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SPRING 2005 ISSUE 6

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MARITA GOLDEN

Combining Art and Activism in the African Diaspora by Tonya Matthews

SABLE SENT ME to the Furious Flower Poetry Conference to find Shani Jamila O'Neal, a writer, journalist, and activist with credentials. Shani, 29, is a producer and co-host of Decipher- a daily radio show on the Washington DC bureau of the Pacifica network that features politics, poetry, & hip hop. and a Fulbright scholar. She has visited or lived in more than 25 countries- including a year spent volunteering with the International Foundation for Education and Self Help in Gabon, Central Africa. She is a Fulbright Scholar, a proud graduate of Spelman College, and holds a Masters degree in Africana Cultural Studies from UCLA. She is about my height, my complexion, and my age. We both went to majority white high schools and southern colleges. We both write. We both have nappy hair. We both look sideways at people who don't know Audre Lorde.

The 'Ms. Matthews' and 'Ms. O'Neal' format quickly slid into Tonya, Shani, sis, girlfriend, and "chil' you ain't neva lied." What started out as interview quickly morphed into conversation between two kindred sojourners - same destination, different paths. We were supposed to talk about Black writing in the Diaspora. And we did. We were supposed to talk about translating feminism into cultural work. And we did. But we also laughed about the missing links in white canons of literature. We made faces at Nelly videos. We broke into hip-hop lyrics and reminisced on break-dancing. We giggled over the African woman's behind as the most sanctified piece of human anatomy in the world. We did a lot of signifying that I can't easily recreate on paper. But if you load your CD player with one of those DJ-remixed Nina Simone cuts, and read this piece while facing the street so you can see cars rolling by and brown people strutting past your window, you might just be able to understand the

aura of an interview-gone-bonding experience between two undeniably African-American women writers in the heart of Washington, D.C.

DISCOVERING THE DIASPORA

Tonya - Now a lot of the work that you do - in your writing, your activism and your occupation - has to do with the Diaspora, right? I want to put that in context. You're from Delaware, then you went to Spelman, and your family has been in America for seven generations. So let's consider... we all know what happens to Black folk, when we stay here long enough and get that good education.

Shani - [Laughing]. Uh-Oh!

Tonya - [Laughing]. That refined book learning!

Shani - Right, right.

Tonya - We tend to be Ameri-centric - even when it comes to Black cultural issues. So where did you get those first Pan-African interests? That interest in us outside of this time and this place?

Shani - I can pinpoint the moment exactly. There was a class I took my first year called, African Diaspora and The World. And that class became a foundational part of who and how we were at Spelman as women, as Black women. So the very first part of my education centered around understanding myself as part of the Diaspora. I came from a predominately white high school where our experiences as Black people were so marginalised. It was insane. At Spelman, Black feminist thought was a huge part of the curriculum. I was an English major, so the typical canon was included in the curriculum, but we also knew June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Mari Evans, Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins. These sisters were core parts of the

curriculum, so all that Black feminist thought and connecting with the Diaspora...that's where it all started.

CHOOSING THE LIFE OF AN ARTIST-ACTIVIST

Tonya - It's a long road to that point where you say, "I'm going to make a career out of me." You know, a career out of helping, empowering and moving Black people, let alone Black women. I have found that quite difficult, actually. Where do you find the strength?

Shani - Well, it became my passion. First of all, it's possible. Who knew? I remember when I graduated people asked me what I wanted to do. I said "I want to be a writer and activist," and they said "Well, have you tried the law school forum?" and "That kind of activist-artist living is not possible, right? But I was surrounded by women who were doing just that. Through them, a lifetime of activism had become a very real thing.

So when I graduated I moved to Gabon. I wanted to live in an African Francophone country. Experiencing the continent in that way let me know I wanted to keep studying this - I later got my Masters in Africana Cultural Studies from UCLA. "Much of my graduate work concentrated on the Caribbean, and when I completed my program I moved there to work with the University of the West Indies Centre for Gender and Development Studies.

