

## **Safiya Bukhari: The War Before Represent Our Resitance**

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*Tell No Lies and Claim No Easy Victories*

Kids aren't learning it, because we were not spreading the history ourselves. In Africa, they had griots. So we have to be the modern-day storytellers.

Safiya Bukhari died in 2003. She was just 53 years old. It saddens me to know this courageous woman no longer walks this Earth, and that I didn't know of her or her work while she was physically here.

I began reading her collection of essays [\*The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, and Fighting for Those Left Behind\*](#), published by The Feminist Press and edited by political activist, Laura Whitehorn, just after a 7.3 earthquake struck Haiti. As I watched or listened to news reports trying to blanket the whole of traumatized community in Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas as looters, and I watched the U.S. Empire, 8 days after the man-made catastrophe send its U.S. Marines (some 20,000 now) to take control of Haiti's airport and secure the country. I am reading Bukhari's account of brutality at the hands of local police because she decided to stand in solidarity with her community, and I think of the long struggle of Haitians against European colonists, against U.S. occupation, against U.S.-backed dictators and UN trained Haitian National Police (HNP), and against the U.S.'s economic agenda to privatize Haiti's national resources. Then I realize her daughter, Wanda Jones, in the Preface, Angela Y. Davis in the Forward, and Whitehorn in the Introduction were mistaken - *Safiya Bukhari is alive!*

To an Empire, hell bent on repressing if not killing the spirit of love and compassion among and for the poor and working class communities, the images of Haitians using their bare hands to rescue fellow Haitians and organizing neighborhood response units warranted security measures just as it did when Bukhari, a Black woman with a young daughter, decided to take responsibility for an extended number of children in Harlem through the Black Panthers Free Breakfast for Children program. The HNP, trained by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) team, reports Kevin Pina, has been responsible for summary executions, arbitrary arrests, and the killing of unarmed demonstrators, the masses of poor and working class Haitians, who simply want the return of their president, Jean Bertrand Aristide. The *mission* to stabilize Haiti with violence is one Bukhari would recognize as a COINTELPRO *mission*. Just as Lavalas, the Peoples Party, Aristides Party, has fought since 1994 to feed, educate, defend the Haitian poor and working class while exposing the brutality of the foreign police and military operations against the people, the Black Panthers, too, sought to expose how the police systematically targeted the Black population even before its members became aware of how COINTELPRO systematically targeted them. Safiya Bukhari's collection of essays again and again refers to the traumatic affects of COINTELPRO on the Black community, particularly the Black Panthers, sworn to feed, educate, and defend the

community.

The corporations receive a ruling from the Supreme Court: Give all the money you want to political candidates! CEOs brag about the millions they will receive this year in bonuses after receiving trillions from taxpayers who saved an economic system that permits Wall Street and the corporations to continue their rule. In the meantime, Black unemployment is just over 16 percent. Yes, nothing short of a revolution is needed to end the oppression of the poor and working people. You think that the U.S. Empire's emphasis on security operations, renamed and globally expanded operations of COINTELPRO, is unrelated to the systematic targeting of the poor and working class people around the world? The U.S., says Professor Philip Brenner, recently on *Focus on Cuba*, WBAI, (1/25/2010), doesn't define security the way other countries define it. Generally the term refers to an attack against your homeland. But Homeland Security wasn't established until 2002 and that means, Brenner explains, that the defense Department is about expanding Empire. Security is bound up in the protection of its Empire.

The common enemy for domestic and foreign struggles against oppression is, Bukhari writes, racism, capitalism, and imperialism. It is no accident that COINTELPRO and MINUSTAH are activated to respond to the poor and working class within and without the U.S. or that the U.S. sent 20,000 Marines to Haiti while blocking other nations from delivering water, food, and medical supplies to a people thirsty, hungry, dying of serious injuries as a result of being crushed by collapsing cement buildings. As Brenner explains, the U.S. is the only country in the world that maintains its vital interests - that is, vital as in necessary for life - are global! The U.S. works to save the life of the capitalists at the expense of the poor and working class, and it is not beyond the use of fascist repressive tactics to achieve its goals.

I hear Bukhari reiterate that nothing short of a revolution will eradicate the racism, capitalism, and imperialism that oppress me and my people as well as other exploited and oppressed people everywhere. The capitalist system of this country has to be destroyed and replaced with an economic system built on the premise 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.'

### **Freedom vs. Equality**

Bukhari is a woman! It's so refreshing to read the thoughts of a woman who found her revolutionary role as a movement thinker and activist. While she worked as a member of the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army, as a citizen in the Republic of New Afrika, and as a co-founder of the Jericho Movement, she wrote and re-worked her essays, as Whitehorn explains, not because she was thinking about leaving her papers to posterity.

