



*Global Feminisms:
Comparative Case Studies
of Women's Activism and Scholarship*

*Interview Transcripts: United States
Language: English*

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**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Rabab Abdulhadi
Interviewer: Nadine Naber**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: April 2, 2004**

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Rabab Abdulhadi, born in 1955, was raised in Nablus, Palestine and is a long-time feminist activist and scholar who has made significant contributions to the struggle for Palestinian self-determination and the well-being of Palestinian women. She has participated in numerous organizations dedicated to fighting for the rights of Arab and Arab-American women. From 1982 to 1988, she was the Director of Political and International Relations at the Middle East Research Center in New York. Abdulhadi was instrumental in founding the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in North America during the first Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, that grew to 2,000 members and 29 chapters in the United States and Canada. Abdulhadi is also involved in a variety of coalition-building projects that make links between diasporic communities living in the U.S., U.S. communities of color and women of color activists. She has published extensively for the academic and mainstream presses writing on issues of nationalism, terrorism, race, ethnicity and the experiences of the diasporic Arab communities. She is currently working on two books. Abdulhadi is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan at Dearborn.

Nadine Naber is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Women's Studies and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Anthropology. She received her Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Davis. Her research and teaching focus on Arab American Studies; Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms; Race and Ethnicity; and Colonialism and Post-Colonial Theory. She is currently writing a book entitled, *De-Orientalizing Diaspora: Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity among Arab American Youth in San Francisco, California*. She is conducting new research on the ways that class, gender, sexuality, and religion have intersected within Arab American engagements with anti-Arab racism following September 11th. Nadine is a co-editor, with Rabab Abdulhadi and Evelyn Alsultany, of *Gender, Nation, and Belonging*, a special issue of the MIT On Line Journal of Middle East Studies on Arab American Feminisms. She is co-editing a forthcoming book with Amaney Jamal entitled *From Invisible Citizen to Visible Subject: Arab American Engagements with Race before and after September 11th*. She has published articles that situate Arab American Studies in the context of U.S. racial and ethnic studies, and women of color feminisms in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *the Journal of Ethnic Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. She is co-founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, North America (cyber AWSA); Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ) and Arab Women's Activist Network (AWAN) and a former board member of Incite! Women of Color against Violence; Racial Justice 9-11; and the Women of Color Resource Center.

Transcript of Rabab Abdulhadi

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes¹*

Nadine Naber: I'm Nadine Naber. We're here today with the Global Feminisms Project at the University of Michigan. We're here with Rabab Abdulhadi, Palestinian activist, visiting us from New York City. Welcome to Michigan, Rabab.

Rabab Abdulhadi: Thanks, Nadine. It's very...happy to be here.

Nadine: We're just going to begin by talking a bit about your personal history.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: And then we'll get into a discussion about your activism, some of your thoughts and ideas about activism and feminism, and then we'll close with some discussion about your journey as a whole and how you see it, and how you see U.S. feminisms and global feminisms in general.

Rabab: Oh...

Nadine: Okay, sound good?

Rabab: ...that's good, yeah.

Nadine: All right. So tell us a bit about your personal history—Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Rabab: I was born in Nablus. It was...it's on the West Bank in Palestine. At the time it was under Jordanian rule. I grew up under first Jordanian rule of Palestinian areas², which happened in 1950 after Palestine was turned into Israel, as a result of the establishment of the settled Israel, and the disbursement of Palestinians. Two territories were left—the West Bank and Gaza, and the West Bank was annexed to Jordan by them, King Abdullah at the time, of Jordan. And Egypt...Egypt controlled Gaza Strip, and I was born in Nablus on the West Bank. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, Sinai and East Jerusalem. And so I experienced also life under Israeli occupation. So that's where...

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

² From 1950-1967 the West Bank became officially under rule of Jordan. In 1967 Israel overtook Jordanian West Bank and became the ruling forces and Palestinians were forced off their land as refugees. There is a movement around the "Right to Return" which is a UN mandated right of refugees to return to their land. See <http://al-awda.org>.

Nadine: So...

Rabab: ...my life has been. Yeah.

Nadine: So while you were living there, were you involved in political activities? Were you...you know, what was it? I know that you're an activist, but I don't know much about what exactly it is you are doing, and when you started your involvement.

Rabab: Well, I was...I was pretty young when the occupation began, but I've...I've grown up in a fairly politicized family. My father was a founding member of the Arab National Movement³. My mother has...was involved in 1948 in...as a volunteer nurse in 1948 War⁴. She didn't have any training or...but she, but she did. And so I grew up always listening to political discussions and so on. And under Jordanian rule, I remember a couple of things very clearly. I remember that...we were not supposed to turn on the radio to "Sotel Arab"⁵, the Voice of the Arabs, which was the Egyptian radio station, because Jordanian Hashamite Monarchy⁶ was not fond, to say the least, of the Egyptian, rule of Jamal Abdel Nasser⁷, who was one of the giants of the N... movement at the time. So we would had to lower the radio whenever the Jordanian army patrols pass by, because some people were arrested and thrown into jail for that. And the second thing I remember, Jordanian soldiers actually coming to our house to search. And I didn't know—I was too little—but I didn't know why, but I knew there was something not altogether, and of course when I grew up I realize that my father was active in the Arab National Movement, and that must have been the reason why. And then the other thing that I remember, I think I was...I was in the fifth grade, which must have made me like 11 at the time. And there was this, some more incident in which Israel invaded a Palestinian village on the West Bank. That was before 1967⁸. And they've had attacked and I think they killed a few people and so on. And a lot of Palestinians and Arabs felt that the Jordanian government was not actually protecting the population well. And there were a lot of demonstrations, and, you know, I went out on a demonstration with my girlfriend from school and like 12 other girls, running in the street...

Nadine: And how old were you?

Rabab: Oh, I think we were like 11 or 10. I don't know. We were walking in the street. Nobody was paying attention to us. But we were very proud of ourselves. We were kind

³ The *Arab National Movement* was a movement in the 1950s in response to Western colonization and domination of Arab lands and peoples. A secular pan-Arab movement formed that sought to unite all Arab people in a struggle for Independence.

⁴ 1948 was the year that the state of Israel was created on Palestinian land and resulted in the colonization of Palestinian lands and peoples. Palestinians actively resisted the colonization of their land and are still resisting today.

⁵ This is the voice of the Arabs' radio program.

⁶ *Hashamite Monarchy* is the ruling monarchy of Jordan.

⁷ *Jamal Abdel Nasser* was the leader of the secular Arab National Movement of the 1950s.

⁸ 1967 was the year of the Six Day War.

of like solid activists. Nobody, you know...it's like little girls. Probably they were laughing at us or something. But, yeah, so this is...this is part of this, but it was, I mean, it was...part of it is funny because we were little, but a lot of it wasn't funny, because a lot of people were arrested, a lot of people spent time, were tortured in prison, Jordanian prisons. And as was the case in many other countries in the region. And so I've had this kind of like, you know, consciousness, I guess planted in my mind since I was very little. And then...and then I remember at the '67 things became much more like active, one...one Jordanian soldier went on the roof of our building and actually carried a battle with the Israeli soldiers' occupying army, which came from the eastern part of Jordan. The West Bank, if you come from the eastern part, you're...if it's Israelis, they're supposed to come from the western part, because Israel is to the west of the West Bank. If you come from the east part, you think it's Arab armies. So a lot of people were...got out of the windows to cheer Arab armies supposedly coming to liberate us. It turned out to be the Israeli military, the Arab...a lot of Arab governments had already pulled out their armies at the time. And this young man had carried the battle with the Jordan...with the Israelis and got killed, was martyred on the roof of our...our building. And I was...I was 12. I was asked to go up and remove the gun from his hand and like throw it in this big square, because the Israelis were coming to collect the weapons. By that time, it was already known that Israel has occupied and, no, you're not supposed to have weapons or anything. And...and that was my first time I actually saw somebody dead with blood on him, carrying like the gun, like this. And...and he was not Palestinian from Jordan. He was Jordanian, I think from a village around Sultorman, I'm not sure. I don't remember anymore. Because his father came few months after the occupation, and my parents had saved his ID and his military papers and his wallet, and my father and a couple of other people, men from the neighborhood, carried him and buried him, you know, in the cemetery so he would get dignified burial. So this are some of like the things I remember. And then I...I remember, this is kind of like when the women's activism become...began picking up again. I should back up a little bit because in 1965, there was this big meeting in Jerusalem with all delegates, Palestinian delegates coming from all over the world. And they established the Palestine National Council⁹. And among them, there were 139 women who formed the General Union of Palestinian Women¹⁰. And one of them was my aunt, who then became very active in the Palestinian Movement, and in 1996 she ran for the President of Palestine against Yasser Arafat¹¹.

Nadine: Hm.

⁹ *Palestine National Council* is the parliament in exile of the Palestinian people. The PNC elects an Executive Committee, which assumes leadership of the organization between its sessions. The Council usually meets every two years. Resolutions are passed by a simple majority with a quorum of two-thirds.

¹⁰ The *General Union of Palestinian Women* belonged to the larger "umbrella" group of the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations.

¹¹ In 1958, *Yasser Arafat* (1929-2004) helped found Al-Fatah which was an underground organization which advocated armed struggle against Israel. During the first Intifada (1987-1991) he played a key role in resistance against colonization and occupation. After Oslo he led the new Palestinian government (PNA) which some grassroots Palestinian activists today critique for their weak stance in resisting Israeli colonization and US support of Israel as well as compromising the Palestinians. He died of unknown causes, under much speculation.

Rabab: And she passed away in 1999. But, you know, so there were...there was all this kind of like environment around. I...and this is interesting because I grew up thinking that all Palestinians are politicized¹², because I was politicized. But I think a lot of Palestinians are politicized. The majority are, but not every single Palestinian is, because not everybody has been through that. But after '67, women were...there were a lot of friends of my mother who were school teachers. So they actually went on strike. They refused to teach because Israel was changing the curriculum. So they refused to participate in the teaching. And then, and there it was all these debates going back and forth. Do we teach? Do we not teach? If we don't teach the kids don't learn. If we teach, are we going to teach this curriculum. And within six months, or so, some people decided to go to teach and some people said we're not going to participate in that. And each one of them has a valid point of view. So I can never...you can never...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...which one is better. Each one decided differently. And then there were a lot of sit-ins. So, you know, like my mother and some of the neighbors will go and sit in the...in a mosque. The mo—the mosque was very close. One of the mosques was very close, never the cemetery, near our house. And that was the closest place. Because you'll have to go to a place which is supposed to have sacredness about it, to make sure that you don't get really attacked. But they'll have a sit-in, they'll have a hunger strike. Because for the prisoners or for all sorts of things. And, you know, we'll sit there and we won't eat. I mean, we'll go for hours and hours and hours, and then they'll force the little kids to start eating because we were too young. And there were also like women going around gathering petitions and they'll come and like in the evening and they'll knock at the door and...and everybody's hush-hush, you know, so like somebody's signing. And it sounds, today it sounds kind of, even for me to kind of retell the narrative, it sound ridiculous, because what's the big deal about signing a petition. But at the time, if your name was anywhere, if you were caught doing anything, you will be thrown immediately in prison. So it wasn't, it wasn't kind of a luxury activity, because like I think the temporality needs to be remembered here. So there was always this kind of stuff going on, and...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...you know, a lot of other things. We were always listening to the news, hearing what's going on. Everybody was discussing it. Many times the city will come under complete curfew. We would be walking to school and the Israeli soldiers would be parked in a patrol, and they'll, you know, they'll start kind of harassing us little girls going to school. And it's not that the Israeli soldiers harass us and the Palestinian guys didn't harass us. They harass us too. But with the Palestinian guy, I could just go tell, you know, my mom or my father that somebody is bothering me. And the next day my father will drive me to school and just likely stop and give the guy a dirty look. He's not there tomorrow. You couldn't do that with Israeli soldiers.

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

¹² *Politicized*: Being made political or being active politically.

Rabab: Because, you know, you just have to like make sure that you'll go to the other side of the street, you have to avoid them. So there was...and they will just like, you know, using curse words and all sorts of things...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...for little girls! It was...it was always this kind of fear, but at the same time come...like very strong dislike...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...and distaste. And, and I guess consciousness of what's going on, I think, after maybe if people weren't politicized by that time, people would become politicized, having experienced this. Because everybody has to go...walk to school, so...

Nadine: So you grew up. So by growing up under Israeli occupation, it's not a one-incident that leads you to become an activist...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...it's the ongoing situation of...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...your entire life growing up.

Rabab: Yeah, and it's...it's everyday life.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I mean, it's everyday life here to, you know, if you're...if you're...if you're poor and you...every day you remember your parents or your mom or your father, if you have a single parent worrying about where the bring the food and so on, it's the same.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It's, I mean, it's a different...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...kind of like, um, oppressive situation. It's very much ingrained in your consciousness. It's...you can't...you can't imagine your life after a while, not...

Nadine: Different.

Rabab: ...having...yeah, this part of it. It's part of it. It's not that you like it.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It's not like...because you get used to it, you say, "Oh, I miss the occupation."

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: But it's not...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...it's very much of part of your...yeah, so you become political, you always have a viewpoint...

Nadine: So let's move into...

Rabab: ...about things, yeah. Hm.

Nadine: ...um, the turning point, or...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...the time that you started playing a more central role in political activism. Can you tell me about when you became involved kind of in a more formalized kind of way?

Rabab: I don't know. I mean, I think it's really hard to say...

Nadine: Or you could tell me the, you know...

Rabab: I think it's very hard. I was...I was...I went to Birzeit University¹³ one summer to...to improve my English. They had summer...summer classes and they allowed high school kids to go. And, you know, and there was all...people were getting arrested.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I took class with, um, two professors. One was Palestinian from Israel, and was the first time I actually met a Palestinian from Israel who is actually politically involved. Because we had family...

Nadine: Can you tell me just very...

¹³ *Birzeit University* was first Arab university to be established in Palestine that is the center of Palestinian student politics. Birzeit students have a key role in the Palestinian student movement and have instigated many actions against the occupying forces. The University also has one of the only Women's Studies Institutes in the "Arab World."

Rabab: ...like what's...yeah.

Nadine: ...very, very briefly what you mean about a Palestinian from Israel?

Rabab: Well, in 1948, Israel was created. Nine hundred thousand Palestinians or so became refugees. They were expelled from their land. And they, they live in 59 refugee camps and throughout the Middle East in the West Bank, Gaza, in Jordan, in Lebanon. Couple in Syria, although the status is interesting and all that. And then there were, there were...was small number of Palestinians left in Palestine but now it's controlled by Israel, which becomes a state for the Jews, with a very, very small number of Palestinians, but it's dominated by...it's a Jewish state. Zionism call—defines Israel as a Jewish state. And so in 1967, in 19...1948, Palestinian population is split, right. There is people in refugee camps, there are people in the West Bank, there is people under Israeli law, and that is really marshal, throughout, until 1966, under military marshal law¹⁴. And so we don't interact at all.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Except for people who have relatives who lived in the West Bank, they would meet at Mandelbaum Gate in Jerusalem¹⁵, maybe once very two months or so for half an hour. And then one of the, the things that actually is very also part of the collective memory of the Palestinians, is the radio broadcast for relatives telling their relatives that they're alive.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: So it's very sad. There is a song by Fairuz¹⁶, I mean, the minute you hear it, it's sort of like immediately reminds you of this broadcast. So-and-so is saying, so-and-so so we are alive, we're okay. Your uncle so-and-so died, you know, this one graduated, this one had a child. And so...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...this is the only way people actually, when they grew up they didn't know each other. If they meet somewhere outside in the Middle East, they wouldn't recognize each other on the street.

Nadine: I appreciate the clarification.

¹⁴ *Marshal* is a term connoting militaries and law enforcement officers so to live under military marshal law would entail being under an active military.

¹⁵ There are seven gates into Jerusalem and in this case Rabab is most likely referring to a place where people could plan on meeting when they were in Jerusalem for prayers. Although Palestinians are not allowed to travel around their land although exceptions are sometimes made, particularly for prayers. Therefore, one could meet in Jerusalem at a particular gate to see loved ones.

¹⁶ *Fairuz* is a legend of Arab music from Lebanon who writes and sings in Arabic. She sings about social issues and inspires people's emotions about the struggles of the Palestinians and Arabs.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: Can you go back to the...

Rabab: Yeah, so...yeah.

Nadine: ...so...I hate to have cut you off, but can you back to the...

Rabab: It's all right. But [inaudible] so in...in...So there were all these professors, and some were from the Communist Party and it was the Jordanian Communist Party. And they used all...all this activism going on. So you start participating. And the Palestinians in the West Bank are not allowed to sleep overnight in Israel. Were not allowed. We have to go and come back, if we are allowed to go, and...And the Israeli Communist Party every year did a camp...work camp in Nazareth, at which people will come from all over the world, and work. And I was dying to go, but I knew if I go, I'm not...I'm not supposed to go, and I knew my parents would not allow me, so I went without telling them. And I got involved with people, and I was just very close to what's going on. And I started becoming more and more and more active.

Nadine: I see.

Rabab: But my activism really became...I mean, in the sense of not taking a leading role rather than...

Nadine: Yeah, that's what I would like to hear about.

Rabab: ...rather than just participating in whatever people were...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...organizing and so on. What really took place in Madison, Wisconsin when I came to this country, I participated in the Union of Arab Students at the time, and I was elected president. It was my first year. And then and [inaudible].

Nadine: And when was that?

Rabab: This was in 1978.

Nadine: 1978.

Rabab: Yeah. And, and then the following year, the Palestinian students were becoming more active and we founded the Union of Palestine Students and it was becoming chapters all over the United States. And we would go to camps, you know, go on buses and meet and argue and debate. Even the smallest point, what kind of statement is it "the" or "a", you know, "the" peace process or "a" peace process.

Nadine: [laughs]

Rabab: I mean, it was important, was very important all of these debates that were going on. And the place, you know, made us like very conscious. And I think...so this was con—and there were a lot of activist organizations. U.S. Activist organizations on campus. I mean, Madison, Wisconsin has tons...tons of them. So little by little you start like learning. You know, you have the sense that there are injustices in the world. You know, like when I was little, I remember one, there was a newspaper at one point, and there the picture of Angela Davis¹⁷ on the front. And there was about her being arrested. And I remember my mother saying, “She’s friend, she’s friend.” And like...

Nadine: [laughs]

Rabab: ...I know somebody’s...I...I don’t remember who said, “Why would you say that? That’s...” “She’s black, she’s in U.S., she’s friend.” As in...you know, I mean, so there is all this kind of things that, that begin, and you start connecting things. Because in Palestine you’re not interacting with a whole lot of other people from other countries. Little by little you start connecting, and you start seeing the intersections...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...the similarities. And so there were a lot of coalitions going on, and you also see the differences, and the tensions, and what sort of programs the movements were having. There were a lot of women who were doing women’s history...International Women’s Day¹⁸ actually. So I would participate with them. And in 1982, I think the Israeli invasion of Lebanon¹⁹, and specifically the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, it’s kind of like did it for me.

Nadine: So that’s when the Israeli massacre...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...of Sabra—it was...it was an Israeli massacre. It was a massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Shatila Camp²⁰, in the area of Sabra²¹ and Shatila. Sabra is near Shatila.

¹⁷ *Angela Davis* is a radical Black American activist who worked with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement. She is well known for her arrest as a conspirator in the prison break of George Jackson on August 7, 1970 and making it onto the FBI’s Most Wanted List. She is currently a professor in the University of California system although then-Governor Reagan had claimed she would never work in the system again after she had been fired for her openly communist views.