The work I was doing when I returned to the States with IPU was supported by a fellowship for social justice advocates called New Voices. They allow you to design your own programme, so in 2003 we did The Art of Activism - a semester long seminar series based at Howard University that combined cultural work and political education. We looked at social justice issues in the context of international human rights, and we used different art forms to do it. I'm committed to that concept, and that's the work I'm building on with projects like the (delete the anthology I'm editing) radio show we're doing."

I think it all comes back to that miseducation I was given when I was younger about Black people

and culture. My passion has become learning the truth about who we are.

PRACTICISING ART & ACTIVISM IN THE DIASPORA

Tonya - When we met at Furious Flower, you were doing a presentation on one of your writing projects. And that was in the islands, right?

Shani - It was in Trinidad, actually. I was talking about this poetry collective that I performed with while I was there called, 10 Sisters Poetry Collective. Credit for the groups development and production is due to Paula Obe and Annessa Baksh at Fishink Press. It wasn't an exclusively feminist group, but it was a fierce all female group talking a lot about justice. I was in the islands working on a project initiated by Dr. Patricia Mohammed called 'The Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean.' We were looking at the history of women's activism in the Caribbean. My background is in the history of African American feminism and I was trying to frame it in a diasporic context. The presentation that I was doing looked at how we could contextualise our work as artists, activists, and academics of Ten Sisters, into the whole women's movement. I loved the energy we had! It was mainly Trini women. At the time, there was me from the States, and one sister from the Virgin Islands. The group has continued to grow and shift over the years.

Tonya - 10 Sisters was a writing group, and you all created a body of inspired poetry and writing that you exhibited in various projects and performances. What were some of the themes in that work? With you being from the States and the rest of the 10 Sisters from the Caribbean, did you find common or uncommon themes?

Shani - Well when I was there sisters were discussing a range of themes that included gender and the intersection of race, ethnicity and nationality - something that always sort of rears its head every time I travel out of the country. That discussion includes how you define yourself and what are your definition signposts, right?

Trinidad is half Black and half Indian. And we had that reflected in our group. One [Afro-Indian-Trinidadian] woman named Weslynn Ashton has a poem called 'Black Indian' that talked about

growing up within the traditions of Indian and East Indian culture and history, and then reconciling how Black people are at the bottom of their hierarchy. Paula has a great poem on the 10 Sisters CD that points to the hypocrisy of religious men who are embroiled in incest scandals yet dared to tell others how to live, who to love. One of the poems I wrote when I was down there was called 'TNT'. That stood for Trinidad and Tobago, TNT dynamite, and Timothy Thomas. Timothy Thomas was a young 19-year old brother who was murdered by the police in Cincinnati. And I think he was the 19th Black man to die at the hands of police in five years. And that's the official figure, but if you talk to the community that number, of course, goes higher. That incident really spoke to the condition of Black people in Cincinnati, but then when you talk about the numbers from Cincinnati, don't even ask about the numbers from Ohio. Then you go on and multiply that by the 50 states [of America]. Then you need to add in the rest of the world!

Tonya - How did the people in Trinidad - how did 10 Sisters, even - react to this? Was this a communal thing? Or was this something they saw as an American problem?



Ten Sisters , c/o Paula Obe & Annessa Baksh, Fishink Press, 12 A Ryan St., Petit Bourg
Trinidad, paulaobe@yahoo.com

Shani - Well now, my parents and I were glued to the TV because Cincinnati was home for us. Most of Trinidad wasn't tuned in. But that is exactly where the pairing of art and activism came to pass because I ended up writing that poem about the incident. And when we did our first 10 Sisters performance, that was one of the poems I recited. I was crying; I could barely make it through the piece. The sisters were extremely supportive, it was an honour for me to perform with them. People came up to me after I finished the piece and to talk about police brutality in Trinidad. And then I went around the world with that poem. When I read it in South Africa, same thing. The same thing happened in Venezuela - I don't even speak Spanish! But my friend translated for me and I did my best to communicate. All over the world people were crying with me and talking about the shared oppression. That's the kind of power that art has. That was how I was able to take my specific experiences as an African-American woman and combine them with issues that we all share as a Black Diasporic community.