She was thinking about writing in the moment as part of her organizing work. She wrote these pieces and gave these speeches and interviews out of her enormous passion for change and her rock-solid loyalty to political prisoners.

The *War Before* is the work of a thinker, a theorist, a writer, and yes - an activist who not only tried to record the moment of action, but also tried to evaluate the past to understand what led to a specific course of behavior on the part of the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) in the grand narrative of resistance and counter resistance. It wasn't Bukhari's intention to see her collection of work as text, as Whitehorn explains, but for Bukhari, this work of writing (thinking) was part of producing

the revolutionary many knew as Safiya Bukhari.

I am reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King who re-wrote and re-told passages or Biblical stories in his speeches and writings, depending on necessity and the audience. At other times I thought of the novelist William Faulkner who spoke of his struggles to tell the story of the South, the story of its violent foundation, with the writing of each novel.

[So it was with Bukhari. In several of her essays and speeches, she returns to the issue of violence against the poor and working class through educational institutions, poor health care, police harassment in the neighborhoods, and through hate-filled propaganda used to demonize political activists and political prisoners, in particular the Black Panthers.](#) A number of the essays not only record what the Black Panthers did right (the Free Breakfast for Children Program and the Ten-Point Program, for example) but also considered how the Black Panthers were destroyed from within by the activities of the FBI's COINTELPRO. The U.S. has become a State obsessed with security. COINTELPRO is still with us. It's called the War on Terrorism or it's a *mission* concerned with *stabilizing* the population through an oppressive economic agenda.

So Bukhari begins by reflecting on the definition of security. In the battle of *security* - COINTELPRO's surveillance and assassination program and the Black Panthers program to defend the community against violence - how did the former succeed? What is the meaning of security? Security, Bukhari writes, means freedom from danger, fear, and anxiety. To have security means you are enabled to trust your comrades implicitly and to know with certainty what they will do in any circumstance is the best security [for] the basic element of security is trust.

Secrecy is counterintuitive to security. Secrecy becomes a weapon the enemy can employ against the individual or the group. What the police know, the people should know. Like snakes, secrets crawl from the media, to the next-door neighbor, and back around to other comrades, producing a venomous atmosphere of mistrust, insecurity. What the police know, the people should know. Take one weapon from the police.

In an atmosphere of mistrust, insecurity, the Black Panthers and other activists, Bukhari suggests, lost sight of the revolutionary goals. Settling for easy, short-sighted gains to ease the suffering, too many Blacks, she writes, equated freedom with equality. The former means you want the ability to determine for yourself, without social and political pressures, tainted as they are by racism, how you want to live your life and what you want to achieve for your family and community.

Equality (uniformity, conformity, likeness), on the other hand, is not the same as freedom. Do you want the same things, the same access to things that the next door person has? Or do you want freedom? I see that the Black community doesn't ask this question anymore. We seem to want *equality* in the Empire! We want to be *equal* partners in racist, capitalist, imperialist agendas. What kind of victory does *equality* represent for the many?

What is our goal? The enemy never loses track of its goal to eliminate the Black Panthers then and now. It never loses track of its goal to eliminate political activists and ultimately stifle the movement for freedom.

What's left of the movement, Bukhari writes, has been bogged down in a quagmire of infighting, backstabbing, manipulation, and one-upmanship. Instead of remaining steadfast in revolutionary convictions, Bukhari writes, the Black Panthers practiced liberalism. The split in the Black Panther Party in 1971 was the result, she writes, of members harboring ill will and believing rumors without investigation. In turn, we allowed this to go on until it grew so large that we believed the only way out was fratricide. If we had nipped it in the bud, COINTELPRO would not have been able to do its job. A lot of comrades would not have been killed, many more would not have ended up in prison for all those years, and countless others would not be members of the class of walking dead.

For Bukhari some members of the Black Panthers and other political activists took their eyes off the goal of freedom, in a war to eradicate racism, capitalism, and imperialism. I hear her saying that ultimately as activists, many of us deserted the struggle for the rights of the poor and working class.

Bukhari redoubled her own efforts to achieve the goal of freedom realizing war for substantial change in human relations doesn't yield easy victories for the few.

### **They Create a War Atmosphere**

In 2002, Bukhari wrote an Afterword to the first essay in *The War Before*, *Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary* which was written in 1979. She was asked to attend a conference organized by Professor Joy James who was a professor then of Afrikan Studies at Brown University. The conference was titled *Imprisoned Intellectuals: A Dialogue with Scholars, Activists, and (Former) US Political Prisoners on War, Dissent, and Social Justice*. Bukhari writes that she had not thought of herself as an intellectual or a prison intellectual. The term intellectual had been an anathema to her. But she was forced to face a reality.