¹⁸ *International Women’s Day* is celebrated throughout the world on March 8 to recognize women and the struggles they face worldwide.

¹⁹ Approximately 100,000 Palestinian refugees lived in Lebanon. In 1982, spurred by the failed assassination attempt on the prime minister, Israeli forces entered Lebanon in search of members of the PLO. A tentative cease-fire was eventually agreed upon, although it was not upheld by Israeli. When international and U.S. peacekeeping forces left, agreements were further breached and attacks continued.

²⁰ The Red Cross founded *Shatila Camp*, a Beirut refugee camp, in 1949 to accommodate Palestinian refugees. It was decimated in the 1982 Israeli attack on Lebanon although Israel has denied involvement

Who were killed by Lebanese right wing militias who were aided in their massacre by the Israeli forces, led by the Israeli current prime minister, Ariel Sharon²², who actually turned on flood lights to facilitate the killing. Because they were usually using actually like...they weren't even using guns, they were using like knives and daggers and swords to kill people in silence, so through the night, so people wouldn't know. The killing actually began Wednesday night, September 17th and it did not stop until I think Friday September 30th. And by the time the UN workers and the Red Cross workers came in, a lot of the bodies had decomposed. I remember even on TV seeing like the flies. Some bodies, they couldn't know who they belonged to. Anyway, it was...you know, so that...before the massacre itself and on September, when Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, there was a lot of stuff going on. I began to realize...I began to realize...not decided actually not to realize, that I didn't want to be...to go to school. Education was a bourgeois thing. I wanted to...I just wanted to be an activist. And I was dying to go to Lebanon to volunteer. But like none of the Palestinian activists would send me. They said you have no skills, you're just going to be an obstacle. I was really offended, but they were right.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: And but there...but in lieu of that, we started organizing something called November 29th Coalition for Palestine²³, which has a group of many...a hundred I think organizations around the U.S. that organized the first huge march for Palestinian rights in 1981 at the United Nations, eight thousand...

Nadine: Wow.

Rabab: ...people. That was so big, eight thousand people at the time. And we took buses and we came and we met other people. And so immediately I started organizing with other people in Madison and Milwaukee²⁴, teach-ins, bringing speakers to come. One of the areas, because I remember Oscar Shapone a *compañero*²⁵ from El Salvador, who actually didn't speak...you know, his English wasn't that...that good. But we bumped into each other along the way...in India, of all places, we were at the World Social Forum²⁶. And they...we were just building...

with this specific incited. This camp is formally recognized by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. See <http://www.un.org/unrwa>

²¹ There was also a refugee camp in *Sabra*, a town near the Shatila refugee camp.

²² *Ariel Sharon* served as Israel's Minister of Defense from 1981-1983. He ordered the Israeli army to invade Lebanon in 1982. In 1983, Sharon was found indirectly responsible for the Lebanon massacre and was removed from office.

²³ In 1997, the United Nations designated *November 29* the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

²⁴ University of Wisconsin has 13 campuses including Madison and Milwaukee.

²⁵ *Compañero*: a Spanish word that means "companion" or "buddy."

²⁶ The first *World Social Forum* was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 as a response to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual meeting of the world's most powerful political and business leaders. According to its Charter of Principles, the World Social Forum is "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...movements. And so then...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...I moved to New York and I became more active. And [inaudible]

Nadine: And is that when you were involved with the Women's Organization?

Rabab: In...yeah. In...

Nadine: Can you tell us about that?

Rabab: ...that's when...that's when we founded it. We...you know, I moved to New York and there was a whole bunch of us. And we were...the year before there was a decision to start a chapter for the General Union of Palestinian Women²⁷ in the United States. And the General Union of Palestinian Women, GUPW, is one of the mass institutions of the PLO²⁸. It was founded in 1965. And the...then somehow the Arafat and company decided that they didn't have a whole lot of women belonging to the main party of the PLO. So they banned, they stopped the decision, they froze. They didn't say, "We're not going to implement it," they said, "We need to defer," okay, hoping that they will recruit more people to have a union. And so...

Nadine: So that was...

Rabab: ...and many of us were...

Nadine: Who made the decision to freeze?

Rabab: Arafat...

Nadine: Arafat.

liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centered on the human person." The Forum has been held annually in Porto Alegre since 2001.

²⁷ "The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) was established in 1965 as a body within the Palestinian Liberation Organization and according is considered to be the official representative body for Palestinian women around the world. It is also the umbrella for all women's organizations in Palestine and in exile. The main goal of GUPW, since its establishment, has been to mobilize women within Palestinian communities to participate in various social, economic, and political processes, which contribute to their development." (Mission Statement from GUPW's website at <http://www.gupw.net>)

²⁸ The *Palestine Liberation Organization* (PLO) was established in 1964, bringing together groups working to free Palestine for Palestinians. After the defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, Yasser Arafat's Fatah party emerged as the most powerful group in the PLO and took over the organization, making Arafat the chairman of the PLO executive committee. In 1988 the PLO reversed its position on "terrorism" and supported "the right of all parties concerned in the Middle East conflict to live in peace and security."

Rabab: ...and the party which is...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...supposed, the status quo party, not the...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...ruling party in Palestine, if there is a ruling party. And, and then we...we were...we didn't have any...anything to work under. We didn't have like a group to work with. And we were trying to participate in International Women's Day. Again, in 1983, I had to move to New York in November 1982, and there were other women who were doing it before that I can talk about the experience I participated in. And we would go to the all the organi—activities and nobody will...will let us participate. Everybody will say, "You don't represent anybody. And then others will say, "Well, are you a nationalist or a feminist?" "We don't know." "What you said, Palestinian are you...what are you going to do? Are you going to fight against your men?" And we're saying, "Yes, but we have to tell you about the occupation," and it wasn't going anywhere. So we didn't...you know, so we...I remember we sat around the table in Brooklyn, kitchen table, and we said, "We're going to find a Palestinian women's association."

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: We...we're getting invited to, you know, to set the record straight, we actually got invited to Medgar Evers College. At the time by Betty Shabbaz²⁹, Malcolm X's³⁰ widow and other women who were active there. We were invited to Harriet Tubman High School in Harlem³¹. There were a few places. El Centro, which is a Puerto Rican Center at Harlem, at Hunter College, operated by a number of Puerto Rican activists and feminists. But in terms of like the...what would be called the mainstream women's movement, we didn't have...And people were saying, "You...you should have your own organization too. And we started our own organization. And then we realized there were organizations flourishing all o over the country. Was one in San Francisco, there was one

²⁹ *Betty Shabbaz* is the widow of Civil Rights activist Malcolm X. She herself was an active advocate for the rights of African-Americans and fought against racial inequality. She was a professor of Health Education at Medgar Evers College at the City University of New York in Brooklyn.

³⁰ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

³¹ *Harlem* is a neighborhood of New York that is mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities. El Barrio is a neighborhood of East Harlem and has many Spanish-speaking residents.

in Chicago, there was one in Los Angeles, in Houston, Texas. I think in Austin at UT there's some students forming it. So, you know, little by little, all these groups. That was 1983. In 1986 we founded...

Nadine: Women's groups.

Rabab: Women's groups. Yeah, yeah. All these women have already set up activities and associations in different places, and we called it Association, the same name that is used in Palestine for women's associations. So sort of like a broad umbrella that everybody can build.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: All Palestinian women, you know, can belong. And in 1986 we...we came together and we unified in the Union of Palestinian...That's why it's called Union of Palestinian Women's Association, not Union of Palestinian Women.

Nadine: Ah.

Rabab: Because the association's retained auto— you know, autonomy at the same time we were unified in this national program. And thus the revolution began for us. [laughter]

Nadine: I'm really interesting to know about the issues that the association tackled.

Rabab: It was very interesting in...In different places there were different issues. And I think it depended on who was part of what I know, um, for instance, when we would meet at the Union, the San Francisco women would come and we...they would say like, "Oh, you know, so-and-so is working in a liquor store." And the women who were devout Muslims in Brooklyn would say, "Liquor store? Palestinians owning liquor stores?" It was...it was sort of there were all the kind of like culture, you know, sensibilities and differences and so on, that, well, it didn't mean much at the time. I mean, people...part of the Palestinian movement is democratic secular Palestine, democratic secular state, as an antidote and a position, an opposition to Zionism, calling Israel a Jewish state. So that...Christian, Muslim, it...Atheist, what have you, it didn't really matter. And there wasn't that much [inaudible] at the time yet. But so we didn't...that, that wasn't kind of like a huge issue. One of the issues were, there was a very big tension from the beginning, and I'm kind of like, now that I'm beginning to kind...write about this subj—it's coming to me to...to realize what the tension was. But was a lot of tension around the whole discourse of modernity and modernization.

Nadine: Do you mind if I ask you, if we...if you tell us a little first for people who don't know much about the work...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...what were the issues that that association was tackling. Like can you tell us about some of the issues?

Rabab: Well, some of the stuff.

Nadine: Of that [inaudible]..

Rabab: One of the...one of the main...oh, oh.

Nadine: ...that drew your group together.

Rabab: ...okay. Let's see what...what we...We had a very minimal like points of unity to...

Nadine: What's the agenda or...?

Rabab: Yeah. The overall program let's say...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ..that we agreed upon...

Nadine: Great, great.

Rabab: ...because there were differences. The overall program we agreed on was the question of doing...being a Palestinian women's organization. What does that mean?

Nadine: So that's interesting.

Rabab: What does that mean? Is it a Palestinian organization made up of women, or is it the women's organization that happens to be Palestinian. And it was always this...the tension was always there so, because on one hand, we wanted to...to...we wanted to carve a place in the leadership of the Palestinian movement. So we used to get very upset when there are demonstrations, for instance at the Israeli mission, at the United Nations, when it's all these guys holding the microphone and chanting slogans. Or like making speeches, or organizing security for demonstration. We...we're there. More of...more of us are there than there are guys, so how come we're not making decisions in what's going on? And it wasn't really...it wasn't kind of like we sat around and we cooked it. We...it became little but little, the recognition of things that were happening and we would just negotiate, and we will say, "Okay," at...At some point, I remember we said, "You know what? You don't want us to make decisions, we're not coming." And they said, "Well, how could you not come? This is Palestine." We said, "We'll have our own demonstration for Palestine. We don't have to be part of this." And this was kind of part of the negotiations of how to make sure that we have some influence on the program, who gets to speak, who gets to participate, how do we take care of like...Because we're also...we brought a lot of children. Not that, I mean, I don't believe in a lot of [inaudible]

didn't believe that women necessarily have to be linked with children, but that was the reality. Okay, the women came with children. So we wanted...you know, we wanted the kids...when the boys get like very angry and they wanted to jump at the police and start fighting with them, kind of mixing up with the police in New York, "Is it the Israeli military occupation? Is this a demonstration against Israeli...protesting Israeli military, or protesting police brutality? What...what's the target. You know, kind of clarifying things and so on. We wanted to make sure that we're all protected. And then there was the whole other thing of whether you are a citizen or not. So if you're not a citizen, you can't actually afford to get caught up in civil disobedience action, because you could get deported. And if you get deported, where are you going to get deported? To Israeli occupation. Who's going to receive you?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Israeli military at the airport. So there were all these kind of like issues that coming up. But there was also a very serious thing that we specifically were concerned about, those of us who were more active than others and sort of the leadership of the Union, is to see what we can do within the community. This was a very big issue. And then defining what the committee is, is a whole other question. But how is it that we will provide space for women to be able to participate in things? Get together, argue with each other, organize themselves? How is it that we can provide space for the younger kids.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So we started doing Saturday schools to teach Arabic, geography, history. We actually had like a whole group...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that like for they were five years old, and then I think they got to be maybe twelve, thirteen. They dance the Depke³², perform in public places, they'll go into huge demonstrations on these days...

Nadine: And the Depke [inaudible] represents...

Rabab: ...which is the Palestinian folkloric dance, which is thumping³³. They...you wear boots and you stomp on the floor and so on and then the kids were learning, you know, Arabic and speaking about things, arguing about things. And it was...it...it really...it really was an amazing space. I'm...you know, even now as I...I kind of revised the narrative in my mind and I think about, you know, being self critical of myself and my other comrades and so on. Still it was an amazing space. It was...it...I mean, at one...at one association meeting, Union meeting, we had hundred women standing in line to argue about one clause. I don't remember what was, but everybody wanted to argue. They made the trip, thousands of miles away, nobody was going to take that...that, you know,

³² *Depke*: A Middle East folk dance.

³³ Palestinian dance where one wears boots and stomps on the floor.

that right away. She is standing in line, you know, waiting. And everybody like Arabic, English, the people, some...some young kids were speaking in English, some people were speaking in Arabic. Some women were wearing the tobe³⁴, the Palestinian traditional dress, you know, the embroidered one. Some women were wearing like pants and some women wear...wearing [inaudible], you have some women who were not. And there was this kind of...I don't know, and I still trying to figure out, what was it, that there was this kind of tolerance, and patience with each other. I mean, we would sit and we would argue till the morning and we'll vote.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: It wasn't...it wasn't the question of consensus. It was a question, we disagree, we vote. And, you know, if you know the vote, you'll just have to either...try to convince...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...me, or just live with it, okay.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: But, but there were...but it was...it was just...there was a lot of respect for each other.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It was...I...I miss...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...and a lot of us miss that. Then there was the whole question of our interaction with...with the U.S. women's movement and...

Nadine: Can I ask...

Rabab: ...yeah.

Nadine: ...you a question about, you talked a little bit about what the associations...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...kind of did around gender, having women make more decisions...

Rabab: Yeah.

³⁴ *Tobe*: Traditional embroidered Palestinian dress.

Nadine: ...in the movement at large, and then building kind of community based work.

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: Was there also a link between these issues and a larger movement for the liberation of Palestine?

Rabab: Yeah, definitely.

Nadine: Can you tell us about that?

Rabab: Definitely. And I...you know, this is...this is some of the stuff that was going on. That...this is where like a lot of tensions were going...on different levels. One of the things that kept...that was very interesting to me, and happened around the National March for Abortion Rights. It was called the National March for Reproductive Rights³⁵. But I really call it National March for Abortion Rights, because it was NARAL³⁶ and Planned Parenthood³⁷, and the whole...all the...most of the slogans were “Have mercy on Mother Earth, zero population growth,” you know, well, because the people of the Third World are going to grow so much, so take over the world, so we have to minimize the numbers. And at the same time, we were getting reports from Palestine, that Palestinian women who were marching in demonstrations were having a lot of miscarriages. At some point there were kind of like two thousand miscarriages within six months. And some women began theorizing that this has to do with tear gas, poisonous tear gas. The link was never established actually. Physicians [inaudible] tried to establish. But they said, something is going on, but we can’t we don’t have enough time to do the research and so on. And we were trying to figure out how to...how to articulate that. And on one hand, there is the whole question of...some of us we really wanted to talk about reproductive rights. To have or not to have children. Not for the U.S. women not to have children and Palestinian women to have children. And of course we’re talking about the U.S. women now, were thinking around the monolith of thinking about U.S. women as all white middle class, you know. But then as we were beginning to figure out like what to...what to write—we wanted to write a leaflet and talk about how—It was I think Reagan administration³⁸ at the time. They were, they were issuing all sorts of judgments against

³⁵ *National March for Reproductive Rights* was a march in 1992 which had the goal of raising awareness of abortion and issues of reproductive choice. Although the march helped white middle-class women realize their potential in advocating for reproductive choice, the groups who sponsored it—NARAL and Planned Parenthood—are critiqued for their lack of diversity or analysis of race and class implications of “choice.”

³⁶ The *National Abortion Rights Advocacy League*, NARAL Pro-Choice, is an organization which advocates and organizes for abortion rights. NARAL supports abortion providers as well as campaigns for governmental recognition of abortion rights.

³⁷ *Planned Parenthood* is a national organization of member clinics who provide a range of reproductive health services to women at low or not cost. They also provide abortions although, due to governmental regulations, these are not reduced in cost. Along with operating clinics there is also an advocacy and activist side to the organization as they work on state and federal levels to fight for “choice.”

³⁸ *Ronald Reagan* was the president of the United States from 1981-1989 and was a conservative Republican. He had a very hard line stance against Communist states (which he dubbed to be an “evil empire”) and was embroiled in many international scandals and conflicts.

women. They were like nasty and sexist. And at the same time they were also funding Israel to use weapons to kill us and to....

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...poison people and so on. And at the same...So we were trying to figure out what position, what do we do? Do we talk...talk about this? Do we not talk about this?

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: Some of the women in the Union were against abortion. They didn't think it was right, either on moral grounds or on religious grounds. Other women thought it's fine, you know, just go have the abortion and move on with your life. So there is disagreements, but worse...but it's one thing to have an individual disagreement. It's another thing to carve a position for the Union. I mean, this is our, the group that represents us, 2000 women, you know. And so what we...we...and then we actually, um, began having discussions with a whole bunch of groups in...among communities of color. The...the...I think it was the Coalition of Hundred Black Women³⁹, at the time, which came out with a statement around sterilization abuse⁴⁰ and on reproductive rights, and that. So sort of, you know, allowed us to be able to have this kind of information and how do we articulate the position. So that was con—that was something that was resolved in a way that wasn't too stressful. But the other thing that almost split us was the question of Norplant⁴¹. We were having a meeting for the newsletter of the Voice of Palestinian Women. This was our newsletter. We...I think we used to put every two months. At the time used to live in Detroit.

Nadine: **Hm.**

³⁹ The *National Coalition of 100 Black Women* (NCBW) was started as a non-profit organization in 1981 whose mission is to develop “socially conscious female leaders who are committed to furthering equity and empowerment for women of color in the society-at-large, improving the environment of their neighborhoods, rebuilding their communities and enhancing the quality of public and private resources for the growth and development of disadvantaged youths. NCBW is dedicated to community service, the creation of wealth for social change, the enhancement of career opportunities for women of color through networking and strategically designed programs and the empowerment of women of color to meet their diverse needs.”

⁴⁰ In the 1970s, it was discovered that many poor women, in particular women of color, were being *sterilized* illegally (without their consent, when they were too young, without having an interpreter, etc.). Although there were laws against this illegal sterilization, racist ideas of individual doctors as well as government officials made the problem continue. Even today, there are reported cases of the abuse of sterilization. Because poor women and women of color have been targeted for “birth reduction” programs they are often critical of the white middle-class arguments of “choice” as choice is often a questionable term.

⁴¹ *Norplant* is a form of hormonal birth control which is implanted under the skin of a woman's arm and remains there for five years. The desired effect is to make the woman unable to have children while it is inserted and the theory is that when she removes it she will be able to get pregnant. Norplant is very controversial though because it has very negative side effects (including death) in some women who have used it. Critics claim this has not stopped doctors and NGOs from providing it onto poor women and women of color in the US as well as women all over the world.

Rabab: Michigan. Julia Rahab. Professor. She was professor here, at one of the colleges. And so we...One woman came and she was from Chicago, active with a lot of groups of activists of...feminists of color, and she said, "We have to talk about this. This is...this is horrible. They're putting them in our communities. They're sending them, dumping it in the Third World. We have to say something." And the other women were saying, "No, we're not going to say anything about this, because if we say something about it, women who may want to have an abortion will stop having...will stop having birth control. So we're actually, you know, contributing to backwardness. I mean, this is...So it was, you know, back and forth. Back and forth, they would...but...and actually at the end, the vote was not to put it.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: So we didn't write anything about it. So this wasn't something...this wasn't the resolution in a, you know, good way, the way I'm...according to my view. So there were all sorts of like ways to figure out how to do it. Another big issue was what to do with Hanan Ashrawi.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: Because Hanan...

