

Sherona Hall

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A Tribute

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Sherona Johnson-Hall, une battante très aimée de la communauté qui militait pour la justice sociale est décédée le 30 décembre 2006. Elle avait 59 ans. Pendant des décennies on l'a vue organiser des campagnes, se dévouer avec une générosité sans bornes, au prix de sacrifices personnels, léguant à des milliers de personnes de Toronto, de la Jamaïque, du Canada et du monde entier un héritage inoubliable.

Sherona. Sister, mother, friend. Dreadlocked feminist, activist. Fearless and unrelenting warrior. Yes, she was resilient, tough too, but there was also a vulnerability that surfaced in rare and unexpected moments.

Sherona. Sensitive, passionate, generous, and tender. Beloved friend of 35 years.

I cannot even begin to imagine the “bigness” of this loss but know that it will be felt ever more deeply in the years to come. The first jolt will be when I pick up the phone to call her. Sherona was always ready to talk, especially in the early hours when I couldn't sleep. For those of you who knew Sherona, yuh know all yuh haffè seh is “W”happen Sherona?” and before yuh know it, yuh falling fast asleep, with Sherona's voice making waves between fighter and compassionate, sister/friend.

Over the years, Sherona touched many lives. She had only to see the need to act, whether it be the Black Action Defence Committee, labour struggles, the International Women's Day Committee, feminist organizations, HIV and AIDS, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered groups. She also gave of her time and money to African Heritage Month and to Kwanza celebrations, particularly in St. James Town but as well in other communities. She was passionate about the well-being of young people. Just before her death she worked as a community youth advocate with the Toronto Housing Authority.

Sherona worked both inside and outside the system. Her work as a court reporter in Toronto brought her insight into the legal system and its problematic relationship with young black men. In 2004 she worked with other com-

munity advocates from the Malvern area and St. James Town to expunge the records of many young black men who had been charged with petty crimes and still had records years later, which meant they could not get jobs. Every Friday evening she met with these young men to make them knowledgeable about the law and their legal rights. I hope that young people remember her fight on their behalf.

We shared many journeys together, political and personal. Sherona's immense pride and belief in her Jamaican community of East Kingston, her capacity to see beyond its grinding poverty, her determination that injustice could be fought, shaped her radical politics. Sometimes over a drink or a pot of fish tea soup, Sherona would reminisce about her father's wooden shop with its earth floor, which supplied the community with goods from ground provisions and rice to flour and coconut oil, and of her mother's determination and ingenuity to provide education for her children.

In the late 1970s and 1980s whenever I visited Jamaica she would ask me to take down envelopes with money for her family and others. “Just a little help,” she'd say, “'cause it rough down de, yuh know, Makeda, and woman and dem pickney have tough.” Her generosity was constant, whether in Jamaica or here in Canada, where she shared food, shelter, and money with struggling students, with welfare mothers, with the young and homeless.

Some years ago when my grandmother died, and I was still in shock, Sherona in her boundless energy rustled up a Nine Night with food and drink, friends and community activists so that my grandmother would have a fitting send off.

As mothers we shared the joy and pride we felt for our children along with the inherent contradictions activist mothers face and the lived messiness that comes with those contradictions. Many years later, with the death of her mother, father, and then her sister, she regretted not having spent more time with her family, the price she paid



*From left to right, Makeda Silvera and Sherona Hall at Blockorama, organized by Blackness Yes!, June 26, 2005.
Photo: Junior Harrison*

for the political work that had made her mother, sister, and friend to entire communities, locally, nationally, and internationally.

Her greatest unrealized ambition was to write her life story, to set down her struggles and her growth as a political person, and to talk about the price of being a woman in what were often male-dominated political organizations. But, like many other radical women, she put the telling of her story aside for the “right time,” for after the work was done. Maybe one day we will honour her wish with a biography.

Sherona loved her music, especially Burning Spear, Sons of Negus, Peter Tosh, and the Mystic Revelations of Rastafari—a Rastafarian Niabingi group from East Kingston, Jamaica. She would often recount stories from the late 1950s, early 1960s, stories of the group’s protectiveness of its community and how the group respected and looked out for little girls like her. It was in Rockforth among the Rastas that she had her first lessons in resistance, militancy, black pride, and alternatives to the system that prevailed in Jamaica. Don’t get me wrong, she also loved her romantic music too, yuh know: Gregory Isaacs, Dennis Brown, Marcia Griffiths, Phyllis Dillion, and Judy Mowatt.

When I met Sherona in the early 1970s she was already a seasoned and tireless political worker. At age 15 in Jamaica she had left her mark as a campaigner and organizer and was a founding member of the People’s National Party’s youth organization. In Canada she continued her work on behalf of the PNP and the socialist movement led by Michael Manley from the late 1960s through the 1980s.

She gave money and housed and fed many a PNP candidate who came calling on Jamaicans living in Toronto. In recognition of Sherona’s love of and commitment to the people of Jamaica, another old comrade, recently elected Jamaican Prime Minister, Portia Simpson, sent her condolences.