I was there because I had spent time in prison writing and thinking. Thinking and writing. Trying to put on paper some cogent ideas that might enable others to understand why I did some of the things I had done and the process that had brought me/us to the point we were at. I had come to the conclusion that if we didn't write the truth of what we had done and believed, someone else would write his or her version of the truth.

She realized that so many citizens of the U.S. including Blacks believe what they have been told by the police and other governmental agencies about the Black Panthers, activists in general and political prisoners of the struggle. The government and the media, says Bukhari in a CBS TV video, *CBS Tries the New York Three*, have conned us into blaming the victims for what was done to them under COINTELPRO. At one point she asks: How do we (re)engage this war? How do we push back the State? Well, we must speak; we must write; we must intervene in that narrative of violence compiled by the U.S. government.

Bukhari's role as a revolutionary hadn't been planned. One of 10 children, Bukhari's parents taught her and her siblings to believe that with the right education they could make it. Bukhari tells us that she had decided to be a doctor. In her second year of college, she joined a sorority whose yearly projects included work in the ghettos of New York among the disadvantaged. At the time, Bukhari didn't think there were disadvantaged people in the U.S.

In Harlem, she volunteered with the Black Panthers Free Breakfast program to serve food to hungry

children. Soon after she began this work, she realized fewer and fewer children were coming to receive food. Bukhari says she questioned the children and discovered that the police had told parents that the program was feeding the children poisoned food. This incident was followed by another.

On a corner in Harlem, a Black Panther was attempting to sell the Panther newspaper on the corner when two policemen insisted he move away. Bukhari was walking by with a friend; both of them stopped to listen. The young man insisted he could sell the paper there. Then without thought, she writes, I told the police that the brother had a constitutional right to disseminate political literature anywhere. The police turned on her, asking for her identification and proceeded to arrest her, her friend (another woman) and the brother. She had never been arrested before.

At the 14th Precinct, the women were strip searched. After the policewoman searched me, writes Bukhari, one of the male officers told her to make sure she washed her hand so she would not catch anything.

When Bukhari was released the next day, she went back to Harlem, and joined the Black Panther Party. This was 1969. In the next two years, she writes that she had seen friends and loved ones killed or thrown into prison. Others, she believed, would never turn states evidence do so and melt into the woodwork. In the meantime, by 1973, the police were becoming more suspicious about her and what she might be doing. She was actively and vocally supported BLA members.

And so the authorities wait. Then the day came.

January 25, 1975. Bukhari is in Virginia with members of the Amistad Collective of the BLA to practice night firing in the country. The group had to start out for Jackson, Mississippi that evening, so they decided to stop at a store to pick up cold cuts for sandwiches. The men were to stay in the car while Bukhari offered to enter the store.

I entered the store, went past the registers, down an aisle to the meat counter and started checking for all-beef products. I heard the door open, saw two of the brothers coming in, and did not give it a thought... but out of the corner of my left eye, I saw the managers hand with a rifle pointed toward the door.

Bukhari hid in the aisle. Shooting began. Then she saw Kombozi Amistad walking toward her. As he approached, he told me he had been shot. I did not believe him at first, because I saw no blood and his weapon was not drawn. Just then, she witnessed another Panther, Masai Eehosi, who became her codefendant, receive a bullet in the face. While she tried to comfort Kombozi, the store manager and his son approached her and Kombozi. Paul Green Sr. and Jr. begin stomping Kombozi to death, as Bukhari records, in front of my eyes.

The authorities declared the killing of Kombozi justifiable homicide. The next day, the FBI held a press conference to announce to the public that Bukhari was notorious, dangerous, etc., and known to law enforcement agencies nationwide.

They create a war atmosphere.

Sentenced to 40 years for armed robbery, (she was released in 1983), Bukhari was placed in maximum security at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in Goochland. The following year, she writes, she began hemorrhaging from tumors. Bukhari tried to seek medical attention but was repeatedly denied. *The general feeling was that they could not chance hospitalization for fear I would escape; as such, they preferred to take a chance on my life* [\(my emphasis\)](#). Bukhari considered escaping and ultimately did so only to be captured and returned to isolation once again in a maximum security cell. But she didn't give up. As Bukhari writes, the private/personal became a public/collective struggle to expose the level of medical care at the prison and to put pressure on the prison to give her the care she needed. Finally, in 1978 she underwent a hysterectomy because, as she explains, by then, I was so messed up inside that everything but one ovary had to go.

But the following year, Bukhari found the power of the pen! She began to write because women in the prison had to be organized. Organizing thought precedes organizing people. As Bukhari writes, she observed the oppressor play a centuries-old game on Black people - divide and conquer. As Bukhari explains, under pressure, Black women sold Black men down the river while the State follows up by separating these women from their children.