Nadine: **Known as...**

Rabab: ... Hanan Ashrawi is...was at the time the Dean of Arts and Science at Birzeit University. She has a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Was Edward Said's, the late Edward Said⁴², professor at Columbia University, the author of *Orientalism*⁴³, who coined the phrase.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: A great intellectual. And...and so she was the dean and she became the spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation at the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991⁴⁴, which it was supposed to produce an international conference to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But then there was something going, cooking, secretly at Oslo, which became later the Oslo Accords⁴⁵, which basically destroyed the international process, the multilateral...

⁴² *Edward Said* (1935-2003) is a famous scholar who was considered one of Palestine's greatest advocates within the United States. *Orientalism* (1978) is considered by many to be his most influential book.

⁴³ *Orientalism* examines Western representations and stereotypes of the East. Said argued that Western perceptions of Eastern culture were often incorrect and misconstrued.

⁴⁴ The *Madrid Peace Conference* was jointly sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union where leaders from Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, as well as the Palestinians, met to negotiate peace issues.

⁴⁵ The *Oslo Accords* are also known as the "Declaration Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements." This document was signed on September 13, 1993 in Washington D.C. by representatives of the State of Israel and the PLO. Both parties agreed on specific rules regarding a five-year interim period of Palestinian self-rule; these principles are specifically defined in the Oslo Accords.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...negotiations. But she became very well know, because she was very articulate. There was another person. Heather Abdishefi, a doctor from Gaza, who was the spokesperson now who actually was very articulate. But someone, I don't know, the media picked up only because there is a woman and, of course, all Palestinian women are very backward. And there is the exceptionalism, Hanan Ashrawi. So the media picked on her and so on. And so after a while, Hanan became very well known. She became the spokesperson. She ended up joining the Oslo team and she was coming to Washington for negotiations. And Hannah...and so we, those of us in the U.S., wanted to bring Hanan to speak in the U.S. The Palestinian women with whom the grassroots activists⁴⁶, with whom we have contacts in Palestine, they didn't want us to bring Hanan in.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Because they kept saying, "Why she never threw a stone, she never went into demonstration. Why you bringing her?"

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: You know? "Why are you promoting her?" And we're trying to say, "Well, you know, she's really articulate. If she comes, she will be quoted if she doesn't come."

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: And so it was...it was, it was like really very tense, because...and it made it clear that, yes, we do have the same goal of freedom and liberation. However, we do have differences in how we perceive of it. And it was also the question for us is, why...how...not only why do we do what we do, but how do we do it? In the process of doing your activism, do you compromise? Because we did not have disagreements, that, you know, Hanan, yeah, she wasn't a grassroots activist. She did not get her authority or...or her legitimacy from the grassroots. Although her rise to fame was reflective of the cumulative struggle of the Palestinian people. But she wasn't accountable to the women.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: I mean, she wasn't. She became a minister. So was...she had, so he recommend. They're not accountable to the...to the women whose interests they're supposed to represent.

Nadine: Hm-hm.

⁴⁶ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

Rabab: You know. So this is the...this was a very big dilemma that in the end we actually, we ended up bringing Hanan to the National Organization for Women⁴⁷. They had their 25th anniversary. And anyway, they would not have taken a grassroots activist. So we suggested Hanan, and Hanan was quoted in *The New York Times*, in the media and so on, made a lot of statements. But at the same time for our conventions, we did, we continued to bring the grassroots activists.

Nadine: Hm. Hm.

Rabab: Because for us...So I mean...they never forgave us.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: Every time, you know, I or other people bump into our comrades, they say, “You brought Hanan in.” You know, it’s the...I don’t know. It’s just...it...this is what happened. I don’t know if we would have done it again had we been faced with the situation again. But I think this also shows the contradictions of...of activism, of movement building. The things are never clear cut. You can’t just say, “Oh, this is good and this is bad.”

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And so on. You can only say that if you don’t do anything. You can pass all the judgment you want. You can...but if you’re really involved, there...things are much more complicated than...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...you know, the simple way of dealing with it. So this was...yeah.

Nadine: Yeah. That’s great.

Rabab: This was a very big issue. Yeah.

Nadine: Thanks.

Rabab: Yeah, yeah.

Nadine: I think what I’m going to do now is shift to some different historical moments...

Rabab: Hm.

⁴⁷ *National Organization for Women* (NOW) was founded 1966, with the goal of taking action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; and end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society. However, NOW has also been criticized for being focused on what is good for middle-class white heterosexual women.

Nadine: ...in your activism, so that we'll have time to talk a little bit about your views on some of the concepts—like feminism and transnationalism.

Rabab: Sure.

Nadine: And all that. So it seems that your work with the Association was during a certain historical moment.

Rabab: Right, right.

Nadine: And what I'm going to ask you is to tell a little bit about the historical shift when that organization's or that association's work faded out.

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: Um, so we could start with that. And then I'm going to ask you about, um, your more recent work and how your activism has shifted with new and different historical moments.

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: So can you tell me about how the...

Rabab: The...the Union...the Union continued being very strong and active, and conflicted over all sorts of things, you know, for membership.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Who are the members? Are the members Palestinians? Or Palestinian identified? And what is Palestinian identified?

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: You know. It's very loose thing. But what's Palestinian? Is Palestinian a Palestinian—a woman of Palestinian parents? Half? One parent Palestinian or not? Married to a Palestinian?

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: What do we do with the women who have Palestinian women partners? I mean, this...all these issues, right? So there was always this conflicts, back and forth, you know. We...we fought, we argued, we screamed at each other. They were that. The thing that really broke us was the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords in 1993, ah, really did the Union in and two years later we actually decided to fold. Part of the reason is a lot of our members went back.

Nadine: The Oslo Accords is...?

Rabab: ...to Palestine. the Oslo Accords, in 1993, this was...this was the secret deal that was being cooked in Oslo as the Madrid Peace Conference was being held for international negotiations. There was a group of the Palestinian...Palestinians led by Abu Mazen⁴⁸ who was elected prime minister and had to resign because he failed at his mission, you know. The U.S. and Israel basically appointed him, even though the Palestinians appointed him, he was their choice. And...and he wasn't, by the way, by himself acting. He was acting on behalf of Arafat and others. And the Israelis at the time, it was the Labor Party⁴⁹, Rabin and...Yitzak Rabin⁵⁰ who was later assassinated, who became very famous in the first Intifada, calling for the...the policy of might force and beatings, breaking the bones of young kids, you know, so they wouldn't throw stones, so they would be incapacitated for three months, while their arms heal. And there was this famous video, CBS, of two soldiers, you know, breaking...break...45 minutes, which was on TV. Anyway, he got the Nobel Prize.

Nadine: Peace Prize.

Rabab: Yeah. And so this, the Oslo Accords in 1993, they signed it, the Israelis and...and the...and the Palestinians on September 13th, 1993, at the lawn of the White House. Clinton was supposedly the neutral observer blessing the...the thing. And what happened...and it produced Palestinian self-rule arrangements on the West...parts of the West Bank and Gaza, divided the West Bank in Gaza, six...

Nadine: Palestinian self rule.

Rabab: Self rule meaning...meaning only Palestinians rule themselves. It's not...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...it's exactly what it is. It doesn't mean government, it doesn't mean independence, it doesn't mean...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...you know, Palestinian passport. It has...It's...actually what they did is they took the Israeli IDs that Palestinians had and they converted them in the Arabic, but the number is the same. I mean, it's exactly the same, and it has Hebrew in it, and it says that it is issued...

⁴⁸ *Abu Mazen* is also known as Mahamoud Abbas. For about six months in 2003, he was the first Prime Minister but resigned. In 2005, after Yasseer Arafat's death, he was elected president of the Palestinian National Authority.

⁴⁹ Founded in 1948, the *Labor Party* began as a socialist party. Over the years it has become more moderate, holding various seats in the government by aligning with other parties.

⁵⁰ *Yitzak Rabin* served as Israel's Prime Minister from 1974-1977 then again in 1992. He was assassinated in 1995 by a man who opposed his involvement in developing the Oslo Accords.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...with the permission...and...and approval, authority of the Israeli Civil Administration, supposedly. So, yeah...

Nadine: So I'm going to move you back, but in...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...in a nutshell, it's...

Rabab: It's an agreement that basically produced...legitimized the occupation...

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: ...of the West Bank and Gaza. But instead of having the Israelis policing the Palestinian cities and towns from which Israel withdrew, they have 13 Palestinian security agencies that police the Palestinians.

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: What this produced is that, on one hand, it produced Palestinian Israeli-free areas to which some Palestinians were living in the U.S., especially recent immigrants who came in since...since 1967, could actually go back.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Could go back to their homes and so on. And there's some families who did not want to bring up their kids American—your research. So they brought them, took them back to teach them Arabic, put them in schools and so on. And there were also some Palestinians who were so disgusted with the process that they...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...decided they didn't want to be involved anymore. Demoralized, a lot of people were demorlar—demoralized. There were some people who've wast—who...well, not wasted I would say, but invested.

Nadine: Yeah, they felt that they...

Rabab: Most of their use, you know, in activism and so on, they kept to the point where they're middle aged...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...they have...they, they don't have jobs, they don't have anything. They don't have...they don't have anything for their retirement, you know. And so they tried...started to take care of their own affairs, because there was no more of this collectivity that stayed...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that, to which they can turn for support.

Nadine: So what happened...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...to the organization?

Rabab: So the Union, the Union basically, it just...it's...it's all this kind of like this...the richness and the...it was incredible organizing during the Intifada. I mean, it was just incredible. People, everybody—well, not everybody...

Nadine: And that was during the time of the first...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...Palestinian uprising.

Rabab: This was Intifada, yeah. Which began in 1987. And 1993, five years later...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: This was Oslo, and this...and, you know, the Gulf War⁵¹ actually, even the first U.S...U.S. attack on Iraq when Iraq occupied Kuwait and the U.S....

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...supposedly went to liberate the democracy in Kuwait. They did not actually weaken the Union, but...but...

Nadine: It was Oslo.

Rabab: Oslo, really, yeah, did us in. And so we...we basically...they weren't that many people around.

Nadine: Hm.

⁵¹ *Persian Gulf War* began in August of 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. On January 12, 1991, U.S. Congress authorized "use of force" in Iraq. The war continued until June 1991 when the Iraqis were forced out of Kuwait.

Rabab: There were all sorts of, you know, thing...the...a lot of the people in the U.S. Peace Movement thought that it's finished.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: They said “Why are you still talking about this? We have peace, you have to...” And you start like telling them, you know, that...there is real—this is really horrible, and I remember, actually I had spoken in Ohio with an Israeli feminist at something called Mershon Center for Peace Studies⁵² at Ohio...Ohio State University. And I was criticizing, you know, how the Palestinians are going about the legislative council and so on. And the Israeli speaker jumps at me and she says, “Well, you know, but...” And I said, “Well, we deserve...we deserve democracy like everybody else.” And she jumps at me and she says, “No, no. But you have to, you know, take your time. You have to be patient [inaudible] because I'm not used to this. You need to...you need...you need like baby steps, and so on, and people...”

Nadine: You're not used to democracy.

Rabab: We're not used to that. And people in the audience there agree, and I'm like, there's something wrong here. Yeah, so there was...there was all of this stuff that's...that was going. So it's basically...I mean, there was no support. We folded and a lot of people continued active on all sorts of issues.

Nadine: Hm. Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: On, on local.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: But there was this kind of thing that brought us all together...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...once a year, and we had all these committees we will meet in different places. I mean...

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: ...we would go to all these international conferences— 8, 9, 10, and we all had papers to present, and arguments, and we had banners and...I mean, we were...we were just...we were really...

Nadine: Wow.

⁵² The *Mershon Center for Peace Studies* aims to “advance the understanding of national security in a global context.” See <http://www.merc.ohio-state.edu>

Rabab: ...It was a revolution. It was. But it's okay.

Nadine: It's a privilege to hear about it.

Rabab: The torch lasts. It continues (laughs).

Nadine: That's right.

Rabab: It doesn't go away.

Nadine: Well, I know that...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...since that time...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...you've continued your activism in all kinds of different ways.

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: And I'm actually going to jump us to some more recent historical moments that...you know, there was a...up until the second Palestinian uprising, which started in November of 2000...

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: ...um, can you tell me how your activism has been? And...and during that time you went to school, you...

Rabab: I went back to school, I got my Ph.D.

Nadine: You finished your Ph.D.

Rabab: I got my BA...well, first my BA and then the Ph.D.

Nadine: Your BA, okay.

Rabab: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Nadine: And, you know, I wish we could hear everything. But we're going to kind of...

Rabab: You do hear everything

Nadine: It would be interesting...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...to hear about that period, during the first Palestinian upri—not the first, but he big Palestinian uprising of...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...'87 till Oslo, and now if we could talk about the second Palestinian Intifada which was...

Rabab: Yes.

Nadine: ...more recent, November 2000, and then after that was September 11th.⁵³

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: So it would be interesting to hear about your activism in...in these times.

Rabab: Well, I was in different places. When I was a graduate student I...I worked on the Academic Freedom Campaign⁵⁴ for the Palestinians, because Israel was already instituting closures⁵⁵.

Nadine: And you went to graduate school at...

Rabab: At Yale University.

Nadine: At Yale University.

Rabab: And...and in...

Nadine: Sociology?

⁵³ On *September 11*, 2001 two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, New York. This spurred attacks on suspected terrorists in Afghanistan as well as spurred a war in Iraq. There were many ramifications of these attacks in the United States including increased racism and “security” as well as a burgeoning of patriotism and, some argue, a lessening of certain civil liberties through passage of the Uniting and Strengthening American by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (also known as USA PATRIOT ACT or Patriot Act).

⁵⁴ The Academic Freedom Campaign is a campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel. See <http://www.pacbi.org>

⁵⁵ *Closures* are periods during which Israeli forces take over a Palestinian town, including restrictions on residents’ movement and curfews. Restrictions can include prohibitions from using cars, traveling to other towns, or exchanging goods. See <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA>

Rabab: In Sociology, yeah. And the Israelis were putting closures, preventing students from getting to their universities. This was before September 2000. People think that all the closures began on Septem—This was right after Oslo.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: I mean, Jerusalem got closed up. Gaza became a big prison. Palestinian Gazans couldn't come and go. So there was a big campaign to allow students for instance from Gaza to reach Birzeit University so they could actually have classes. And if they're at Birzeit, they had to stay for five years until they graduate, not see their parents, because if they go back to Gaza, they may never get to go back to classes and so on.

Nadine: So they were illegal students.

Rabab: So there was a big...yeah. So there was a big campaign, and I was...I was one of the coordinators in the U.S. for that, and, you know, doing things, not as much as I was doing before, because I was a graduate student.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And I had all this requirements that I had to do.

Nadine: (laughs)

Rabab: And, but then I also went to Palestine and...and during my field research, I taught at Birzeit University Women's Studies. I got involved in all sorts of activism as usual. And, and then...and then in September 2000, I was actually at the American University in Cairo. I had graduated, I was teaching at American University in Cairo. And, you know, little by little I started getting involved, which was really weird, because I'm a Palestinian with U.S. citizenship, in Cairo. This is the first time that I'm in a position of power. I'm not the student who is asking everybody to go on strike. I'm actually the power. But at the same time, if I mobilize my students, the administration may think that I'm the one who's mobilizing them, troublemaker professor. And so it was, it was very interesting place to find myself in. I mean, I was active. I was...kept going back and forth to Palestine interviewing people, coming back, speaking about it, coming to the U.S. a few times, speaking about this. Organizing my students I...to go to a trip on...during a class to a Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, getting to know, you know, the students and so on. And when I came back to the U.S. a year after, of course, you know, lo and behold, September 11th is the first day of my first lecture, an Introduction to Gender and Sexuality at NYU. And, yeah, so it was...it was very interesting. The whole...the whole environment. It hasn't...it has changed, but it hasn't changed drastically in the sense that everything was wonderful before and everything became horrible after. It just...a whole lot of things that were hiding, that were below the surface, came to the surface. So the...so people were actually, the U.S. dominant discourses could now practice discrimination and racism against Arabs without license. They...you know, now they can, they can go,

get away with it and they could say it, and actually not only it wouldn't be reprimanded, but they will actually be hailed as the great patriots, you know...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...for doing something that's their nationalist duties. So it...it's...it was completely different ways in which we had to respond differently. So, you know, a whole number of people, you included, me and a lot of people, we...we had to jump in and we had to, you know, be speaking and explaining what's going on, and making the linkages and at the same time, you know, not...not necessarily as we...as we talk against anti-Arab discrimination and Islamophobia and all the things that were happening after 9/11, at the same time clarifying that we're not actually defending the...the oppressive regimes in the Arab world. We've been against them all along, way before the United States remembered to come up with the it's own project of remaking the Middle East.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: We've, all along we've...we were against this. So there were a lot of activ—activists...activist activities going on— conferences, demonstrations.

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

Rabab: And so, yeah.

Nadine: **And where is the kind of gender component come into this recent wave of your activism, kind of a post-2000 activism of Rabab Abdulhadi? [laughs]**

Rabab: I don't know. I think it's just kind of like, you know, you keep reinventing yourself in all sorts of ways. And I think...I mean, one of the things that...that was always, you know, kind of like nagging in the back of your mind, and I know talking to a lot of activists, it's the same thing, that on one hand, you want to talk about women's liberation, you want to talk about women's feminism and so on. At the same time, you know that if...if you are part of an oppressed community, it's not only women who are oppressed. They...and...So how do you articulate that? It's very difficult to come up with that, especially when you are dealing in a context which likes to...which likes to organize everything in neat boxes. So have to be either women or a Palestinian. And you...you get into this schizophrenic, you know, act that I actually accommodated, because you can't be. What you are is you're informed, your actions are informed by *everything* that you are. It's not by one thing...

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: ...as opposed to the other. Something that Kimberle Crenshaw⁵⁶ talks...talks about how she went as a...as a black legal feminist lesbian scholar, when she goes to...when she goes to different spaces, she's expected to shake off part of her identity at the door, as she checks out her coat. You can't do that. It doesn't work. But one of the things that has troubled me, especially since 9/11, is this extreme attack against men, Arab and Muslim men, specifically targeted.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And the need to actually articulate a gender analysis that addresses this victimization and targeting of Arab and Muslim men. And at the same time also acknowledges, recognizes and theorizes and comes up with agendas for women's liberation.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Because it doesn't disappear. Women's...women's oppression doesn't...not disappear, let's say. I don't want to say it doesn't, because it becomes ahistorical. It does not disappear with the targeting of men. But we need to kind of like think about beyond essentialism. But it's one thing to say beyond essentialism, it's another thing to actually do it.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: It's much easier to theorize and say "Well, this is how things appear, you know?"

Nadine: (laughs)

Rabab: Critique them, right? Very smart piece and move on. But how do you, how do you actually, how do you do that? And I think it's...it's a very, very tricky game. Because on one hand, you have...we see how it is that the U.S. and especially...I mean, and I'm not...I'm not...I don't even...I'm not even talking about the U.S. government. I'm talking about U.S. supposedly feminist organizations who...whose main thing is gender apartheid in Afghanistan. Okay? And, and I'm very, very troubled by these slogans. You know, it's...a) it's just...even the use of the word "apartheid" in this particular context, what does this mean? But, and the way in which they jump on the bandwagon, and it's always like saving brown women from brown men, and...and kind of like never being self-reflexive about what's going on here, and as if, you know, thank God, we're in the United States because women have arrived. And they are not only equal, they're actually better of their men. Everything is wonderful. You know. So this kind of like completely lack of consciousness and extreme racism, to...to keep constructing women and that. And then being troubled every time another woman comes forward that actually...that under...under...undermines this model, that says, "Well, this is not right." And then this,

⁵⁶ *Kimberle Crenshaw* is one of the leading theorists on the concept of "intersectionality" which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

“She’s an exception.” Hanan Ashrawi, because she’s Christian. Of course she will be a feminist, you know.

