activism, because it was about inequality, getting better wages, better conditions for working people and women entered that and needed and wanted the security of labor to get those things for ourselves. And I think that there is an unfinished business for labor, where labor needs to build some of those alliances internationally. But labor's project has been so narrow...about the workers that are its members, is labor's only concern. And I am saying no labor...because globalization makes it so that you need

to be concerned about the labor globally and how labor gets used globally. Because when the factory moves from Ontario to Brazil, because there is lower wage, no protection, it should be our concern, because it's the same job...yeah? And therefore, I think...how do we build—is there room to... 'cause labor is a movement.

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Is there room for us as feminism to take up space in labor organization to begin to do that project? To connect women internationally, globally, around our place and the lack thereof in the economy. So, I think...yeah, I think there is room there.

CTM: I mean, it interests me that there are women's unions in the global South but those unions are not actually connected to labor unions in the North.

LEC: Even where there are counterparts. Even where in the unions in the North, they may be led by men or doing whatever, but the work of the workers is the same as the unions in the South. No connection. So I think a significant failure of labor is that they have failed...even in North America you see it...they fail to recognize what the typical face of labor is now. They still haven't recognized that it's not a blue-collar male. It's a woman of color.

AR: Yeah, and labor is still very much as I said, concerned about its members. And the people...unorganized workers...should be labor's concern. But we appreciate the fact that unorganized workers do not contribute to labor's coffer.

LEC: So it's the dues paying members, right, the dues paying members.

AR: But we know that more and more, the workers are unorganized because of the way capitalism is organizing and restructuring itself. So, it is in labor's interest to be involved and be supportive of unorganized workers, as allies. There's room.

CTM: There's room and there are some unions who are doing some things, you know. Like SEIU is organizing, you know, hospital workers.

AR: Yeah, SEIU, UNIFOR—

CTM: So, there's some movement, because there has to...in a way they lose their membership, too, if they don't pay attention to who the workers are anymore.

LEC: And they lose their relevance.

AR: And it's about making the global connection. It's about making the global connection.

LEC: And there's a systematized attack on them in the North. Look at the US. It's less than double digit now, that's the organized work force.

CTM: So, what do you see...you know, we talk about living right now in a completely neoliberal climate in Canada, US, lots of you know, everywhere...India, too...what are the possibilities for organizing? And for pushing back...I'm thinking also that sometimes organizing falls short or is truncated because...and this is where I think the relevance of people who produce knowledge comes in...even in the academy, right...that because we haven't produced the kinds of knowledges and imaginings that make it possible to organize...and it works in both directions, right...so it's not, intellectuals are not the vanguard...but intellectuals have also failed in terms of really being attentive in the neoliberal climate...and been co-opted quite so easily into that project. So, what are...

LEC: And not as in touch with what's going on on the ground.

CTM: Yeah. So what are some nodes, some places that you see the possibilities of...and...just talk within...even being in Toronto...about what you see or...

AR: So, I think what I've seen is in the absence of collectives, where activist organizing happened, is that those of us who are now in organizations have taken the project of social change work to the organization, because I think what I have said and what many are doing is that our work as...you know, in my context in social services, in community health...is that my work must be about social change, my work must be responding to the conditions that create...the inequalities that bring people to my service.

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So, therefore whichever table I am sitting at is, I must be bringing a social justice perspective...a lens, to all of those spaces. Part of what that has meant practically is where we've seen in the city, and in this country where we had a government that sought to cut healthcare to refugees...well, they did do the cut. But, what we saw was the mobilization of healthcare workers as social justice advocates, in their role as care providers in response with an activist voice, with an advocate voice, with a social change, with a social justice voice. So I think we...that is happening. So, the spirit of the activism has not faded. And because the movement's structure isn't there in the same way, the work is still happening in organization. And the pushback against the state in saying, "You shouldn't do that work because we're giving you money just to deliver services". Folks are saying the work of responding to the inequality is part of the project, is part of the work. So, I think that's happening. I think the other piece that is happening is—increasingly in the academy—is students and faculty are saying that we need to have a connection with the underground to respond to the material needs. And to speak to the gaps in material resource for communities and people. So,

it's pushing...and it's not happening maybe in the concerted way or the systematic way, that I would say I would want it to happen, but it is happening. So I remain kind of hopeful...because I think what...you know...yes, you're right, the academy can sometimes be divorced as the place creating theory. And the people with the lived experience, they are the practice ground, right and somehow there isn't a sense that they, too, at that place, too, hold strategies...to change...

CTM: And knowledges...

AR: And knowledge to change, to advance social change and to make public policy and to change policy. So, I think that tension is there. And I think there is a need for more work in that place called the academy and the community. And maybe even challenging that divide, in saying that we shouldn't have that divide, where you have feminist scholarship and poor women and they're just separate entities. So I think, yeah—

CTM: Great.

LEC: Great.

AR: Yeah. Thank you, that's a wrap.

LEC: That's a wrap.

CTM: That's a wrap. Thanks Angela.

AR: [*Ahem*]

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