Sherona also worked with poor women in Kingston, Jamaica, sending money, shipping off barrels of school supplies and food to start up basic schools. And by the 1970s she was also heavily involved in Toronto’s black community, organizing demonstrations to protest police shootings and other injustices. In that she followed closely in the footsteps of warrior women before her who fought with slave traders on the African continent and in the diaspora. In support of the liberation struggles in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, she gave her time, energy, and money as a staunch supporter of South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC), the Movimento Popular de Liberaçao de Angola (MPLA), and the African Liberation Day Support Committee in their work to free Africans from colonialism. She was a strong supporter of the Grenadian revolution and continued to give support to the Cuban revolution.

In the early 1970s, a period heavy with social and political unrest, Sherona travelled to Tanzania to take part in the Sixth Pan-African Congress. There she extended her network to include government official from various African Countries and forged her own political relationships with leaders and freedom fighters.

At her Toronto home in the late 1970s a visitor might

run into Stokley Carmichael, arguably the best known of the Black Power leaders, or the late Prime Minister Maurice Bishop of Grenada, or D. K. Duncan and Anthony Spalding, two powerful cabinet ministers in Michael Manley's government at the time. She also had close ties with Beverley Manley, wife of Michael Manley, and a social and political activist in her own right. Later, in the late 1990s and a little before his death, Dominican Prime Minister Rosie Douglas, a long-time friend and comrade of Sherona, was in Canada on official business and dropped by her home to talk about old victories and catch up on new struggles.

We worked together in the late 1970s through an organization Sherona founded, the Committee Against the Deportation of Immigrant Women, set up to advocate for landed status for Jamaican-born domestic workers in Toronto who were facing deportation. The committee's bywords were "Good enough to work, good enough to stay." Although Sherona didn't hesitate to work with male-led groups working on behalf of the women, she was convinced that a women's organization could most effectively address many of the issues. Through the work of CADIW the women began to talk about not just the racist stand of the Canadian government but its sexism—only single mothers, not single fathers, were being rounded up and deported. CADIW soon became a place to talk about physical violence, sexual harassment at work, and other pressing matters that did not seem to have importance in the male-led committees.

Sister, Maroon, rebel. Sherona had energy-plus, commitment-plus, dedication-plus. Let there be an injustice, she spoke up, even when others were full of praise for the miscreant. Some of you may remember Sherona at the University of Toronto's Convocation Hall, on her feet, standing alone among a crowd of 2,000 people, shouting out "Murderer! Murderer!" as Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, took the stage. At the time, very few in North America would criticize the Mugabe regime. Others in the audience may have known Mugabe's bloodstained record, but only Sherona spoke out. Here I am reminded of a quote by African American activist and past member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, "only the strong go crazy the weak just go along."

Some of you may remember our demonstration outside the Miss Black Ontario Pageant in the late 1970s. There we were, all six of us picketing out in front of the Sheraton. Of course, nobody paid much attention to us; it was obvious from our appearance that we were not Miss Black Ontario material. We walked into the hotel and proceeded to the large banquet hall where the pageant was taking place. There we were refused entry, our clothing cited as "not dressy enough." We six left for the washroom and a strategy session where we decided we would each give Sherona a piece of our clothing that was "dressy enough" for the pageant. That would make her a suitable candidate and she would disrupt the pageant on

our behalf. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. A now-glamorous Sherona going up to the door, cash in hand, to pay her entry fee. To the doorman she said, "Am I properly attired?" As we crowded at the door, trying to see inside, would-be Miss Black Ontarios were parading on stage in their formal gowns. Suddenly, Sherona's voice boomed out, "Pimps! Pimps!" Of course, pageant organizers immediately called for security guards to throw us out, but before we were ejected we wreaked major disruption and confusion. How sweet it was!

An extraordinary woman, Sherona made no apology for any of the many strands of her identity, nor for the diverse struggles she engaged in, nor for any seeming contradictions. If questioned, she would say that of course these strands would "somehow, somewhere create contradictions in our everyday lives. Ah, just earth runnings." We need to draw on Sherona's capacity for putting personal "isms" aside so that justice is the goal.

Never afraid to chant down Babylon by herself, she oftentimes ignored her fatigue until her health was compromised by stress. Even when pushed to the margins by the very groups that relied on her, she remained unshakable, had already taken the high ground, would fight for her convictions no matter the cost. Finally, like the many before her on whose backs we continue to climb on, she succumbed.

To you, Ruddy, this is what I think your mother would like you to hear: "Grieve not, nor speak of me with tears, but laugh and talk of me as if I were beside you." And then she would say, "I love you."

For the rest of us who knew her, I am reminded of a Jewish proverb that goes something like this: "Speak not in grief that she is no more, but live in thankfulness that she was."

Makeda Silvera is the author of two critically acclaimed collections of short stories, Her Head a Village and Remembering G. She is the editor of The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature, the groundbreaking Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology and Silenced, oral histories of Caribbean domestic workers in Canada. She has edited numerous anthologies. Her novel, The Heart Does Not Bend, was a finalist for the Toronto Book Awards in 2003. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Women's Studies at York University.