Nadine: And she’s not Muslim.

Rabab: Yeah. There is always one reason or another why is it.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: It is...it’s like there’s no accounting for there are patterns of...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So this is...there is this question about...this whole question of what I call Imperial feminisms, okay. And then...and then there is the whole business of targeting men, and being between, in between to actually try to be able to carve a vision for liberation and...and action for liberation, and at the same time be able to say that, look, this is what’s being...women...Arab women and Muslim women are constructed as supposedly the antidote for moderation and Westernization and modernization in the region against these backward Arabs and Muslims uncivilized and so on. And I think...And it’s really troubling to actually to deal with it here. It’s very difficult. You know, Spivak⁵⁷ keeps saying, “Can the subaltern speak?” Okay? And...and then question is, maybe the subaltern is speaking but no one is listening. And it’s...it’s...it is so much easier and I know it’s very difficult to live under occupation, but it’s so much easier to have these conversations within specific communities. Not...I’m not talk about safe spaces. But it’s so much easier. Because the way in which it’s articulated, when you say women are...are...the Taliban⁵⁸ are...and it’s all about men and women. It’s like all men are oppressing all women, except for certain women who are our women, the exceptions.

Nadine: So you’re talking about..

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...like in dominant U.S....

Rabab: Yeah, yeah. In dominant U.S. feminism, and I would say like the feminism that is representative of the interest of white middle class heterosexual Anglo English-speaking...

Nadine: Um-hum.

⁵⁷ *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* is a theorist whose article “Can the Subaltern Speak” is a critical text in post-colonial and feminist scholarship.

⁵⁸ The *Taliban* was the regime put in charge of Afghanistan after the United States tried to get the Soviet Union out and then was consequently chased out of Afghanistan as a terrorist and oppressing regime. There were known for their extremely poor treatment of women, but also for their disregard for all human rights.

Rabab: ...white, yeah.

Nadine: So with all that as your back...

Rabab: Like Eleanor Smeal⁵⁹ and National Organization for Women.

Nadine: Okay.

Rabab: Okay.

Nadine: With all that as a backdrop, you've given me this, you know, backdrop to ask you questions about whether you identify as a feminist.

Rabab: Yes, reluctantly. [laughter]

Nadine: And actually, what would be interesting is to know with your work, with the Union...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...would you consider the work of the Union, kind of, would you consider the Union a feminist organization or association, what you call your Union?

Rabab: I...I, yeah, I do. I consider it a feminist organization. The problem is that we always have to qualify which feminism. Because I don't think feminism has got the point where it's actually...when you say feminism, we...even though we mean a transformative vision, a comprehensive agenda that talks about the liberation of people, including women. Not just women who are women. Even we still...it's still...feminism is still used mostly to connote a specific kind of feminin—So every time we want to talk about what we...what we might call fem—transnational feminism, or comprehensive feminist agenda and so on, you have to qualify it. You have to explain what...and I think...and so...But I think in that sense, yes. I think the Union was feminist. Because who's going to define feminism? Why is it that feminism gets defined...and as I say, why is it that feminism gets defined. I know why it is that...

I Um-hum.

Rabab: ...because it has all to do with the production and reproduction of knowledge, and who has monopoly on that, you know, who actually gets to say, this is what it is. Not who gets to say...a lot of people get to say, we all get to say. But who gets heard?

⁵⁹ *Eleanor Smeal* was president of the National Organization for Women and later founded the Feminist Majority Foundation. FMF focuses on women's equality and reproductive rights and has among its projects Afghan Women. The FMF site credits Smeal with leading the first national abortion rights march in 1986.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: And who's words gets validated, and how does that shift? I mean, unless there is kind of like social change, unless there is resistance, unless there is subversion, these words will continue being fraught with this kind of meanings.

Nadine: Hm. Um-hum.

Rabab: So I think in the sense of was the Union an example of...of...of women's liberation? Yes! It was an example of women's liberation. And...and it was a space in which women felt that they could come together, they could argue, they could do all sorts of things. They could...they could start gaining some economic independence, those who are not...and not all of us were dependent on the man, the fathers, the brothers, the husband, what have you, the son of the family. Not everybody was. And not...and not...and I'm not talking that everybody was. I'm not talking those of us where who were independent, not necessarily are the ones who are English speaking, who go to the universities, who are academics. It is not that neatly organized, okay. But...but, yes, I think it was a great feminist space. And I think it was one of the best feminist spaces, that makes it...that makes it so possible for you to actually talk with other people, because if you...if there is...if there is...if there is this attack against the community, and there is this attack against Palestine, and there is this attack against women and so on, you cannot afford not to be tolerant. You cannot afford to monopolize the truth. You cannot. You have to be able to talk with other people and accept what they're saying, and say...and, and expect them to also hear you out. Because that's the only thing that you have.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: And that's the only way you can move. But you have to start thinking, shifting your thinking of...of according to whom you're defining your agenda, whose measure, whose standard. What is it, how is that we can say this space is feminist or not? By the extent of women who is not wearing the hijab⁶⁰? Is that...?

Nadine: The hijab meaning the...

Rabab: Yeah, the...the headscarf that...that women wear, that could be a sign of Islam, a sign of cultural expression, whatever, yeah.

Nadine: So you're kind of getting into a discussion about, you know, your vision for, you know, for feminist practice and for maybe Arab and Arab-American feminism in some ways?

Rabab: Yes. And I think we have different feminisms also. Be—I think, I mean, but I think...and...and the bottom line is we really have to have a comprehensive agenda. I think it's impossible...

⁶⁰ *Hijab*: Veil or headscarf worn by some women as a sign of belief in Islam or of cultural identity.

Nadine: What do you mean by that?

Rabab: A comprehensive agenda, I think you cannot have gender liberation when you have...when you continue to have class oppression, when you con—when you have racial oppression, when you have sexual oppression. When you have all these systems of domination that exist.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: So, you know, you may be able there...Some women are liberated in some aspect over another. But for those of us who are actually at the intersection of these different systems of domination, you know...So, okay, so I may be...I may be, when I walk down the street, I may be thought of as...I could pass. Let's say not pass, but I could pass for not being Palestinian, until people see my ID and the "abdul" comes out. Then people say, "Abdul"—they don't even say the whole name right. And that's when like certain things start happening that may not happen...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...to another women who may...who may be brown like me, in a specific context.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: And so, you know, this...the...But I think unless we understand that, we understand the connections between them, and we understand that it is not really about *all* women's liberation—that it is about a notion of eliminating gender, hierarchy. But that's a long process, a), and 2) it shifts, gender hierarchy shifts in different contexts. It means different things, and it's always mediated and it's always structured by class, by race, by sexuality, by age, by ability.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Immigration status, what have you. So I think this is the way I...to me, this is what it means.

Nadine: Yeah, right.

Rabab: I don't think I will ever be free if Palestine continues to be occupied.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: I will never, I will never, I will...Because I'll never be able as...just to talk as a woman. I'm not just a woman.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: There is so many more things to me that it is just one part of who I am.

Nadine: And how would you link that kind of vision or...or how do you link your work? Or do you link your work with other women's organizations or other feminisms in the U.S.?

Rabab: Well, I'm...I'm...I...I would...I would...I link my work with those people who share the same kind of agenda. And I think...and, and I don't think it's an accident. I don't want to say "it just so happened." It's not an accident that our strongest alliances are with feminists of color, and feminists of...in the global south, as broadly defined. I don't think that's an accident.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: Because there is this kind of consciousness and awareness, that you...you cannot just say that, you know, I'm a feminist, I'm all for women's liberation, and I support what Israel is doing.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: Because...and I don't know if I can...There's this whole thing with these fashion models...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...at the apartheid wall that are supposed to make a statement...

Nadine: So the apartheid wall is...

Rabab: Apartheid wall is a wall that Israel is building. First they claim that it was...Israeli's was building between the West Bank and Israel to prevent Palestinians from going into Israel to carry out suicide bombing. And of cour—this is a big huge problematic thing about the security argument that security doesn't come from without. As long as you keep oppressing people, somebody's going to try to attack you. And so the best security of Israel is to stop, withdraw, end the occupation, stop being an oppressive state. But at the same time...so this...so but what the wall is doing actually, in actuality, is taking, stealing Palestinian land, cutting olive trees, pulling them from the roots, destroying vineyards, separating families from each other, locking communities inside with a gate at which an Israeli soldier stands. Sometimes he's around, sometimes he's not around, to let a woman maybe go see her children, or a man get to his field, or what have you. So the apartheid wall, an Israeli designer, by the name of Goldfiner, gets very disturbed, that this is a really a bad thing, and she has a fashion house called Comme il Faut...and Comme il Faut. And then so she goes and she brings these models and she puts them against the wall to protest, and she bumps actually with a Palestinian woman, Omil Hamad, who is not convinced that this is a good sign of protest. And they have an expression. Omil Hamad says to the Israeli designer, she says, "Well, why don't

you...why don't you come sit with me at the sit-in, if you want to protest, come join me at the sit-in." And the designer says to her, says to the people after the woman passes, "Do you want...does she want her picture taken?" And I think it's...it shows sort of, encapsulates the...the...this...I mean, this is...there is the whole struggle for life and death, by a woman. Omil Hamad, who is supposed to be insignificant, and she would be probably constructed as, by imperial feminism, as non-feminist. And there is the avowed feminist, the designer, who is actually trying to protest, doesn't get it!

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: Doesn't get what the struggle is all about. Ends up having the last word, talk about listening to women's voices, right? Certain women's voices.

Nadine: And she gets represented in the media.

Rabab: And, and she gets represented in the media and it's like all this...this advertisement for her models and for her clothes and so on. And it's all about...it's all about the comodification...comodification of...of oppression...

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Rabab: ...and the aesthetics of violence. That's exactly what's going on, and she's making money out of it. And...and so I think this is...there are all these troubling things...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...that really, they need to be exposed, and...And I think if you say that, and I think I...it's...it's not an accident that people who understand, relate to what we're talking about...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...of people who are subjected to all of these kind of...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...oppressive mechanisms, yeah.

Nadine: Yeah. Well, I have two more questions for you. One it has to do with a lot of your work kind of is framed these days around the rubric of transnational feminisms, Diaspora and exile. Can you tell us, kind of, what you mean by transnational feminism...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...and how you envision alliances between women in the U.S and women in the global south?

Rabab: I think, I mean, transnational I think of it as something that will...I began to apply it in my work as thinking about how Palestinian women who are living the Diaspora, in exile, in the U.S., people like me and others, have the transnational networks and connections and belongings and identifications with a place called Palestine that is always transnationally imagined. That is...

Nadine: Meaning that it's always...

Rabab: ...imagined, that is...I mean, there is a physical...it's not not physical. It's not just, not contextual, it's grounded. It is physical. There is a place...

Nadine: Like a physical place.

Rabab: ...called Palestine...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...geography. At the same time, people are not there, but there is this kind of connection that has...that shapes the identity, the thinking, the psyche, every-day life of your existence, and a lot of the women I would call, they have these transnational relations and networks and so on, are not living actually here and there. They're living here and there. It's always here and here. It's...you could be physically here or you could be physically there, but there is this kind of...And it's not...I don't want to call it divided loyalty.

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: I think there is kind of connection, and I think it is transnational. When we apply it to Palestine, it is not just national. And it cannot...it can't...national can never apply to Palestine anywhere, because we're scattered all over the world. And so there is this...But I think transnational feminism, sometimes it's not...I think it's not used in the...in the way it's supposed to be used when people call...transnational just to say that there is organizations here, here, NGOs⁶¹ and so on. But I think it's as the women who actually, the feminists who recognize that there are alliances to be made, that there are commonalities, that there are differences.

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: And there are commonalit—and possibilities to build alliances across borders without erasing the borders, while acknowledging that there are physical borders.

Nadine: Hm.

⁶¹ An *NGO* is a Non-Governmental Organization.

Rabab: That if you cross the borders virtually, it doesn't mean that they're gone. They're there. The wall is there. It doesn't go away, okay? So, but can you envision that there are possibilities, imagine a different world. And if you imagine a different one, can you build alliances on that basis? Can you think about that? While always acknowledging the specificity of each group and...and the context in which particular forms come up, without thinking that one form should dominate another. And I think this is...this is...and when we think about that, then it becomes really when we say "global south" I would say, well, "global south" is right there in New York City— in the Bronx and in Harlem and in El Barrio, and in Brooklyn, and right there in the streets of NYU, which is supposed to be very fancy, but...You know, so it's...it's everywhere, always when we think...if we think about south and north, we don't think about them as like, um, forcefully divided geographically and...and distinct and discrete...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...units, that there is all...a lot of fluidity in them, but we recognize how they are structured...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...in terms of oppression. That's...that's what I would...I would think about trans—And I think, I think it's very helpful framework because it doesn't then lock us only within the borders of the United States, and then it's...we start like having arguments about, the U.S. or outside of the U.S., and so on. But the U.S. is everywhere. I mean, the United States dominating the whole world. And there are people oppressed in the United States itself, as the United States government and the United States empire is dominating the world, people in the United States are oppressed as there are people around the world that are oppressed differently, depending on...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...their places vis-à-vis the social structures.

Nadine: So on the same topic...

Rabab: Hm.

Nadine: ...of transnational feminism, can you tell me about some transnational feminist alliances that you're...you participate in, or work that you've done with women from other communities, transnationally?

Rabab: Yeah, um, well, one...one of the things that, that I would say, I would consider it transnational, even though it is Arab and Arab-American...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...is the...is this thing we're trying to put together for next year -- an Arab women's gathering at which Arab...Arab and Arab-American women...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...come together to think about various ways in which we can think about our liberation and carve visions, and come up with strategies and actions for our liberation, within and without our communities, and as broadly defined. There is...we have a whole bunch of alliances that actually crystallize at the World Social Forum in India, and it was very interesting how...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...people sort of configure themselves and ally themselves. We...we have...

Nadine: Well, this is...

Rabab: ...yeah.

Nadine: ...really interesting...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...this idea of Arab and Arab-American women's gathering, since it's a different historical moment than your previous work.

Rabab: Right.

Nadine: And it's an Arab, an Arab-American woman...

Rabab: Where they can consciously...yeah.

Nadine: ...consciously context. Can you tell us about some of the issues that would be tackled in such a gathering?

Rabab: Yes. I mean, it's very interesting because there have been a lot of debates around how do we carve certain visions? What do we think...how do we think about questions of sexuality? for instance. How...how...how big of a space do they occupy in our imagining and our struggles and our daily interactions with each other? How do they configure vis-à-vis questions of what...when we say politics? And people think politics, big politics, not everyday politics also. The U...

Nadine: Like war...

Rabab: ...the war and empire and the oppression, special registration⁶² and the FBI and the Homeland Security⁶³ and Patriot I⁶⁴ and Patriot II⁶⁵ and the war against Iraq⁶⁶ and the destruction of Palestine. How do we...? How do...how...how...where do these things...how do these things fit together? And how it is that we can actually carve a vision that does allow...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...us to think about our liberation without silencing some of our concerns? And...and we come from different backgrounds. Some of us have really serious...serious...the biggest fight and the memory, the memory of oppression and the memory of liberation is all taking place within the community. The Palestinian or the Arab-American community, right? Somebody like me, I have never felt that I was oppressed by the Arab-American community. I always felt that the Arab-American people was the safe space. That was home for me. Whenever I feel like really troubled by Zionism or by racism, that's what I run to. That's home. But there are women who grew up here in the United States -- for them Arab-American women, this...

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: ...is very oppressive. While the bigger space outside of the community represents liberation and resistance. So it's...I think we had...

Nadine: **Hm.**

⁶² “This new material is to notify the public of an amendment to existing regulations by suspending the 30-day and annual re-registration requirements for aliens who are subject to the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) Registration. Instead of requiring all aliens subject to NSEERS to appear for 30-day and/or annual re-registration interviews, the DHS will utilize a more tailored system in which it will notify individual aliens of future registration requirements. Additionally, this rule clarifies how nonimmigrant aliens may apply for relief from special registration requirements and clarifies that certain alien crewmen are not subject to the departure requirements.” From the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website at www.ice.gov.

⁶³ “We will lead the unified national effort to secure America. We will prevent and deter terrorist attacks and protect against and respond to threats and hazards to the nation. We will ensure safe and secure borders, welcome lawful immigrants and visitors, and promote the free-flow of commerce.” (Department of Homeland Security’s Mission Statement from the DHS’s website at www.dhs.gov)

⁶⁴ Passed after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the stated purpose of the Patriot Act (H.R. 3162) is “to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes.” The Act provides for enhanced domestic security against terrorism, enhanced surveillance procedures, stricter border controls, stronger criminal laws against terrorism, and increased information-sharing among the branches of the intelligence department, among other things. The Patriot Act has been criticized for removing checks on law enforcement and threatening the civil rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike.

⁶⁵ Formally known as the Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003. A draft copy of the proposed legislation was leaked and public outcry ensued.

⁶⁶ The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 claiming to be searching for weapons of mass destruction. Although none were found, a democracy is in the process of being established in Iraq and Iraqis have elected their first president. U.S. troops currently remain in Iraq.

Rabab: ...we have different experience and we're negotiating. How do we...how do we...how do we...how do we come up with some common basis without invalidating each other's...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...concerns and demands. I think...I think...I think we're going to have a great gathering and I think it's not going to be not painful. It will be painful, and will be...but that's the way the struggle is. It's never...

Nadine: Yeah.

Rabab: ...it's never easy.

Nadine: Yeah. Thanks.

Rabab: Thank you.

Nadine: Now, finally, last topic we're going to cover has to do with, ah, you know, you've built yourself in so many different ways on so many fronts. And one of them is an academic front, kind of, history of activism and then becoming a Ph.D., and coming soon next fall an associate professor and director of a center for Arab-American studies and, you know, you've two books coming out and a number of journal ar—academic journal articles. And today you've made a lot of references to academic scholars in talking about your vision of activism. So I wanted to ask you about how you see the relationship between activism and scholarship. And in particular, in terms of kind of since you do identify as a feminist...

Rabab: Yeah.

Nadine: ...your feminist politics and scholarship.

Rabab: I don't think they can be separated. I...I'm...and I think, and sometimes I actually get like...keep wondering why is it that we...we even *think* that they could be separated? Why, and where is it that we think they could be separated. And I think it comes up a lot in the U.S. academy. It probably comes up in other academies of privilege, but I'm not as familiar with them as I am with the U.S. academy. Because if you are...when, you know, I was...I was...when I was a student at Birzeit University, when I taught at Birzeit University, when I've been back there for conferences and so on, it...the question never comes up. Nobody ever says, "Am I an activist? Am I a feminist? Am I an academic?" You know, there's that schizophrenic...because it's your daily life necessitates that you cannot be one without the other. And even if you think that you are just an acti—an academic, not a feminist, what are you doing every day in the classroom? You're active on...whether you acknowledge it or not, you always have a point of view, no matter how much you claim neutrality, you always have a point of view that is informing what kind of views you're...you're putting forward either in the classroom or in your scholarship

everywhere. So I think...I think this...it's...academia is a site, is definitely a site of activism. I am not going to get into the hierarchy what's more liberating, the street or the academy, you know, because for whom the street and for whom the academy, it all depends on the context on the history.

Nadine: **Hm.**

Rabab: On the particular group we're talking about. So, you know, in the United States, the street, you can get a permit⁶⁷ and...and then any...any professor who signs a statement for divestment from Israel⁶⁸ who is not tenured, at the U.S. academy, at which there is Zionist influence in some places, that professor may not last for a very long time. I mean, so sometimes walking in a march is not really more costly than doing this particular act. Sometimes walking in a march may get you killed.