BEING BLACK FEMINIST

Tonya - In African-America, Black feminism is sometimes a four-letter word. Yet I find that we manage to hold the movement together because we have the advantage that our common enemy is always visible. Black American women have mastered the art of gracefully taking the back seat for the so-called greater good. I wonder how this dynamic plays in a country where you can see a Black face in every context every day. In your experience, how has this theme of Black gender politics taken shape in non-American cultural contexts?

Shani - I've noticed that in predominantly Black countries, people are quick to claim their country before they claim anything else. I'm Trini. Kenyan. You know, I'm Jamaican. It's an intrinsic part of how they define themselves. I will not be that quick to shout I'm an American.

I'm an African-American, and I understand that's a component of a larger African community. That's where I find my roots and my strengths and my definitions. Overseas, when people refer to me as an 'American' without the 'African' part, it always strikes me. No one was trying to deny my 'African-ness' - that hyphen is a distinction that we have over here that doesn't necessarily mean as much overseas. That leads me to my 'other' self-qualifications. I consider myself a feminist, true, but I consider myself a Black feminist. Black feminism is specific to the issues of our community. bell hooks talks about how, essentially, feminism is a movement that can dismantle all of the interlocking forms of oppression regardless of the community or cultural context you come from. So many of the issues prevalent in the Caribbean - violence against women, gendered income gaps, the need for full reproductive justice, to name a few - are the same in Africa and in the States. The difference would be in the historical, cultural, and governmental dictates that surround our approach to their resolution.

Tonya - It's kind of like living in a soul divided. [America] is our country but we don't always really want to claim it. So when you're surrounded by people who can and do claim their country, what is your reaction? Do you feel like maybe we are missing something or are at a loss for something in not being able to claim our home country wholeheartedly?

Shani - Robin Kelley has a book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, and he talks about looking at the history of Black Freedom struggles in [America] specifically, and how you can argue that a lot of them didn't succeed. He asks, what makes us continue to dream? How do we continue to look at this world with all of its issues and problems and drama, and still envision Freedom? Not just envision it, but base our whole lives around fighting for it. And I guess, in traveling to places where Black folk can claim their country - I can see an actualised dream in the notion of being able to claim where you're from with pride. It's inspirational because just because you have a Black country doesn't mean you are free from racism and oppression. They're not free from that but they still claim their country. I would love for Black people to be able to do that in America.

Tonya - Has being surrounded by people of the Diaspora who can celebrate where they're from affected your writing?

Shani - Absolutely. I can think about people in a contemporary context, but I also go back to [the] Negritude [Movement]. And look at the way those sisters and brothers- and there were some sisters up in there-

Tonya - Ha! Yeah, right!

Shani - Mmhmm... Well, looking at the way those sisters and brothers defined their own diasporic aesthetic. They came from Martinique, from Senegal, from all these places and met in Paris. There was an exchange between them and artists of the Harlem

Renaissance. They met, they talked, they built together. That's one of the legacies that we stand on as hip hop generationers. So it's important to me to understand my part in the continuum and do my best to continue that tradition of speaking our vision into being. We can claim the world we want in our work.

CONNECTING PEOPLES. CREATING SPACES

Tonya - I think these common global issues for women of the Diaspora - in fact, all people of the Diaspora - are crucial. The biggest conspiracy is the one that teaches us we have no power, no voice, no connection. We all need to travel more so we can see for ourselves that this isn't true. In fact, we all need to get out more to see ourselves.

Shani - Shani- It's amazing. I don't know that we recognise the power that we have in our voices... but we have such power, and it extends beyond the borders of this country. Let me start with Gabon. So as I am going through the schools during orientation, I'm checking out the graffiti that is not in French- half of it is in English. And I check it out- hip hop lyrics! Can you believe it! It was amazing for me to see the power of our culture on such a level. I was able to teach English in a French speaking country because I was using hip hop culture and poetry to do it.