She witnessed Black women no longer focused on family and community, and us as a people. Instead, the younger women were about looking good, having fun, and making it. As detached, lost elements of the collective spirit, these women become difficult to educate and to organize because they have become more manageable clogs of the Empire. The State, Bukhari acknowledges, prefers this anomaly rather than the Black mother, wife, daughter, and woman in general, who stand by and, in many cases, fight beside their men when they were captured, shot, or victimized by the police and other agents of the government. Frightened of the potential of Black women to wreak havoc when these women began to enter the prison and jails in efforts to liberate their men, she concludes: the States war attempts to destroy any concept of family/community (private/public resistance campaigns) *outside* as well as *inside* the prison walls.

### **The Struggle Continues**

We are fighting to be human beings, to not have to accept roles as the *tamed* Negro, someone who acknowledges and submits to the superiority of the rulers by *adjusting* and *conforming* to comfortable embodiments of the *familiar* but still Other entity. We should reject the rulers plan to create us in their image. The role of the *adjusted* and *conformed* [Black today employs the same blueprint use to mold the images of Sambo, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, and Jezebel](#). In the essay titled, Lest We Forget, Bukhari reminds of the fallen heroes of the Peoples War of Liberation. Author Morris, Bobby James Hutton, Nathaniel Clark, Alprentice Bunchy Carter, John Jerome Huggins, Fred Hampton, Jonathan and George Jackson, Sandra Pratt, Twymon Myers and so many others didn't die for the resurrection of Sambos and Jezebels.

The revolutionary begins at home with the individual and collective of individuals fighting for the right to be - to be human, to be Black. As Bukhari writes, no concrete change in the very real condition of Black people occurred. We're still at the bottom of the totem pole.

The movement to bring about radical change is a process as Bukhari reminds us. That process

begins by envisioning a new society. if we truly are to create a new society, we must build a strong foundation. I think for Bukhari, thinking and writing was her way of creating a strong foundation in which to envision something new. Building a movement, requires that the workers do it the hard way - slowly and methodically, building step by step and block by block - much like the process of observing, thinking, and writing necessary to see the road to freedom. The difficult part is the day-to-day organizing, educating, and showing the people by example what needs to be done to create a new society. This is now a task left to us to continue.

Its not so *radical* to think and re-think a vision of that new society without racism, capitalism, or imperialism. Whats so *radical* about ending the need for wars and war profiteers? Whats so *radical* about ending narratives of domination that call for the control of the majority of humanity and this planet? Think of where we are now with jobs outsourced to the so-called developing world where those fellow workers are paid slave wages. Think of the repressive state of K-12 in urban areas throughout this country. Blacks and Latino/a youth are introduced to law enforcement and detention before they can read or write! Think of protesters challenging the status quo of undemocratic laws and procedures coming face-to-face with fascist forces equipped with high-tech weaponry. Think of the increase power given to the corporations by the U.S. Supreme Court. Think of the Earth as the battlefield of the U.S. Empire where *enemies* and *wars*, militarization and oppression are the best the U.S. can offer the world.

[Just as the revolution is a work in progress, Bukharis writings were a work in progress, reflecting her thoughts on organizing for an end to capitalism and working toward a new society. In the Afterword, political prisoner and journalist Mumia Abu Jamal states that Bukharis passing wasnt the only tragedy; the tragedy was that more people didnt know her, learn from her, or grow from her fund of hard-won wisdom.](#) While I acknowledge the tragedy of her physical death, I prefer to see her passing as a transition. Among the ancestors now, she offers us her wisdom in [\*The War Before\*](#). This is a collection of essays, speeches and interviews, reveals a strong spirit, and should be read like a textbook, again and again. Returning to how Safiya Bukhari thought and how she fought on behalf of political prisoners keeps her spirit close to us while we continue the struggle.

*We call and she responds*

A Peoples War of Liberation is like the points of a starfish. When a soldier (guerilla) dies, another grows and takes his or her place in the struggle, or in the body of the army.

***BlackCommentator.com*** Editorial Board member, Lenore Jean Daniels, PhD, has been a writer for over thirty years of commentary, resistance criticism and cultural theory, and short stories with a Marxist sensibility to the impact of *cultural* narrative violence and its antithesis, resistance narratives. With entrenched dedication to justice and equality, she has served as a coordinator of student and community resistance projects that encourage the Black Feminist idea of an equalitarian community and facilitator of student-teacher communities behind the walls of academia for the last twenty years. Dr. Daniels holds a PhD in Modern American Literatures, with a specialty in Cultural Theory (race, gender, class narratives) from Loyola University, Chicago.