Nadine: **Um-hum.**

Rabab: And it happens in the United States, happens elsewhere in the world. So think...but I think that all our actions have a component that would impact what sort of things happen in life. We impact our...our own lives, our colleagues lives and our students' lives. So what sort of...so I'm going to be the Director of the Center for Arab-Americans, so am I going to forget about the question of gender and so and so, like over all Arabs, and in our Arab-ness there are no differences. We're all equal, we're all, you know, that sort of an imagined community of equal comrades, horizontal membership that...as Anderson calls it. But there are differences, of course there are going to be differences between, you know, on average women and men, as structured by the gender system, that we need to take...acknowledge it, take account of it and think about where do these women and men are situated in different systems. And, I mean, I know like...and I'm...an immigrant man has it worse off to start with than a woman who is a citizen, who has a citizenship. Because...

Nadine: **Yeah.**

Rabab: ...today immigrant, as I said, immigrant men, Arab Muslims and Arabs are targeted.

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

Rabab: So I think we need to be aware of that, and at the same time push for activism. I mean, I would encourage my students to go and join the Arab woman's gathering. I would encourage my students...

Nadine: **Hm-hm-hm.**

⁶⁷ A *permit* allows you to engage in some sort of activity. For example, you must plan a protest and get a permit from the appropriate local officials before you are allowed to have one—or risk being arrested.

⁶⁸ A person who signs a *divestment statement* believes that universities should not support companies that aid Israel.

Rabab: ...to be active. And some of the programs that I'm actually hoping to institute in the program is to actually get students to require for the major to have a portion of community service—that nobody's going to graduate, even if they have 4.0, without having served the community. It's not going to work. And I'm talking about the community as broadly defined.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: That you have to do community service. You have to go, you can't just like spend all your time in the books, be bookish and then expect that you're going to graduate and go to college and then become the authority...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...on knowledge to decide and theorize about the people's lives who did not serve in the first place. It's not going to happen.

Nadine: H m.

Rabab: May happen elsewhere, but not at this center.

Nadine: And so vice versa, your...your academic work also informs your scholarship.

Rabab: Yes. My activist, you mean.

Nadine: Your...

Rabab: Oh...yeah.

Nadine: ...pardon me, your...your academic work also informs and shapes your political work.

Rabab: Yeah, definitely, definitely. Because I...

Nadine: I'm a feminist.

Rabab: I think...I think...I mean, I think theory is really important. I...I think that if we think about activism as just doing without thinking, because we're always thinking. We're just...we're just claiming that we're not thinking. I think it's really important to learn together. I think it's important to...to read together. I think it's important to figure out what we're doing and what each action entails. What does each action cost us? What are the results? What does it mean for us? What sort of people does it make us when we choose to do this or choose to do that, and so on. And so I think they're very much linked

together. And I...I mean, the...the...what Gramsci⁶⁹, the organic intellectual, I think this is...this is a responsibility that we have in the academy. We are in a place where we can actually...we have the luxury to...to make certain things accessible and to also act on behalf of our beliefs and...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Rabab: ...the people with whom we identify.

Nadine: Hm. So in wrapping it up...

Rabab: Um-hum.

Nadine: ...um, I wanted to ask you, you know, when you think about what brought you here today, um, can you depict...how would you depict the journey that kind of brought you to the point that you are today?

Rabab: I keep thinking about my activism actually. And I keep thinking about...I was having a conversation with another long-time activist three nights ago—Hannan [inaudible] of ACCESS⁷⁰ in Detroit. And we both agreed that we do not regret. We have no regrets, because we would have never gotten where we are now had we not done what we did before. This is kind of being involved, and...and really believing, and we still believe, and, you know, this another thing is just like people say, “You have to grow up, and you stop,” and I...and I just, I don’t, I don’t...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: I don’t think it’s about growing, but actually believing in justice. And if you believe in justice, it doesn’t stop at a certain again, you graduate from believing in justice, and then you say, “I grow up, I’m retiring.” You can’t. This is a belief that you have to continue. If you believe in it, you have to do something about it. And so, I...this is what...what...what brings me here. These...this...my, my activism, my involvement, which I have the honor to be part of, is...is what makes me who I am today. And I owe a big great deal to all those people who taught me...

Nadine: Hm.

Rabab: ...these kinds of activism.

⁶⁹ Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian theorist who supported socialism and whose writings have been highly influential in social theory. He argued that each class produced intellectuals, not necessarily formally educated people, who could articulate the feelings of the people.

⁷⁰ The *Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services* is located in Dearborn, Michigan which has second largest Arab American population in the US. See <http://www.accesscommunity.org>

Nadine: Well, I'm extremely moved, and I've just learned so much. I'm speechless, so speechless that we're going to wrap it up (laughter). Thank you so very much for joining us today and being part of this project and your participation has been invaluable.

Rabab: Thank for all the amazing questions you raised, and the comments.

Nadine: Thank you Rabab, thank you very much.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Adrienne Asch
Interviewer: Anna Kirkland**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: June 5, 2006**

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Adrienne Asch, born in 1948, is the Edward and Robin Millstein Professor of Bioethics at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, and Professor of Epidemiology and Population Health at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, both at Yeshiva University in New York. Asch received a BA in Philosophy from Swarthmore College, an MS in Social Work and a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Columbia University. Much of her scholarship examines issues of bio-ethics, reproduction, and disability. A long-time member of the Society for Disability Studies, she served as its president from 1996 to 1998. In 1997, she was named Blind Educator of the Year by the National Federation of the Blind, and in 2001, she was awarded an honorary degree from Swarthmore College. Asch has been a member of the board of directors of the American Society for Bioethics in Humanities and served on the Clinton Task Force on Healthcare Reform and the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications Policy Planning Group of the National Human Genome Research Institute. She has also served on the board of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. She has authored numerous articles and book chapters and is editor with Eric Parens of *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights*, and a co-editor of *The Double-Edge Helix: Social Implications of Genetics in a Diverse Society*. She is currently working on a book on assisted reproduction.

Anna Kirkland is Assistant Professor of Women's Studies and Political Science. She earned her J.D. (2001) and Ph.D. (Jurisprudence and Social Policy, 2003) from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on the construction of the legal categories that receive civil rights protections in various jurisdictions of the United States, particularly gender, race, sexual orientation, and disability. She is interested in the politics of gaining legal protections as well as the ways in which ordinary people understand and negotiate their identities through the law. She is completing a book manuscript entitled *Discriminating Differences: Identity and Personhood in American Antidiscrimination Law*. Other ongoing projects include a qualitative interview study of fat rights activists and their perceptions of law and a mixed methodology study of undergraduates' ideas about what diversity means. Her published articles analyze transgendered plaintiffs who win their cases, transgender discrimination as sex discrimination, and the efforts of fat rights organizations to combat weight-based discrimination. Her work has also been featured in the recently published collection of *The Fire This Time: Young Feminists and the New Activism* (Anchor Books 2004). Professor Kirkland teaches courses on gender, sexuality, politics and law in Women's Studies and Political Science, and was recently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Law at the Michigan Law School.

Transcript of Adrienne Asch

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest*

Transcript of Adrienne Asch

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*⁷¹

Anna Kirkland: Hello, and welcome to the Global Feminisms Project. I am Anna Kirkland, Assistant Professor of Women Studies and Political Science here at the University of Michigan. I am here with Adrienne Asch. And first I'd like to thank you so much for coming.

Adrienne Asch: Thank you for inviting me and considering me to be one of the people that you wanted to interview.

Anna: Wonderful. So first we're going to talk about your background, both in activism and scholarship. And then we're going to discuss some particular areas of your expertise--disability rights, particularly women with disabilities, bioethics, and reproductive rights. And we'd also hoped to hear some closing thoughts from you about some of the important challenges you see ahead in these areas.

Adrienne: Thank you.

Anna: So could you start us off by talking a bit about your background and life story that have made you the scholar and activist you are today?

Adrienne: I think the most important influences on who I am today have to do with growing up in a small town with very nonconformist parents, but not nonconformist parents who waved a flag about how nonconformist they were. They just were nonconformists. They were Jews in a non-Jewish town. They were Democrats and leftwing Democrats in a very conservative Republican town. They believe in things like federal aid to education when that was considered a really radical act. They read *The New York Times* when people didn't even...and they went to New York to museums when people didn't go to New York, even though we were half an hour away.

Anna: Hm.

Adrienne: So, um, and we had guests from lots of foreign countries that were friends of my parents when people didn't...were very parochial. That was one big influence. My parents taught me to think for myself and to be comfortable with who I was, even if people around me weren't entirely comfortable with who I was either as a leftwing type or somebody who loved classical music, or someone who was Jewish, or someone who

⁷¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

was blind. So they just taught me to be myself. And that was a big thing. And the other big thing was going to Swarthmore College, which was a place full of intellectual engaged people who loved scholarship and also loved activism, and I was part of Swarthmore College work in the anti-Vietnam War movement⁷² and in the civil rights movement⁷³, and found a great emotional home with like-minded people in the '60s. I'm very much a person of the '60s who, not that drugs and rock and roll part of the '60s, but the politics and cultural rethinking part of the '60s. That's very much who I am.

Anna: And in your writings you say that your disability isn't something you find inherently interesting. I mean, you speak of your blindness as something that other people label you with rather than something your...you take on for yourself. So can you tell us what it's been like to forge your identity both with a disability as well as apart from it?

Adrienne: It has been very difficult to force my identity apart from disability, because people, really, my whole life, have been trying to tell me that that's the most important thing about me. And so when I say that it actually isn't, and that the most important things about me as far as I'm concerned are that I do bioethics or that I'm a leftist or that I went to Swarthmore, or that I love Renaissance music, people really often don't like that. They want me to tell them that I'm blind. That's really important. So the biggest challenge of having...of being a person with a disability, I think, not just for me but for most people in today's society is saying, yeah, that's true. I have a disability, I don't read print without a scanner and I read Braille and whatever. But I'm really interested in what I read, not how I read. I'm not...I really...it's not really amazing to me that I travel with a cane and go around the country or the world or whatever it is I'm doing. It's what I'm doing when I got there. And people are much too interested in technology or how much help I need or things like that. I mean, and I think they're focusing on the wrong things, because they're...oh, I think disability makes people quite uncomfortable and it doesn't have the political cachet that race or sex or sexual orientation now have. It's still considered a tragedy and a misfortune and something...It's actually something...people with disabilities are either supposed to be very unhappy about or very proud of, and I'm neither unhappy nor proud. I just am.

⁷² Along with the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s, *the anti-Vietnam war movement* was one of the most divisive forces in twentieth-century U.S. history. The antiwar movement actually consisted of a number of independent interests, often only vaguely allied and contesting each other on many issues, united only in opposition to the Vietnam War. Attracting members from college campuses, middle-class suburbs, labor unions, and government institutions, the movement gained national prominence in 1965, peaked in 1968, and remained powerful throughout the duration of the conflict. Encompassing political, racial, and cultural spheres, the antiwar movement exposed a deep schism within 1960s American society.

⁷³ The African-American *Civil Rights Movement* refers to a set of noted events and reform movements in the United States aimed at abolishing public and private acts of racial discrimination against African Americans between 1954 to 1968, particularly in the southern United States. By 1966, the emergence of the Black Power Movement, which lasted from 1966 to 1975, enlarged and gradually eclipsed the aims of the Civil Rights Movement to include racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency, and freedom from white authority.

Anna: Um-hum. And so I understand you were active in the civil rights movement. How did those experiences affect you?

Adrienne: Well, they were really outgrowths of just being the person that I was, and believing that...and in a way this is very quaint, the content of one's character and not the color of one's skin was what was important and that was true about the content of one's heart and not the sex that one was born with should be important either. So it was very natural to me to be involved in working on civil rights for people of color. And, I mean, it was also part of just general leftwing politics in the '60s, wanting to change societal distribution of income and wanting to make sure that...I mean, it was just preposterous to me that there was any kind of segregation or any kind of unfairness, or that race or sex was a...a thing that people would use against someone. Swarthmore was a wonderful co-ed college⁷⁴ that I think did not differentiate between what women did as undergraduates and what men did as undergraduates. And I like that. I had no particular interest in going to a single sex college. Um, ah...and disability didn't come into my calculations at the time. I mean, I thought of myself as a woman or as a middle class White wanting to change the world for people who weren't White, but I didn't think about disability because I didn't think it was a political issue at all. And then I took that kind of political mentality about how the world had to change into the kinds of discrimination that I and other people with disabilities faced, when I realized that we faced it.

Anna: Um-hum. I know from my teaching that a lot of students haven't encountered disability rights scholarship. And it's the ways of thinking that you just described are fairly common – thinking of a disability as something to react to with sympathy or offers of assistance or things like that. But can you...can you help explain your conception of disability and how it challenges that view?

Adrienne: Well, I think in a way I already did a little bit. You know, do people with disabilities need help in particular situations? Sure. But then everybody needs help. So I don't like having doors opened for me any more or less than women in the '60s liked having men hold doors open for them. Or for us. I mean, now a lot of us fortunately don't need much care. But...but that's because we've proven our point, at least to some extent, that we can do pretty much any job and do it as well as anybody else. That's women. Well, the same thing is true for people with disabilities. That's the point we want to prove and yet I'm...I'm often pushed to the head of lines in a bank. Or given seats that I don't need, because as far as I know, there's nothing about blindness that affects my mobility or my ability to stand. Or people ask a companion who's with me, if they're non-disabled, what I want, rather than speaking to me. Well, all of that is just denigrating and stupid. And I'm indignant about it. And unfortunately, never let those things go, because I think that they're assaults on just one's own personal dignity and self respect, and I cannot tolerate them. And most people with disabilities who are comfortable with themselves as people who have disabilities, just take the disability as a fact of life and then want to get on with their lives. So if they...if somebody uses a wheelchair, they want to just use the wheelchair and get where they're going, and have curb cuts so they can get there, and not

⁷⁴ *Coed*: Of or relating to an education system in which both men and women attend the same institution or classes.

have people marvel at them for going somewhere in a wheelchair. Well, the same is true about any disability. If we had more interpreters, if more people knew sign language, it would be easier for people who are deaf to just go about ordinary life and communicate. Same with the non-apparent disabilities that lots of people have. People with epilepsy or diabetes often try to hide those things because there's so much stigma around disability, and so much fear in the public that the fear is if you reveal a disability, people will shun you or pity you or be sad and tell you that you can't play with their friends or go out with their daughters, or whatever. When disability just isn't necessarily interesting to people. It's just a part of them, like being five-foot-two, or five-foot-seven, or having blue eyes or something.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: But that's not how the world sees it.

Anna: So in one of your articles on critical race theory⁷⁵, feminism and disability, you point out that a minority group model⁷⁶ in which legal rights are considered the central thing to aim for hasn't really done that much for the disability rights movement. And you advocate instead universalizing concept of disability, and that made me think of all the ways that so many people who are not considered disabled nonetheless have trouble functioning according to rules that they had no part in shaping. And the example I thought of was problems that pregnant women encounter in the workplace, for example, a workplace that is not organized around that event. So can you talk some more about what a universalizing concept of disability is, and how it might be more effective in bringing about social change?

Adrienne: Yeah, but I...first I have to say that the minority group model hasn't done everything that we want it to do. But it has done something really important. It's put people with disabilities into civil rights laws. It has helped Congress⁷⁷ and states to understand that this is a group of people who, because of society's attitudes, are discriminated against and need protection. I would like to get rid of the need for civil rights laws. But until there's an end of discrimination, we can't. So I...I think I have to say we need civil rights laws for women and for people with disabilities, and so...But in terms of universalizing, I think your pregnant woman example is a good example. Or let's think of another example. In a Supreme Court⁷⁸ case from many years ago, a job

⁷⁵ *Critical Race Theory* is the school of thought that holds that race lies at the very nexus of American life. It is an academic discipline that challenges its readers, whether proponents or dissenters, to consider the relationship that exists between race, the justice system, and society.

⁷⁶ In the *Minority group model* minority status that is applied to subjugated, powerless, and/or oppressed segments of a society, who are singled out for unequal treatment and discriminated against by the dominant segments of society.

⁷⁷ The *United States Congress* is the legislature of the United States federal government. It is bicameral, comprising the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House of Representatives has 435 members, each representing a congressional district and serving a two-year term. House seats are apportioned among the states by population. Each state has two Senators, regardless of population. There are 100 senators, serving staggered six-year terms. Both Senators and Representatives are chosen through direct election.

⁷⁸ The *Supreme Court* of the United States is the highest judicial body in the United States and leads the judicial branch of the United States federal government.

requirement of having to...ah...I'm sorry. Lots of job requirements, not just pregnancy, turn out not to be related to the job. I mean people used to think, well, you had to have a college degree to do some job or other. But the idea is that discrimination comes when the requirement, the college degree, or being a certain height isn't really related to the task of the job. So firefighter job descriptions have been changed so that you don't have to be a certain height, but you have to lift a certain weight. The rules have to really fit the situation. The workplace has to change not only for women who are pregnant, but for all people who are parents. I'll talk about this more later, but it's not just women who are mothers. In many instances, men are fathers, and anyone who is raising children should have a workplace that recognizes family responsibility. Well, that's a good example I think of how men or women didn't set the rules that govern work. And if...if we had, those rules I think would be very different from the rules we've got.

Anna: You've written about the omission of women with disabilities from much mainstream feminist work on issues like reproduction, motherhood, discrimination, sexuality. How have you tried to explain those connections between gender, sexuality, and disability to those who had overlooked them?

Adrienne: My colleague, Michelle Fine⁷⁹, and I edited a book on women with disabilities in the mid...and it came out in the late 1980s. And what we tried to do was figure out whether women with disabilities had been discriminated against in ways that resembled or differed from other women's discrimination. Or than other men with disabilities. And what we've found in our work was that women with disabilities were in some ways doubly discriminated against. They didn't have as, as Michelle Fine wonderfully described, the pedestal of other women.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: And they did have all the discrimination that women had. They didn't have the...When people studied—and this is still true today—when people study women and achievement, say, or look at women in corporations, or want to look at women in academia, they may look at how many women of color are there, or they may look at the class origins of women. But they don't look at whether those women have disabilities. Disability is still not a category that is comfortable for lots of people within feminism, or anywhere else, to think about. As a political category, it's all in this sort of category of misfortune rather than politics. So we're much more comfortable now than we were even when the feminist movement got started with sexual orientation but that same comfort of thinking about, again, disability as something that affects, say, 15 percent of the population in the United States, and maybe more worldwide, it's a large category. And the...a world that really took people with disabilities into account would look quite different in some ways from the world that we have. Not only would it have more ramps and curb cuts, but flexible hours at work would be much more common to accommodate all sorts of people who need breaks to rest their hands or change positions if they have

⁷⁹ *Michelle Fine* is a professor in the Social/Personality Psychology Program at City University of New York and previously taught for 12 years at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research program surrounds questions of community development with a particular emphasis on urban youth and young adults.

back problems, or all kinds of things than we now have. But we don't take account of people with disabilities as members of society trying to do all kinds of things. And in fact, the definition of disability in a lot of countries, certainly in the United States, is as a person who can't work. And so you have this kind of irony. There's a sense...the typical census questions ask you things about, do you have a disability that prevents you from keeping house – this is a sexist question too...ah...

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: ...going to school or working at a job. Well, what if you have a disability that is considered a health problem, like just deafness or blindness or paraplegia, but you are going to school, keeping house or working at a job. How do you answer that question? I usually confound the census people by answering no.