One of the thing that impresses me most about us, about Black people, is the way that we use our culture and become shape shifters. You have, say Santeria, and Voudoun that have taken shape in the new world. They clearly have very African roots, but they have become specific and unique things based on the circumstances in the countries in which they were formed. If you just go to a Pentecostal church [in America], you know what I'm saying? The means of expression there are not going to be that different from what you see when you experience Black cultures overseas.

And then in Trinidad there is Rapso. People in our generation in Trinidad have used [soca, calypso, and rap] to create a whole new entity, and this is the genius of Black people. Susan Taylor talks about how we were never meant to survive. She says we didn't just survive, we created.

UN-AMERICANISING HIP-HOP

Tonya - African-Americans are really good at creating arts of defiance. There were the spirituals, the blues, protest poetry and now there is hip-hop. You went to Gabon and saw hip-hop there; I went to Japan and I saw hip-hop there. And it amazed me that as different as hip-hop was in Japanese culture, it still retained itself as essentially a voice of resistance. I am pleased that despite its growth and its ability, as you said, to be a shape-shifter, hip-hop remains essentially the child that it was created to be.

Shani - Mm-Hmm. But you know, I think we have to be careful, too. I've been thinking about this. I remember the first time I went to Paris and saw break-dancers at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. And I was like, "What?" And you know, by that time, break-dancing was long gone here! I was so proud: People were studying our culture, learning to love it and create it. But we also have to beware of cultural imperialism. That's part of our 'American-ness' that we can't really escape. We can't underestimate the dominance of American culture and its ramifications. So we have to think of that even with hip-hop. There is nothing like going to a Black country and having somebody greet you with a, 'What's up my niggah?' Even though many people use the word in a way that's intended to deconstruct and reclaim it, when we put it out there for the world to hear without that context it can be dangerous. So it's incumbent upon us to query both our politics and our privilege.

CONCERNING GLOBAL RE-PRESENTATIONS

Shani - "We are defining ourselves on a global scale and it's not really the type of thing you can grasp until you go overseas and see it. And then also, we are writing ourselves into historical record. When people look back on this era, 100 to 200 years from now, how are we going to be portrayed? How are Black women being defined? My God!

Tonya. - Let's talk more about that power you just mentioned in how we are creating our own global definition. When you try to tell some kid from the Bronx, some child from Southeast DC, some young buck from Memphis that his lyrics are going to reverberate all over the world, it's a hard sell. It's really hard to get that through - you're trying to tell someone that he's about to influence people in countries he has never heard of. Shani - It's very hard to get that through when you're disempowered on a continuous basis. They can't imagine themselves in that kind of capacity.

Tonya - Furthermore, it's not likely they will consider the fact that their voice might be silencing someone else's. Shani - Right. It's a question of balance. Like many people, including myself, are upset with the way women are portrayed in contemporary commercial hip hop. But I don't subscribe to the notion that just because women are being sexual, it's a bad thing. Audre Lorde's, 'The Erotic as Power,' essay is one of the guiding themes of my good female stuff. Women have been taught to dishonour our sexual power, our innate creativity. But it's a part of who we are. I don't have a problem with women celebrating their sensuality, even in a video. But there's a difference between the celebration and the commodification of who we are. And I hate to keep coming back to hip-hop videos, but there Nelly was swiping a credit card down a woman's backside in his video and now I'm reading an article where he's talking about the fact that we need to take politics out of music. He is not understanding how incredibly political that image in his video was. All images are political.

RESURRECTING AUDRE

Tonya - Again this goes back to not realising our own power, particularly as artists. The only thing

