

Roberta Clarke

I met Andaiye at a CAFRA meeting. Part of us, Andaiye was also apart from us. She was questioning. Would we embrace a politics that included class and race analysis? Would we have an understanding of the connections between global capitalist economic systems and Caribbean under-development? While she may not always have described herself as a CAFRA kind of feminist, we certainly claimed her and all her wisdoms. Her frame was our frame. For us in CAFRA, women's rights could not be achieved if we did not address the legacies of ethnic and class oppressions and the inequalities wrought by contemporary neoliberalism.

And to do this work well required having women across their diversities in all rooms. When we were planning the regional meeting of social justice and feminist activists in March 2018, although she could not attend, Andaiye kept a close watch. "It have (she asked) any Indigenous women? How you doing for Indo Caribbean women?" "You know me, she wrote, I will ask the same questions even after I die".

Andaiye made an entrance just with that way of gliding into a room. When she spoke, we hushed and waited expectantly. And surely it would come, that piercing and succinct analysis bursting our self-satisfied bubble. She was fascinating and enigmatic. She was politically wise. She was also emotionally sensible.

But she wasn't about 'wash your foot and come' as the Trinis would say. She cautioned us to work with people with shared principles. Not because she was intolerant of other points of view (sometimes yes she was) but because she understood, to be effective in organizing there had to be a strong foundation of shared world views on elemental matters.

The story of Andaiye is not complete without the story of the Guyanese sisterhood. They sustain each other, these generous, committed and unpretentious women, including those in Red Thread and Help and Shelter. These women share with Andaiye that hope which she defined as 'solidly-based expectation (from experience, history and necessity) that we can make change'. And to make change, Andaiye counselled would require "determination which comes from a reading of history and of the world around us which illuminates not just the failures, but the simple fact that nothing ever just stays the same, that people are always resisting their own oppression – by whatever visible or invisible, peaceful or violent or otherwise illegal means."

Her expectations of traditional politicians, women or men were not high but her hopes for sustained social justice movements remained constant.

“As you know, I spend very limited time on party and electoral politics since I believe that the overriding imperative is to build a movement that AT THE VERY LEAST can “hold politicians’ feet to the fire”. I really do think that the job is to transform some people into seeing ourselves as having potential power and acting on that new perception so that the power becomes real, and we will AT THE VERY LEAST stand before the politicians as a force to which they must respond...for women and men it would mean refusing to hand over your vote to your “race” when you poor and getting poorer and they rich and getting richer.’

In essence she demanded of herself and of others, a freedom of the mind, a curiosity about the realities of others and a determination not to live in sealed pockets of privilege. And she was someone whose solidarity was practical. For several years, Andaiye, with Hazel Brown, coordinated medical support in Trinidad for Guyanese women seeking treatment for cancer.

Her principled pragmatism shielded her from pessimism. In an email of 2017 she advised against disenchantment. “And it’s not our experience that we win nothing from the advocacy (which as you know means both using conventional means and the street, including, where necessary, civil disobedience). We don’t win enough, but we do win what my colleague Selma would call “downpayments’.”

Andaiye was deeply interested in the politics of organising. Although she could not attend our March meeting, she stayed connected by skype throughout the two days. And to Joan French from Jamaica who inadvertently omitted her from an email chain, she schooled with affection “French, you well fasty. Given my position on unwaged work, you leave me off your list of who working on this because I elderly and sick? Is only my body gone, not my head!”

In a world where authenticity is a debased conceit, Andaiye lived true.

Let her rest in peace and as sister Wintress said yesterday, let her ideas ‘rise in power’.

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