Anna: [laughs] That reminds me of the bumper sticker, if gays and lesbians are given civil rights then everyone will want them. So like if...if people with disabilities are given accommodation, then everyone will want them [laughs].

Adrienne: Well, and the thing is every...If you're...we talk about accommodation as though it's only something we do for people with disabilities. But that's preposterous. We accommodate one another in day-to-day life all the time. If you have a friend who's a vegetarian, you don't make steak for dinner when you...when you invite her over. And that doesn't get a medal and it doesn't get called reasonable accommodation. It's just you took your friend's concerns and needs into account when you made the plan. And the same is true in...in any work situation. Even if you have ten people doing the same job, people do it differently, and some people know that...some faculty members really like to serve on committees and have the temperament for it, and some people know that other faculty members would rather do anything that serve on committees, so they'd rather write more articles, and people try to...even though faculty members have to both serve on committees and write articles, people try to accommodate, if you will, the individual personalities and preferences of people. But when it comes to a person with a disability, we call it a reasonable accommodation and think it's a totally different thing than any other accommodation we have done...

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: ...of people in ordinary day-to-day life.

Anna: I was talking to someone who had mentioned that...who called a stroller for a child a mobility-assisted device.

Adrienne: That's right.

Anna: Or a...or a typewriter, a prosthesis for writing.

Adrienne: Well, that's right.

Anna: You know, because of course we use these things all the time.

Adrienne: And because the majority use them, we don't think of them as accommodations. I know someone with a disability who always...who uses a wheelchair, who points out that she's the only person who brings her own chair to meetings.

Anna: [laughs] One...one partic—somewhat poignant example that you wrote about was...at a...I think the setting was a feminist conference and the topic was sexual harassment, and the feminists who understood themselves as not disabled were talking about, you know, being sexually harassed and how terrible this is. And one women who was using a wheelchair pointed out that she's never sexually harassed. And the point was that she's not considered an object of sexual attention at all. And it wasn't something that had appeared at all in the discussion of sexual harassment as it had been going on before she interjected that.

Adrienne: That's right. And it's...in I'd say several realms, the perspective of women with especially readily apparent disabilities is often overlooked. Sexuality is one, people with disabilities, women with disabilities and...and men too, but particularly women I think, are perceived as either not attractive or not interested, which is preposterous. And in fact I don't know anybody with a disability or not who doesn't have some interest in the topic one way or the other.

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: But people may feel not that they're...not that they have no desire but they are not desirable, or not...And they may feel desirable, but they don't feel desired. There's a very...You can internalize the fact of not being desired to not being desirable, but you don't have to. And so in fact lots of people don't. They know that they are desirable, but they also know that they're not desired. That's a very painful thing. Similarly, many people with disabilities who are parents, just as people with disabilities who are workers, defy the stereotype of a person who can take care of themselves and take care of someone else. So many of my friends who are parents are always...who have disabilities are always having strangers come up and well-meaning acquaintances of their children come up and say, "Oh, do you take care of your mother? Isn't that nice?" Well, no, the kids don't take care of their mothers, their parents take care of them the way other parents take care of their children. And it's very insulting, not to mention confusing to a five-year-old kid to think that they're taking care of their mother.

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: Another kind of example is, think of all the times that friends are, oh, you know, going through a bad time—they're moving or they're sick or they're something,

and you can offer to bring somebody dinner or pick up something for them. The number of times that people with disabilities will not be accepted or women with disabilities are not accepted as help givers, you're only a help receiver. And...and that really leaves out people with disabilities and women with disabilities from a role that you may want to assume. I mean, no, women don't want to be self-sacrificing martyrs, disabled or not...

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: ...but you want to be able to give help in the same way that you want to be able to take help. It's no fun to take help if you aren't respected as someone who can also provide it. So you're not nurturant, you're not sexual, you're not a mother, you're not a worker. At which point if you're an adult, you have no social role left to you.

Anna: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Adrienne: Yeah. I'm not sure everybody considers me a feminist, but I consider myself one.

Anna: [laughs] Why do you say that?

Adrienne: Well, I have quirky views. I taught at a women's college, Wellesley, for many years and I loved teaching at Wellesley, but I didn't attend a woman's college and I'm not really entirely sure I believe in women's colleges.

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: In fact, I'm pretty sure I don't. Because I'm not a separatist.

Anna: Right, yeah, that's...that integrationist view is really coming...coming through all the way it seems like.

Adrienne: So I was in a department of Women's Studies and I think there's a need for Women's Studies, but only...only until theories of every discipline take the experiences and lives of women into account. Then there should be no need for women's studies. So I'm interested in things like women's studies or disabilities studies or ethnic studies or whatever only until the elites recognize that they're only a teeny part of the story. Then I want to get rid of women's studies and any kind of separate stuff. So I'm a feminist in the sense of believing firmly in women's equality and options for women and I love it that, you know, now you have assembly races and senate races where two women are up against each other and nobody thinks about it anymore. But I remember when Bella

Abzug⁸⁰ was running for Congress, it was a big deal in New York. Um, and, you know, I...I was not a great celebrator of Geraldine Ferraro⁸¹ for vice president in 1984, but that's not that I didn't want a woman for vice president, I just didn't really think Geraldine Ferraro had very good politics. And in the same way that I don't think we want to celebrate feminists should celebrate Margaret Thatcher⁸². She didn't do anything for women or anybody else.

Anna: Right.

Adrienne: I'm not interested in celebrating victories for women if they have terrible ideas. So I'm happy to see a woman president, but only if I believe in her politics.

Anna: Have your views about feminism changed over the years?

Adrienne: Well, that particular view I don't think has changed. Um, I think feminism changes as...as the world changes. I mean, many of the feminists who fought for reproductive freedom, which often meant the freedom not to reproduce and legal abortion, now are very proud parents, mothers, they would describe themselves. And they're very involved in, I mean not all of them, but many of them are involved in celebrating motherhood, or celebrating the notion of having it all. Actually one...one way that I...I find...I found my Wellesley students very distressing. Here were these high powered women planning to get an education and become doctors and lawyers and investment bankers, and still seeing child raising as primarily women's work. Motherhood was really differentiated from fatherhood. And I think that feminism has not done a good job of keeping the notion of gender equality and parenting and gender equality in...in family relations really front and center. There's so much appreciation of what pregnancy and motherhood can mean for women's bodies, that there is sometimes a kind of glorification of, and a sort of essentializing of women and pregnancy and breast feeding as these transformative experiences that make women really different from men.

Anna: Um-hum.

⁸⁰ *Bella Savitsky Abzug* (1920–1998) was a well-known American political figure and a leader of the women's movement. She famously said, "This woman's place is in the House—the House of Representatives," in her successful 1970 campaign to join that body.

⁸¹ *Geraldine Anne Ferraro* (born 1935) is a politician from New York, serving in the United States House of Representatives and who received the nomination of the Democratic Party to run for Vice President of the United States. Ferraro is the first (and, to date, only) woman to be so nominated on a major party ticket, and is the best-known woman to have run for the Vice Presidency. She and fellow Democrat Walter Mondale were defeated in a landslide by the re-election campaign of President Ronald Reagan and Vice-President George H. W. Bush in the 1984 election.

⁸² *Margaret Hilda Thatcher*, Baroness Thatcher, (born 1925) was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990. Thatcher was the longest-serving British Prime Minister since Gladstone, and had the longest continuous period in office since Lord Liverpool in the early nineteenth century. She is also the only woman to have served as Prime Minister or as leader of a major political party in the UK, and, with Margaret Beckett and Condoleezza Rice, is one of only three women to hold any of the four major offices of state.

Adrienne: I'm not a difference person, I'm a similarity person.

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: And I'm probably someone who understates difference, because I think that in overstating difference we do ourselves a great disservice. So I'm in the...I'm in the understating of difference camp.

Anna: So there's been a lot of, in the media about this supposed conservative turn among younger women of these issues that you...it sounds like you've encountered that some with your students. How did you...how did you talk to them about it?

Adrienne: Well, I kept talking about...I mean, I taught a course at Wellesley called Women and Motherhood, and one of the things I tried to raise is should...do we want to think about motherhood as different from fatherhood. Should we be talking about parenthood? In my view, Nancy Chodorow⁸³ had it right when she wrote her book *Reproduction of Mothering*, in 1978. Now she seems to have moved away from some of her own views then about equality in parenting, and in children's needs for...for recognizing that men and women can be gentle and strong. Men and women can be nurturant and separate. I think those are important ideas. But...and so do many young women think that. Until it gets down to the crunch of imagining whether they or their male partner, if they're heterosexual, will stay home with their sick five-year-old, and then they just somehow naturally assume they're going to stay home. And I would say, why? Why is it your job? Why isn't it just as much your partner's job as yours? It's your child, both of your child. I find that appalling.

Anna: So let's get to some more questions about motherhood and reproductive rights. And, you know, a lot of feminists are loathe to abandon the position that abortion should be available without regard to the reasons why a women might be wanting to choose an abortion, and...and they don't want to start it all down the slippery slope of questioning why, weighing a woman's reason for having an abortion. But you also argue eloquently that it's really hard to say that it's okay to abort fetuses with Down Syndrome, for example, but also that people among us who have Down Syndrome⁸⁴ are full and equal citizens, that those...those two things

⁸³ Nancy Chodorow is a feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst born 20 January 1944 in New York City. She has written many influential books, including *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978); *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989); *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (1994); and most recently *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (1999).

⁸⁴ *Down syndrome* (also Down's syndrome) or trisomy 21 is a genetic condition resulting from the presence of all or part of an extra 21st chromosome. Down syndrome is characterized by a combination of major and minor irregularities of body structure and function. Among features present in nearly all cases are impairment of learning and physical growth, and a recognizable facial appearance usually identified at birth.

don't sit very well together. So what are your thoughts on that, this difficult question of prenatal testing and abortion?

Adrienne: It's difficult [laughter]

Anna: It's difficult [laughing]. Is that right?

Adrienne: I guess I'll say...I'll try to say three things, since I've spent a lot of ink on this topic.

Anna: Right, right.

Adrienne: Condense it. But I think that as long as women...as long as women bear children, as long as women are pregnant people, women should decide whether they want their bodies to sustain life. And if they don't, they should have abortions available to them for whatever reason they want. But for the same reason that I think women and feminism critique the notion that women in Western countries or other countries choose to abort female fetuses, as...for the same reason that feminism is skeptical of that act, it may tolerate it, but it is skeptical of it...I think feminism should be skeptical of the act of aborting fetuses because of particular characteristics, whether they're sex or Down Syndrome, rather than...It's very different to say, "I did want to be pregnant, and I did want to raise a child, but now I have found out that this fetus I'm carrying is a girl and I really only want a boy." Or "Now I'm carrying a fetus that has cystic fibrosis⁸⁵ or Down Syndrome and I don't want that." Well, the question I want women to ask themselves is, why don't they want that? How much do they know about life with cystic fibrosis or Down Syndrome? If...if they say that it's legitimate to be a person with cystic fibrosis or Down Syndrome, why isn't it legitimate to be the parent of such a person? If they...if they say, well, of course they believe in women's equality, why should women abort female fetuses, or male ones for that matter. When you abort a fetus because of a characteristic, you're...you're making an assumption that that characteristic in some way is very dominant and controlling of what your life is...what the life of that child, if it comes into being, is going to be. And I don't think that's true. Even sex, being male or female, only tells you one thing about a person. It tells you something about how they may be treated and it tells you something about their reproductive capacities, but it doesn't tell you what they're going to be interested in. It doesn't tell you what their personality is going to be like. The same thing is true for somebody with Down Syndrome or cystic fibrosis or deafness or muscular dystrophy⁸⁶. It tells you some things about limitations and

⁸⁵ *Cystic fibrosis* (CF) is a common hereditary disease that affects the entire body, causing progressive disability and early death. Breathing difficulties are the most common symptom and result from frequent lung infections, which are treated, though not always cured, by antibiotics and other medications. CF is a multi-system disorder of exocrine glands causing the formation of a thick mucus substance that affects the lungs, intestines, pancreas, and liver. A multitude of symptoms, including sinus infections, poor growth, and infertility, can result from the effects of CF on other parts of the body.

⁸⁶ The *muscular dystrophies* are a group of genetic and hereditary muscle diseases characterized by progressive skeletal muscle weakness, defects in muscle proteins, and the death of muscle cells and tissue. In some forms of muscular dystrophy, cardiac and smooth muscles are affected.

impairments, but it doesn't tell you who that person with muscular dystrophy will be. Are they going to be energetic, or are they going to be quiet, or are they going to be interested in things their parents are interested in? Or are they going to be interested in totally different things? Those are the kinds of questions I would like people to ask themselves before women automatically rush to the abortion clinic when they get a prenatal diagnosis of spina bifida⁸⁷ or Down Syndrome or cystic fibrosis or a sex they think they don't want. I think abortion has to be available to women as long as women are the pregnant people who bear children. If they don't want to be going through gestation, they shouldn't have to. But I think they should think about, well, if they did want to be pregnant, why don't they want to be pregnant with a fetus that has this particular characteristic? Isn't that a kind of discrimination and stereotyping that they don't like in their own lives?

Anna: It sounds like you would want the practice of, say, being a genetic counselor to be pretty different than it currently is.

Adrienne: That's an understatement.

Anna: Yes [laughs]. Well, in your...in your ideal world, both...it seems that both the world would be a better place where...for people with all kinds of disabilities, so that perhaps some of the challenges wouldn't happen to people who want to parent children with disabilities, but also that people's understandings of what those challenges might be, would be...would be quite different than they are.

Adrienne: Yes. And I think that genetic counselors⁸⁸ are getting better, but still have trouble both in terms of how much time they are given to work with prospective parents and in terms of how much information they get in their own education, and in terms of how the encounter with prospective parents is structured. There are a lot of barriers to doing good genetic counseling, but I would say that genetic counseling should be giving information about the realities, sometimes very harsh ones of life with disabilities, and the rewards of families of people with disabilities. But parents of kids with disabilities should be routinely part of the genetic counseling encounter whenever you get a positive, so-called positive test result, that reveals that your fetus will...has a disabling characteristic or an impairment. You as a prospective parent should have the opportunity

⁸⁷ *Spina bifida* is a Latin term which means "split spine" and describes birth defects caused by an incomplete closure of one or more vertebral arches of the spine, resulting in malformations of the spinal cord. The spinal membranes and spinal cord may protrude through the absence of vertebral arches (called clefts).

⁸⁸ *Genetic counseling* is the process by which patients or relatives, at risk of an inherited disorder, are advised of the possible consequences of the disorder, the probability of developing or transmitting it, and the options open to them in management and family planning in order to prevent, avoid or ameliorate it. This complex process can be seen from diagnostic (the actual estimation of risk) and supportive aspects. Practitioners must be certified by the American Board of Genetic Counseling. Genetic counseling can occur before conception (i.e. when one or two of the parents are carriers of a certain trait), during pregnancy (i.e. if an abnormality is noted on an ultrasound or if the woman will be over 35 at delivery), after birth (if a birth defect is seen), during childhood (i.e. if the child has developmental delay), or even adulthood.

to meet with someone who's raising a child with that impairment, or to meet an adult with that impairment, and that should be routine parts of the genetic counseling experience. But it typically isn't. And the materials that genetic counselors give parents should be entirely different from the ones that are. They should talk about life with cystic fibrosis, not simply the numbers of medications that a child with cystic fibrosis will take.

Anna: So do the current materials just list all of the medicalized ver—you know, lists of all the clinical problems and medications, and this is what you'll have to do, and that sort of thing?

Adrienne: They tend to be very medicalized. They don't tend to include...any stories about life with these conditions. There's a big difference between what parents are told after a child is born, which is much more life-oriented and what they're told prenatally, which is much more avoidance oriented.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: And I...I think that's...I think that's bad. I think people need to have a familiarity with the genuine struggles. I mean, I was talking with someone just this morning who said, "Well, I don't have the money to raise a child with a disability. And she's a very well educated and sophisticated person. I said, "Do you know how much it costs to raise a child with a disability? Which disability? Why do you think it costs more?" And she, like most other people, doesn't really know. She's going on a kind of stereotype public image that might be true, but might not.

Anna: I'd be interested to know, have you ever had the opportunity to address a group of genetic counseling students or...or...

Adrienne: Yes. I have.

Anna: Yeah. How did that go?

Adrienne: Not well.

Anna: [laughs] What [laughs]...what did you say to them?

Adrienne: The same kind of thing I'm saying to you. But it challenges...I mean, maybe that I haven't said it gently and kindly enough and I'm trying to do that. I have sympathy for how difficult it is to do this work. But I have no sympathy for people telling me that parents aren't interested in this information or it's not appropriate to give them the kinds of information that I'm describing. I think in fact that's what genuine information is.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: And I have no sympathy with the creators of the Genetic Counseling Code of Ethics that don't have anything about teaching about life with disability in their Code of Ethics. There's nothing in the genetic counseling curriculum that requires that students get to know people with disabilities outside of medical settings. So that even in genetic counseling curricula there are culturally sensitive and sensitive to the range of families in the United States now, and I think those are good things. There's no requirement to really learn about the lives of people with disabilities from any kind of social model.

Anna: Hm.

Adrienne: None.

Anna: That is interesting.

Adrienne: And that I have no sympathy for, no patience with, and I'm infuriated by. And in case anybody wants to miss my indignation...

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: I wouldn't want you to miss it.

Anna: Um, so...so backing up to some larger issues about motherhood. Of course feminist research has always considered motherhood to be a critical site for understanding gender. And we've seen recently, the media never seems to lose interest in reporting on the "mommy wars", quote-unquote, generally represented as a conflict between White professional working mothers and their stay-at-home counterparts. And of course now we've seen rounds and rounds of this over the past few decades. But what do you wish we would focus on instead in a national conversation about motherhood?

Adrienne: Parenthood, first of all. I'd like to get rid of motherhood.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: Let's talk about fathers. Don't they count? I mean, there are plenty of families that now don't have two parents, one of each gender. That's fine. But in the families that do, let's talk about fathers. They count. Let's talk about raising children and parenthood, and recognize that people of either sex can be parents. One person can be a parent. And, as scandalous as this might sound, five people could be parents. Sometime, you know, there's a reason why Hilary Clinton wrote her book called *It Takes a Village*. There are...most two-parent families would tell you that they wouldn't mind a little more help.

Anna: [laughs]

Adrienne: I'm not saying that we...that children need one, two, or any particular number of adults to help them grow up. I think parents...I think people who are involved in raising children should recognize that it's a complicated enterprise and children need all kinds of adults to help them. So the first thing I would get rid of is the focus on motherhood as some kind of sacred, natural state. I would get fathers into the act. I would expect women to get fathers into the act. Not in a punitive way, and not just talking about deadbeat dads and divorced fathers who don't pay child support. I mean, those are very bad things. But don't talk about daycare as a woman's issue. Don't talk about flexible hours at workplaces as a woman's issue. Don't talk about school rooms as places only for women as...as aids to teachers. This is incredibly regressive. So that's the first thing I would do. The second thing I would do I think is get rid of this notion that motherhood is about making sure your child has everything, does everything, is everything. This is especially hard in affluent communities that have a lot of resources and a lot of options. Follow the lead of, and the capacities and the interests of your child. Do some shaping, sure. But recognize that your child is an individual from the day your child comes into the world. And start noticing not only what you want for your child but what your child also wants. And respect those qualities of your child. That's true for mothers and fathers. It's true whether you've used assisted reproduction or ordinary reproduction. But it's related to the prenatal testing notion. We want prenatal testing because we want to give our children the best, and we're convinced that disability or the wrong sex, whatever it is, isn't going to be best for them and the best for us. But that's not focusing on the unique characteristics of your child. Every child is going to be different in some ways from the child you want. And you can do as a parent, and you should do things, to instill values and preferences into your children. That's...that's fine. But at some point your children are going to reject some of your values and some of your preferences, and that's valid. Peop—parents forget what they did to their own parents.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: And I wish people remembered their own adolescence when they were parents. And how to respect for the ways that they listened to and didn't listen to their parents, and mostly came out okay.