worse than not using your power, is not using it once you've got it. I think the inference is positive once you've got it. I want to let Sister Audre speak to that. I'm going to read you this quote and have you respond to it. For me as an African-American woman writer, sisterhood and survival mean it is not enough to say I believe in peace when my sisters' children are dying in the streets of Soweto, in the South Pacific. Closer to home, what are we as Black women saying to our sons and our nephews? How can we ever forget the faces of those young Black American soldiers, their bleeding bayonets drawn at a wooden shack in the hills of Grenada? And what if our sons are someday ordered into Namibia or South Africa or Zimbabwe or Angola? What is our real work as Black women writers of the Diaspora?" Shani - I'm going to respond to your Audre quote with an Audre quote! [Laughing]. Tonya - Ha! Bring it on! Shani - In fact, I just read it this morning and thought to myself, "This is it!" "For silence and invisibility go hand-in-hand with powerlessness. My work is to inhabit the silences in which I live and fill them with myself until they have the sounds of the brightest day and the loudest thunder. And then there will be no room left inside of me for what has been, except for the memories of sweetness enhancing what can be and is to be." Our work as Black women writers of the diaspora... it's humbling when you put it in that context. It's too much... but I'm thinking about my work. I'm thinking about The Art of Activism. The purpose of which was to show students and other people who came to join them what is possible. We were saying to them: you can make a career out of social justice - this could be your life. Not only that, but we need you. This is also what we strive to do on Blackademics... present examples of people who are doing critical community work and ask the important questions. Whatever your talent is, how can you use it in service of the community? As writers, how can we use our work to the betterment of Black folk? As teachers, how can we use our work? As engineers, how can we use our work? Whatever your God given gift is, how can you use it? Whatever it is She has blessed you with, do it to the best of your ability and bring it back to our people. I want to use our power. Our voice. Our hip hop and poetry. This is our work....

We have to know who our people are. Read. Study. Travel. Talk. Learn. Envision. Ask elders for their stories. Because once we understand the strength and resilience that we stand on, the legacy we have a responsibility to further, we become emboldened to identify our passions and unafraid to commit to them.

The Music, The Message, The Movement
WPFW Pacifica Radio 89.3FM
"Decipher" is a strip of programming featuring hip hop culture, politics, and poetry. A daily show, with different hosts every night... Shani's crew, Blackademics is on Tuesdays, 11.pm- midnight. You can listen online at www.wpfw.org.
Contact: theartofactivism@hotmail.com

The Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean
Spearheaded by Dr. Patricia Mohammed during her tenure as Head of the Center for Gender and Development Studies, at UWI-Mona in Jamaica, the 'Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean' project has expanded regionally and is now conjointly carried out with the Mona and St. Augustine campuses. This project aims to map the histories of 'feminisms' in the Anglophone Caribbean.

OTHER ORGANISATIONS OF INTEREST

The Social Action & Leadership School for Activists (SALSA) (SALSA) of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) SALSA (US)
is a good start for those who are interested in an Art Activism career path It offers affordable classes to make you and your organisation more effective.

SALSA is:a skills training program that strengthens community activism and fosters engaged citizenship.a forum for discussion and development of progressive issues and agendas. a unique networking opportunity for social change activists.
<http://www.hotsalsa.org/>

National Association of Literature Development (UK)
NALD is the professional body for all involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.
* We exist so literature professionals can talk to each other through our newsletter, website and events.
* We value and pass on skills and knowledge through our professional development programme.
* We make the case for increased investment in literature development.
<http://www.nald.org.uk>

AFRICAN WRITERS ABROAD (PEN) CENTRE
For writers of African descent who live outside the continent. AWA aims to increase the awareness of African and African diasporic literatures in order to educate and encourage adults and children to appreciate and understand literary and oral works produced by such writers. The aims of AWA are undertaken through the principle activities of arts in education and working with women writers of African descent.
africanwritersabroad@yahoo.com
www.africanwritersabroad.org.uk

MIGHTY RIGHTEOUS WOMEN. 2005

(inspired by Dr. Johnetta Betsch Cole)

we are some mighty righteous women
we some mighty righteous women

we weave warnings into baskets
and warm our families with hand stitched patchwork quilts

we scat symphonies of cornrows and cornbread
while battle scars brandish our tongues

we carve generations from the lightning bolts
that sparked revolution in the souls of Harriet, Ida B., Nzinga and
Nanny

we are some mighty righteous women

we birth brigades of black bereted babies
who come walking right on out the womb
armed with fetal fists and ancestral eyes that testify

we don't just survive, we succeed
we don't just persist, we prosper

give us what is left
and we will create life
complete with ringing laughter

we are some mighty righteous women
we some mighty righteous women
setting fire to the wind
with our song

by shani jamila