Anna: Yeah, it seems like now parents have taken so seriously the tabula rasa...that I can make my child, a wonderful ballet dancer, or a star soccer player, you know, if I just try hard enough, or...we just start the lessons early enough [laughs]

Adrienne: Right. That's...your child may say, "Thanks for all those lessons, dad, mom, I'm not interested."

Anna: That's what happened to me. I went to a couple lessons and it was hopeless and that was the end of that.

Adrienne: Well, and the other thing I think I want to say is that I...I said motherhood or parenthood takes a village. The society has to change to appreciate the work that child raising is. Workplaces have to change to...to give people more options. It has to be

legitimate for men as well as women to take parental leave. It has to be legitimate for men as well as women to go to a child's after school activity or a parent-teacher conference.

Anna: How well, do you think we're doing on that?

Adrienne: Badly. We're doing better than we used to, but I don't think it's still the social norm and I don't think it's the workplace norm. That's why we have the mommy wars, that's why we have women getting off the tenure clock or... You know, why aren't men getting off the tenure clock? Or...or the corporate ladder clock in law or whatever the analogous things are in nonprofessional jobs? Unions have to take this seriously. Employers have to take this seriously. I mean, it may be fine for movie theaters and restaurants to have some hours where they say, you know, no children or whatever, but children are a part of life, and I think it's got to... You know, I do think it's...it's much better that breastfeeding women can go to restaurants or theaters and... You know, some of those things are better. But we have a long way to go before American society really is child friendly. We celebrate children, but we don't cele—we don't create a society where children's needs are taken into account. And motherhood and parenthood is about children. It's not about adult satisfaction, or at least not only about adult satisfaction. It's about who individual unique children are.

Anna: So we heard that you're writing a book on assisted production. Can you give us a little preview of what you argue in that book?

Adrienne: Well, some of the things I'm saying here. But I'm also talking about the ways that reproductive technology makes the...makes children even more kind of consumer products, available to the affluent, not available to the not-so-affluent, if you're infertile, for example. I want to try to talk about the problems that I see in buying sperm online or...and buying characteristics of those sperm. Or looking at egg donor profiles.

Anna: How does that...can you talk about how some of that works?

Adrienne: That would take a whole other conversation, but...

Anna: [laughter] I'm just trying to picture that what a website like that looks like [laughs].

Adrienne: Well, there are catalogues. You can go to sperm bank catalogues and infertility clinic catalogues and read...pic—you know, get bios and self descriptions of egg donors and sperm donors. They really should be called "sellers" because they're generally being paid for their sperm or their eggs. And women who gestate children who are either called surrogate mothers or contract mothers, you can find catalogues of all these people who are willing to do these things, and pick the characteristics that you

want, thinking foolishly that because some woman has 1500 SAT⁸⁹ scores that her eggs are going to give you a child that's going to get 1500 on his SATs. There's a kind of genetic determinism⁹⁰ that's not, just not true. It's making us...it's making people think that we are our genes. I mean, genes play a role in our lives, but so does environment. And there are different prices for sperm from different people and eggs from different people. And do we really want to put prices on the characteristics of future individuals? I think that's very dangerous to respecting all people as equals and moral equals, even if they have different kinds of endowments. So those are some of the kinds of things I want to talk about. I also want to talk about the very complicated question of access to these reproductive technologies and regulation of the reproductive technologies. Should they be available to anyone who wants them? Should they be available as they are now basically on...based on who can pay for them? I think that's obviously stratifying more things in society than should be stratified. There are big problems if you had the state regulating reproductive technologies. You could enshrine a lot of prejudices against older women or single women or lesbian couples or gay male couples. I wouldn't want to see that. At the same time, if we don't do some kind of regulation of these technologies, we keep having all the worst of the free market. You think about a free market in work and unregulated workplaces. There are lots of reasons why we have minimum wages laws⁹¹ and work and hour laws and set working conditions.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: And there are lots of problems with regulating reproduction and access to reproduction, but there are lots of problems that come from not regulating them too. So that's the kind of thing I'm going to try to talk about...

⁸⁹ The *Scholastic Aptitude Test* (SAT or SAT I to distinguish it for the SAT subject tests) is a standardized test frequently used by colleges and universities in the United States to aid in the selection of incoming students. In the U.S., the SAT is administered by the private College Board, and is developed, published, and scored by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

⁹⁰ *Genetic determinism* is the idea that genes determine a physical or behavioral phenotype. The term may be applied to the mapping of a single gene to a single phenotype or to the idea that all phenotypes are determined by genes. While the former is well established, the latter is generally rejected by biologists, and is poorly defined.

⁹¹ *The minimum wage* is the minimum rate a worker can legally be paid (often per hour) as set by statute. Each country sets its own minimum wage laws and regulations, and while a majority of industrialized countries have minimum wage laws, many developing countries do not. Minimum wage laws were first introduced nationally in the United States in 1938. During his presidency, Bill Clinton gave states the power to set their minimum wages above the federal level. As of 2004, 12 states had done so; and on November 2 of that year two additional states (Florida and Nevada) approved increases in statewide referendums. Community organizing efforts initiated by ACORN were responsible for the Florida and Nevada increases. Some government entities, such as counties and cities, observe minimum wages that are higher than the state as a whole.

Anna: Um-hum.

Adrienne: ...in this book.

Anna: What would you say is the most pressing bioethical problem we're facing today and how should we be approaching it?

Adrienne: I'm not sure I can link it to one. I think there are two, uh, bioethical problems. One is a straight access problem of access to quality healthcare for everyone in this country. That we have 45 million uninsured people, many of whom work. That health insurance and healthcare comes as a...as a benefit of employment largely, and it's not a national responsibility for all citizens I think is something that is front and center one of the nation's greatest social problems and bioethical problems. I also think the increasing notion of autonomy that I just talked about in terms of reproduction – it's my body, it's my right, I can do what I want"—that notion leads to I think the worst excesses of consumerism and, um...And so you...you have in...in the medical establishment, increasing amounts of cosmetic surgeries – breast reductions, breast enlargements, you have growth hormone for short children. You have all kinds of modifications that have nothing to do with ameliorating an impairment, and a lot to do with making people fit in to some narrower and narrower notion of what people are supposed to be. And the notion of autonomy leads to that kind of consumerism. There isn't enough social justice discussion in bioethics, whether it's about healthcare or about the equality of all people with their different characteristics. I'm looking for a society that respects the uniqueness and the contributions of every individual, and the capacity of each individual to contribute according to their abilities, and...and to be provided for according to their needs. And that's an old socialist-Marxist notion, but it's the society I'm interested in creating. And I'd like a bioethics along with a feminism that was interested in creating that. I think that's out of fashion but that's really what I'm looking for.

Anna: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Adrienne: No, that probably will do it.

Anna: [laughs] Great. Thank you so much!

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Grace Lee Boggs
Interviewer: Emily Lawsin**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: November 21, 2003**

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Grace Lee Boggs, born in 1915, is an activist, writer and speaker whose 60 years of political involvement encompasses the major U.S. social movements of the 20th century—labor, civil rights, Black power, Asian American, women’s and environmental justice. A daughter of Chinese immigrants, she was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1915. In 1953, she came to Detroit where she married James Boggs, labor activist, writer and strategist. Working together in grassroots groups and projects, they were partners for over 40 years until James Boggs’ death in July 1993. The Monthly Review Press published their book, *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century*, in 1974. In 1992, with James Boggs, Shea Howell and others, she founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural, intergenerational youth movement program, to rebuild, redefine and re-spirit Detroit from the ground up. She spreads her ideas by writing a weekly column in the *Michigan Citizen* newspaper. In 1998, the University of Minnesota Press published her autobiography, *Living for Change*. A plaque in her honor is displayed at the National Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. Boggs has also received the distinguished Alumna Award from Barnard College, the Chinese American Pioneers Award, from the Organization of Chinese Americans, and a lifetime achievement award from the Anti-Defamation League.

Emily P. Lawsin, lecturer in American Culture and Women's Studies, is a second generation Pinay originally from “She-attle”, Washington. She teaches Filipino American history and literature, Asian Pacific American Women, Oral History Methods, and Community Service-Learning courses. She joined the U-M faculty in 2000, after she completed her Master of Arts degree in Asian American Studies at UCLA. From 1994-2000, she taught Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge, where she won awards for her dedication to students. She serves on the Board of Trustees of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) and volunteers with Detroit Summer, the Detroit Chinatown Revitalization Committee, Detroit Asian Youth Project, Paaralang Pilipino Cultural School, Filipino Youth Initiative, Asian American Center for Justice, and the Japanese American History Project of Michigan. Professor Lawsin is the co-author, with Joseph Galura, of *Filipino Women in Detroit, 1945-1955: Oral Histories from the Filipino American Oral History Project of Michigan*. Her poetry and essays on war brides, students, and writers have been published in numerous journals, newspapers, and anthologies. An oral historian and spoken word performance poet, she is a member of Ma’arte Tribe Artists Collective, and has performed on radio and stage throughout the United States and Manila.

Transcript of Grace Lee Boggs

Transcript of Grace Lee Boggs

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*⁹²

Emily Lawsin: Well, welcome to the University of Michigan, Grace. We're very happy to have you here. Could you...we'll start out by asking you a few questions. Could you tell me a little bit about the place where you were born?

Grace Lee Boggs: Well, my father had a little Chinese restaurant in downtown, Providence, Rhode Island. And I was born above the restaurant. And I think that was when I first began to learn about how...the changes that we need to have in this country. Because the waiters in the restaurant, whenever I cried, they would say, "Leave her on the hillside, she's only a girl child." And so I got some idea of the kind of changes that we needed to make [laughs] in this world, and I think that was my first indication that my women's consciousness...as a baby.

Emily: Hmm. That's great. So...

Grace: And I think also I should say that my...my mother came from a little Chinese village in southern China, and she never learned how to read and write.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because they had no schools for females in that village. And she used to tell us stories about how she was sold as a slave by her uncle. She...her mother was a single mother. And she was sold to the big house and how she had to run away. So that gave me an idea also that these changes had to be made all over the world.

Emily: Hmm! Um-hum. Yeah. And so then how were you raised?

Grace: Well, actually, I was...we lived in an all-Caucasian community. And my father had to buy the land for our house in the name of his Irish contractor, because there were restricted covenants there. So I was raised in a Caucasian community with the idea that education was really important. And my father felt that way about education for girls as well as for boys.

Emily: Hmm!

⁹² These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

Grace: And I think that was the...my first attempt at having some sort of independence, was I figured that my mother was so powerless because she had no education, and that I was going to get an education. So I think that was why I really pursued my studies.

Emily: Um-hum. So your mother was very supportive of this, too, then?

Grace: Ah, you know, the...this question of the relationship between mothers and daughters is very complex, as you know.

Emily: Yes, I know [laughs].

Grace: I was never quite sure whether My father was really more supportive than my mother, because my mother always felt, I think envious that I had so much freedom as contrasted to her having none.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: My, my sister, my older sister was born in steerage, actually, on the boat from China in 1911. And my mother had no doctor, had no care. And by the time I came along, I think my head was too big and she really suffered a lot in my birth.

Emily: Oh.

Grace: And so we always had a kind of funny...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...relationship.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. So you were talking about your educational experience. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that was like?

Grace: Well, I started college in 1931, with Barnard College, which is a all-women's college. And I was very act—oh, I...the first year, in 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria. So the first thing I thought I'd do, I was go... I would to into International Diplomacy. That's the first class. And then I...I had a wonderful class with a guy by the name of Crampton, who was born and educated in the 19th century and was a Darwinian. And I had NEVER been introduced to Darwinian ideas at all. And so I got very excited about that, so I thought I'd go into science. And then I found that science took so much time in the afternoon in laboratories, so I thought [laughter], I thought I would drop science and go into something else. And so at the end of my sophomore year, I dropped all the classes and decided I'd go into philosophy and that's what I did for the rest of my undergraduate work. And then I...I was lucky. I got a...One...one of the things I was determined not to do was to take a woman's role. In those days, if you were a woman, you were supposed to be either a teacher or a nurse. And I was determined to be neither one of those.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: So, when people ask me, you know, “What will...what will you do as a philosopher?” I hadn’t the vaguest idea what I would do. But I found it very satisfying because it gave me an opportunity to exercise my mind and think about things. So that’s why I went into philosophy.

Emily: Um-hum. Were you the only woman in that philosophy department?

Grace: That’s a long time ago.

Emily: Yeah [laughs].

Grace: No. As a matter of fact, one of the things that I could tell folks and they...they’re...it’s very hard for folks to understand this, for those of you who are much younger, the philosophy for much of the period that ... of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century was a question of very upper class folks talking about very abstract questions, mostly male.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And it wasn’t the sort of thing that I was particularly interested in, and so I had to begin figuring out what I was in philosophy for.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So that’s been part of what my whole life is about, what am I doing, whether I’m thinking about this world, but why am I doing it?

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. And did you ever get to use the philosophy degree in a...or in an academic setting or...?

Grace: Well, I was very lucky that at Bryn Mawr College, my professor was a man by the name of Paul Weiss. He was Jewish, he was very young. He was very, very alive. People have written about him, his book. He was like Socrates down on the Lower East Side of New York, going with a Jewish accent.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But, but he did, was he...he helped me very much to think speculatively, and to ask questions. And he introduced me to Hegel and to dialectical thinking⁹³ for which I am very grateful.

⁹³ *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770-1831) was a German philosopher. Dialectical thinking is, literally, a process of thinking by means of dialogue, discussion, debate, or argument. For Hegel, dialectical

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So, and that's been...that's held me in good stead for most of my active life.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: To think dialectically. That's, that's the biggest challenge I think we all face.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. So after you left Bryn Mawr, where did you go after that?

Grace: Well, ah, now we're talking about 1940.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: In 1940, if you went even to a department store, they would come right out and say, "We don't hire Orientals."

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So after I got my Ph.D., the idea even of applying for an academic job was, you know, crazy. Wouldn't even think about...So the last person, the person under whom I did my dissertation, George Herbert Mead⁹⁴, had taught at the University of Chicago. So I decided to go to the University of Chicago and see what I could learn there.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I went there and I got a job in the philosophy library for \$10 a week. And I looked for a place to live, because you couldn't get very much...I mean, actually, by the way, \$10 a week was not so horrendous in those days, because a lot of people only made maybe five hundred dollars a year or a thousand dollars a year. But it still wasn't very much. You couldn't pay much rent with it. So I went up and down the street trying to find a place to live. And I was very lucky. I...there was this little Jewish woman took pity on me and said I could stay in her basement rent free, and I leaped...I leapt at the chance. And the only obstacle was that I had to face down a barricade of rats in order to get in from the alley into the basement.

Emily: Whew [laughs].

Grace: But that turned out to be a blessing because it brought me into contact with other people who were sort of fighting rat-infested housing in ... on the South Side of Chicago,

thinking meant the inevitable transition of thought, by contradiction and reconciliation, from an initial conviction to its opposite and then to a new, higher conception that involves but transcends both of them.

⁹⁴ *George Herbert Mead* (1863-1931) was major figure in the history of American philosophy. He taught at the University of Chicago from 1894 until his death.

and those were mostly Black people, and I had never had any contact with Black people before, and I began working with this tenants group, and as a result when A. Phillip Randolph⁹⁵ announced in 1941 that he was going to march on Washington to demand jobs for Blacks in defense plants, I was there. So I...most folks don't know, but back in 1940, '41, the Depression was over for whites, but not for Blacks, so Blacks were still banned from the decent jobs in the factories. So out of the march on Washington, which actually didn't materialize as a march, but really galvanized the community, the Black community and ... who were ready to go to Washington. Franklin D. Roosevelt who was president had to issue Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in defense plants. And it was, it was a real sense of a movement about the march on Washington. And as a result, I had some...I got a glimpse of what a movement was like, and I decided I would become a movement activist in the Black community, and that's what I did mostly.

Emily: In the Black community, as opposed to ...you're Chinese American. As opposed to the Asian American, the Chinese American community?

Grace: Well, we...you know, the Asian American movement⁹⁶ is a very recent thing. I was part of it partly during the anti-Vietnam War movement. We were...we had a group called the Asian Political Alliance⁹⁷. But the really big movement, from 19, say, '40 to 1960s and 1970, was the Black movement. I mean, the whole business of fighting for democracy both at home or abroad, "Double V for Democracy"⁹⁸, was such a...it's hard for you people to understand that now, what...what an inspiring force it was for the whole country, and how...how ridiculous it was that we should be fighting for democracy overseas, and that people here should be banned even from going into a restaurant or into a motel or into a theater. And it was such a glaring contradiction that...And, and folks tell...You know, it gave me a sense that I was really a part of changing something really, really historic and really monumental. And so, the...the Asian American movement, you know how many Chinese there were in this country in 1940?

Emily: Huh?

Grace: About 130,000

⁹⁵ A. Phillip Randolph was a trade unionist and civil-rights leader who was a dedicated and persistent leader in the struggle for justice and parity for the black American community. (1889-1979)

⁹⁶ The contemporary *Asian American Movement* started in 1968 on US college campuses and in urban neighborhoods. Young Asian American students fought for the development of Asian American studies programs and joined other Asian Americans involved in national and international campaigns for justice and social equality.

⁹⁷ The *Asian Political Alliance* was credited for the creation of a new "Asian-American identity". Grace Lee Boggs is one of the founding members of this organization created in Detroit, Michigan between the years of 1969 and 1971. It was patterned after the black movement and consisted of Chinese and Japanese people born in the United States and abroad.

⁹⁸ "Double V[ictory] for Democracy" was a World War II-era slogan referring to the need not only for an Allied victory in war but for a victory for civil rights in the United States as well. The slogan emerged in response to the racism experienced by African-Americans in the United States, and in particular the segregation and harassment of African-American soldiers during the war, and served as a reminder that even as the U.S. fought for democracy abroad, our own democracy was deeply flawed.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And if you compare that to the Asians in the country today, you can see a monumental change has taken place.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. And were you ever treated differently in the Black movement because you were Chinese American?

Grace: Well, people always ask me that question.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And it's...I think for folks who were much younger, who remember the nationalist phase of the Black movement and the extreme race consciousness that has developed ever since, say, 1960, I find it difficult to recall that in the 1940's and 1950's there was not that sense of color consciousness in the Black community. A lot of folks, say, in Detroit, for example, many of the people who were in Detroit, lived in Detroit, had come from down South, and they lived side by side almost, even though there was this...this huge, you know, color bar in the South. And I was strange to people. I mean, they...they considered me a person of color, but I wasn't Black, and kids used to come up and touch my hair and say, you know, what nice hair you have, because it was so straight, and black like yours. And so it was...the...there wasn't that...people I think accepted me. Particularly, because, you know, I was married to Jimmy and we lived in the Black community.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I had a wonderful time. It was the first community I had ever really belonged to.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because I...I didn't live in Chinatown. I wasn't raised in Chinatown. It was a Caucasian neighborhood in which we lived. And I was welcomed and enjoyed myself.

Emily: Um-hum. Okay. I'm going to take a little...back a little bit. You mentioned you joined the tenant housing and went to the march on Washington in the 1940's. And after that, what led you here to Michigan?

Grace: Well, I...I...I joined the Workers Party⁹⁹ where I met C. L. R. James. And C. L. R. James was a West Indian Marxist who introduced me to Marx and introduced me to a number of the people who were fighting for independence in Africa and the West Indies.

⁹⁹ *Workers Party* was founded in 1940 by Max Shachtman and other Trotskyists who had broken from the Socialist Workers Party of the USA.

And also we had a...we called ourselves the Johnson Forest Tendency¹⁰⁰. Johnson was C. L. R. James' Party name. And we thought that the most important struggle taking place...not the most important, that's wrong. That the so-called Negro Struggle should...had a tremendously important role in bringing about all the struggles in this country. And that is important to defend the...and encourage it. And in 1951, we decided that the main social forces to bring about social change in this country were Blacks, rank and file workers, women and young people. And we heard about how Blacks going through the experience of the union in the war plants had come out and were looking for something more radical than the union. So we decided that we would come...we would put out a newsletter called *Correspondence*, and that we'd move to Detroit in order to put it out. So I moved to Detroit to work on *Correspondence*.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And there I met Jimmy and we got married.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Okay. Well, you want to talk a little bit about meeting Jimmy.

Grace: [laughter] I talk...yeah, this is very funny. Jimmy was...had come up from the South after he graduated from high school in Selma, Alabama. And he came up to Detroit where his brothers were, and worked in the...on the WPA¹⁰¹ and so forth until he got a chance to go into the plant at the beginning of the War. And he worked on the motor line at the Chrysler-Jefferson plant¹⁰². Actually he worked there for 28 years. And he was...he was...he was a writer. He was an activist and he was a writer. But he was a writer in a very interesting way. When he was eight years old down South, people in this community didn't know how to even write.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So at eight years old, he became the scribe for the community, to write the letters in the community and so forth. And that set him on the path of writing. And he did much and almost most of the writing for *Correspondence*, which was very exciting to me. And he was...he also...By the way, in those days, the Black community was very suspicious of women radicals.

Emily: Hmm.

¹⁰⁰ *Johnson Forest Tendency* was initially a subgroup in the 1940s of the Workers Party, the official Trotskyite party in the USA at the time. The two main leaders: C.L.R. James, who wrote under the pen name of J.R. Johnson, and Raya Dunayevskaya alias Freddie Forrest, hence the Johnson-Forrest label. Grace Lee Boggs became the third leader when she joined the two in the mid-1940s.

¹⁰¹ *Works Progress Administration* was a Depression-relief measure established by President Roosevelt in 1935, it offered work to the unemployed on an unprecedented scale by spending money on a wide variety of programs, including highways and building construction, slum clearance, reforestation, and rural rehabilitation.

¹⁰² *Chrysler-Jefferson plant* was automobile plant in Detroit, Michigan.

Grace: Because there was a thing going around that the Communist Party allegedly sent white women into the Black community in order to recruit men to the Party. So Jimmy didn't want to have anything to do with me, because he thought that I was...I don't know...

Emily: A spy [laughs].

Grace: So, but...but he didn't...I had a car. Whenever I went into a city, I would buy a car. And I bought this Plymouth, 1938 Plymouth for a hundred dollars. And after meetings I would drive him home. And he would sit way over on the passenger side and answer everything I asked him monosyllabically. So one night I invited him to dinner. And he came late. He...

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: ...he didn't like the food that I prepared; he didn't like the music that I played. But in the course of the evening, he asked me to marry him. [Laughter] This is our first date. It was the first date which he...

Emily: What did you put in that food?

Grace: ...not sitting around, and he edges the door of the passenger seat. And I said yes. I had no idea that was going to happen.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: I had no idea I was going to say yes. But I said yes. And it's probably the most important thing I did, ever did in my life.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: It was really...it was amazing. We worked together, you know, for 40 years. And a lot of things changed for me during that period.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because I think we were able to work as partners in a way that few people have an opportunity to do.

Emily: Hmm. Hmm. Let's hear a little bit more then about that. What were the kinds of things that you and Jimmy and others worked in?

Grace: Well, one of the first things I'd learned, I remember I was looking out the window one day and I saw some kid on drugs. And I began thinking of all the reasons why he was on drugs—the system, racism, et cetera, et cetera. And Jimmy took a different stand. He said that what...he gave me an insight I think to the way in which people survived in the

South under the worst conditions of segregation and discrimination and racism. People talked about the kind of values that they had to maintain in order to survive. And they held each other responsible in a way that I think few people understand and really appreciate. And that's...I learned that. I learned that being liberal and making excuses for people helps nobody. That's the first thing I learned from Jimmy. The second thing I learned from Jimmy, which I did not have, was a kind of courage. I have a tape, a video, which was made for Jimmy's memorial in 1993. And it starts out with Jimmy speaking to a class at the University of Michigan. And Jimmy says to this class, "I don't believe nobody knows more about running this country than I do." And when the class responds with a kind of nervous laughter, he says, "You better think that way. You better not think like a minority. Because when you think like a minority, you think like an underling. Everyone is capable of going beyond their...where they are. And I would hope that everybody in this room thinks that way—that you think of yourself and believe that you can do what has not yet been done." And I...you know, that takes a whole lot of chutzpah¹⁰³. Which I didn't have, you know. I had a lot of book learning and, yeah, a pretty good mind. But that kind of audacity, that kind of belief in yourself I think is what we all need. And I think we particularly need it at this point. And I think...and Jimmy, I got some of that from Jimmy.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Um-hum. That's great. You mentioned "Correspondence."

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: And you mentioned the drug problem outside where you were living. What other movements and organizations did you join after you moved to Detroit?

Grace: Well, one of the things I...I think I need to say here, is that I was very much a part of the Black Movement. The...when I...I came to Detroit in '53. The Montgomery Bus Boycott¹⁰⁴ took place. Well, first of all, Emmett Till¹⁰⁵ was killed in September 1955, which began to mobilize the Black community. And then in December 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott started and lasted for a year. And it created such a spirit of hope and also of restlessness up north. Because a lot of folks up north in the Black community had begun to look down on the people in the South, that they were the ones who had stayed down there. We were the ones who had the guts to come up north and all that sort of thing.

¹⁰³ *Chutzpah*: A Yiddish term for courage bordering on arrogance, roughly equivalent to "nerve."

¹⁰⁴ On December 1, 1955, a black seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for not giving up her seat to a white man as the law required at that time. Local black leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., organized a bus boycott that lasted until November 13, 1956 when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a federal court's ruling, declaring segregation on buses unconstitutional. The boycott is seen as pivotal to the civil rights movement in the U.S.

¹⁰⁵ On August 28, 1955 *Emmett Till* (1941-1955) was killed at the age 14 by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Mississippi. The men were jailed and tried for the murder. On September 23rd 1955, although they had confessed to the brutal slaying of Till, the men were released when an all white men jury found them "not guilty."

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And all of a sudden, here were the people in the South standing up, and we didn't know what we should do in order to stand up in the north. So it really was a challenge to us. What should we do in a city like Detroit? Now, Detroit, by the way, didn't pass the public accommo—I mean, Michigan didn't pass a Public Accommodations Act¹⁰⁶ until 1949. Until that time, you couldn't go into a coffee joint on Woodward Avenue and be served. And even after the Act was passed in 1949, Jimmy...and Jimmy and Jimmy was one of them, had to sit down and demand a cup of coffee and call the cops to enforce the law before they would be served a cup of coffee.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: This is Detroit now...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...in 1949. And the plant...and the bars around the Chrysler-Jefferson plant where Jimmy worked were exclusively white. Blacks couldn't go in. And we're talking now about Detroit, which is very much up South. So should we...On the other hand, you know, when...when the young people sat in on February 1st in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, and ... because they weren't being served a cup of coffee by Woolworth's, we would go into the Woolworth's on Woodward Avenue¹⁰⁷ and get served a cup of coffee by then, you see. So we ... that wouldn't do.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: We tried sort of marching up and down in front of the Woolworth's on Woodward Avenue, and that seemed kind of silly.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But what was happening in Detroit, we...I think that one of the most important things I learned in that period was that what you...how you struggle must depend very much upon the concrete circumstances where you are. And the concrete circumstances in Detroit were that...well, when I came...let me go back for that. When I came to Detroit in 1953, I sublet an apartment on 14th Street and Blaine, and ... which was all white.

¹⁰⁶ *Public Accommodations Act* law that makes it illegal to discriminate against a person because of their race, color, sex, religion, ancestral origin, disability, age (18+), sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. The law covers places of public accommodation such as restaurants, theaters, public transportation, hotels, stores, gyms, hospitals, and any other establishment open to the public. Accommodations that are distinctly private in nature are not covered by this act.

¹⁰⁷ *Woolworth's* (1879) was the first five-and-ten-cent chain in the United States, which sold discounted general merchandise at fixed prices. The stores eventually incorporated lunch counters and served as general gathering places. On February 1, 1960, four African American students sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's store. They were refused service, touching off six months of sit-ins and economic boycotts, which gained national attention. Woolworth's closed in 1997.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: I sublet it from a friend. Now the houses in the neighborhood were owned by Blacks mostly, but the apartments were exclusively white.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And, but when they created the Lodge Freeway¹⁰⁸ on the west side...on the west side, and bulldozed Chinatown to create it and created I-75 on the east side and bulldozed the Black community in order to create it, what happened was that there was a way for white folks to escape the city.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So they took the freeways to the suburbs and they left all these vacant apartments. And what happened was the apartments...oh, I have to go back. In this apartment that I rented when Jimmy stayed with me, they threw me out, because Blacks weren't allowed.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And when we looked...went to look for a place, they were beginning to open up apartment houses to people of color but they doubled the rent. The rents went up from about \$40 a month to \$70 and \$80 a month. And that may seem like nothing now. But it was, you know, it was a very dramatic change. And you could see this happening in the city. So the circumstances were that whites were fleeing the city and Blacks were becoming the majority. But all the offices all the officials, all the politicians in the city were still white and the mayor was white, there was only one token Black on the City Council, the Superintendent of Schools was white, the Board of Education was white. So we began to say to ourselves, in the history of the United States, when a city becomes almost ethnically one group, what happens is the political offices are taken over by that particular group. So we began to create a Black Power Movement¹⁰⁹ that would begin to address this situation, that when a certain group of people becomes the majority in the city, they should run the city. And I became very active in the Black Power Movement. I

¹⁰⁸ *Lodge Freeway*: A section of freeway, also known as "Chrysler Freeway," running through Detroit, Michigan. In order to build this freeway Black Bottom, one of Detroit's most distinct African American communities, was bulldozed in the 1960s. Black Bottom, also known as Paradise Valley, had more African American businesses along Hastings and Saint Antoine Streets than any other place in America. It was a predominately African-American neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan where Black migrants from the South were forced to live because of deed restrictions that made it illegal from them to own or rent property in most of the city.

¹⁰⁹ *Black Power* was a political movement that rose to great prominence in the middle 1960s, which expressed a new racial consciousness among Blacks in the United States. The Black Power Movement encouraged the improvement of communities of people of African descent, rather than the fight for complete integration. One of the key concepts in the rhetoric and style of "Black Power" was the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms.

was the coordinator for the all Black Freedom Now Party¹¹⁰, which ran a full slate of candidates in the 1964 election. I was the main organizer for Malcolm's¹¹¹ Grassroots¹¹² Leadership Conference¹¹³ in November 1963. And I became so active in the Black Movement that the FBI, its records say, "She's probably Afro-Chinese." But that's how closely I became identified. And it was, it was...it was a tremendous learning experience for me.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because up to that time, my activities had been really peripheral. I had...I had engaged in things, I had been to meetings, I had protested and so forth. But here was something that actually organically happening to the city, and I was a part of it. And when the rebellions broke out in 1967, people said that I was one of the six people responsible, even though Jimmy and I were on vacation at that time in Los Angeles. But what happened was that the rebellion...up to that time, I had been in the radical movement for nearly 30 years, and Jimmy as well, and we had never tried to distinguish between a rebellion and a revolution. We had never felt it necessary, because the thinking of most people who were for social change or radicals at the time, was that if we...folks who were oppressed got angry enough, and, and acted, you know, went out in the streets and rebelled, the old society would be swept away and the people who were oppressed would represent a whole new set of values. And all of a sudden what happened was that the streets were filled with young people who were angry, legitimately so, at the fact that the police were sort of like an occupation army within the city, and also by the fact that the high tech, or what we called automation was eliminating the jobs which they had been able to drop out of school and get, you know, in the plant, and they were full of this anger. But there was nothing that they were going to replace it with.

Emily: Um-hum.

¹¹⁰ *Freedom Now Party*: An all-Black political independent party in Michigan that ran candidates in the general election of November 1964. A call for the Freedom Now Party was first made in August 1963 to the quarter million participants in the national civil rights March on Washington. While many people supported the call, it was only in Michigan that the new party mounted a serious electoral effort, running a slate of 39 candidates in the 1964 elections.

¹¹¹ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

¹¹² *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

¹¹³ The "*Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference*" was held in Detroit in November 1963, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It was organized partially as a protest after blacks were prohibited from speaking at a nearby, conservative, political convention. At the conference Malcolm X gave a talk that became known as the "Message to the Grassroots."

Grace: So they need...I think this is...this is probably the turning point of my political life—the need to distinguish between a rebellion and a revolution. And to recognize that young people had come upon the historical scene and had needs and frustrations and hopes, but had no idea of how they were going to fulfill these.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And that the task, our task therefore as people who considered ourselves revolutionaries, was to begin to go beyond protests and to begin trying to define what work would mean, what education would mean, what community would mean, what all the fundamental aspects of a human existence would mean in the new society. And that's what I've been engaged with for the last 30 some years.

Emily: Hmm. So tell us a little bit about those organizations. I know that some of them, a lot of them are concentrated on this youth...

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: ...the notion of youth, that you...you mentioned. So can you tell us a little bit about some of the earlier ones and some...

Grace: Well...

Emily: ...some of the more recent ones?

Grace: Well, in the 60's, one of the...one of our demands as part of a Black Power Movement was community control of schools.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And there was a very active movement on the national scale, particularly in New York, around this question of community control of schools. And I had taught briefly, during the 60's in the public schools, and it seemed to me that the question of education was not a question of who controlled the schools, but what was education all about.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That we had come to a point in the history of this country when a system of education which had been created on the factory model at the beginning of the 20th century to prepare young people to become workers in the plant. That that was no longer satisfactory.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That what had happened is that young people were now actors on the historical scene, and that some way that...the only way in which they could become really, say,

citizens, who could play the role of self-governing, with the responsibilities of self government was if the educational system would provide that as a natural and normal part of the school curriculum. That from K to 12, the demo—the classrooms needed to be much more democratic, there needed to be a much more parallel relationship between teaching and learning. That teachers had to learn as well as...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...as young people. And that young people should be engaged in activities, which affected their lives. And through that participation and that activity, they would learn things that would matter not just in a cognitive sense, but in a social sense, in a human sense. And this...this is the sort of schooling that they began to create in the South during Mississippi Summer¹¹⁴ in 1964. So this is one of the most important things. For 30 years I'd been talking about a paradigm shift in education toward a more democratic ed—type of education, a more community-based education, and now I think the crisis in the school system has reached the point where people are ready to entertain it. You know, I think that has a lot to do...How do you build a movement? It seems to me that to build a movement, you have to...first of all, you have to be very rooted in the realities and in the contradictions of the society where you are, or the place where you are. And then you have to begin to create a vision of what the new values would be in a fundamental institution. And then you sort of have to wait till the crisis reaches the point where people are ready to consider it.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And what's been happening is that the school crisis has become so profound and Bush's No Child Left Behind Act¹¹⁵ has turned into such a penalizing leg—form of legislation, that's created a condition of what they call zero tolerance in the schools...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...that principals and teachers are so afraid that test scores will go down that they penalize kids for practically nothing. And the kids are beginning to rebel against it. And

¹¹⁴ *Mississippi Summer* is also known as the Mississippi Freedom Project (1964). In 1964 the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized its Freedom Summer campaign. The main objective was to try to put an end to the political disenfranchisement of African Americans in the Southern States. Volunteers from the three organizations decided to concentrate its efforts in Mississippi. In 1962 only 6.7 per cent of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, the lowest percentage in the country. This involved the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP). Over 80,000 people joined the party and 68 delegates, led by Fannie Lou Hamer, attended the Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City and challenged the attendance of the all-white Mississippi representation. CORE, SNCC and NAACP also established 30 Freedom Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. Volunteers taught in the schools and the curriculum now included black history, the philosophy of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1964 over 3,000 students attended these schools and the experiment provided a *model for future educational programs*.

¹¹⁵ *No Child Left Behind Act* Controversial educational reform passed into law on January 8, 2002 by the Bush Administration.

teachers are also beginning to rebel against this sort of a standardized testing, which doesn't give them an opportunity to be creative and relate to the children. And the Charter School Movement¹¹⁶ is beginning, beginning to pull people out of the public school system so the public school system doesn't know where it's going. So a few weeks ago, Kilpatrick¹¹⁷, you know mayor of Detroit, organized a two-hour televised town meeting, and at the end of the meeting, he said, "We need to be more radical."

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: We need...we...we're protecting the system. All over urban America they are crying out for solutions. We need people to talk about...everybody needs to be engaged. What are we doing or talking about doing that's going to be different?

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And so, I mean, there was the opportunity...

Emily: Yes.

Grace: ...now. And then he came out the other night, Tuesday night; I don't know how many people saw him. But he did a half-hour program on...on Channel 7¹¹⁸. He said, "The answer is to put me in charge."

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: It's just...I mean people...I...you know, I...I go to a water aerobics class almost every morning. And most of the people in the class are retirees, they're mostly African American, mostly women. And they just said, he ought to be ashamed of himself...

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: ...asking for a radical change, asking everybody to be engaged in making proposals, and he comes out and says, "I should be the one who's in charge." Almost unbelievable. But the opportunity is marvelous. Because in the *Michigan Citizen* this week, what we're doing, we have a...we have a group that meets every couple weeks, of young people and teachers and educators. And we've been working on how to project this idea of freedom schooling, and meet with...We've been working with a group called Youth United¹¹⁹, of young people. And they, in response to Kilpatrick's appeal, drew up a series of proposals...

¹¹⁶ *Charter School Movement* aim to have public schools financed by public funds, but which are governed by their own specific charter and not by the regular public school regulations or system. The first charter school legislation was enacted in 1991 in Minnesota and has been increasing at a tremendous rate.

¹¹⁷ *Kwame Kilpatrick*, the mayor of Detroit, was elected in November 2001 and re-elected in 2005.

¹¹⁸ *Channel 7*: A Detroit local television station part of the ABC Television Network.

¹¹⁹ *Youth United*: An organization in Detroit dedicated to young people.

Emily: Um-Hmm!

Grace:...asking what should be done. And that appears in this week's *Michigan Citizen*. And I urge people to get a copy.

Emily: Hmm. Okay. Well, I want to hear a little bit about Detroit Summer, because I know Detroit Summer is part of this Freedom School Movement, too, and you spent many years with that organization.

Grace: Yeah, let me...let me tell you how Freedom Sch—how Detroit Summer started. In...Coleman Young was elected, the first Black mayor of Detroit in 1973, a lot because of the rebellion. People realized that a white mayor would never be able to maintain law and order. So Coleman Young was elected. And Coleman is a...was a very, very smart man. He was a very devoted man. There was nothing ... nothing wrong with his head at all. He might have been a little bit blunt at time but...But anyway, he was able to do something about racism in the fire department and in the police department. He was able to appoint Black folks in charge and integrate both of the services. But he couldn't do anything about the exodus of the corporations.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Which began very heavily right about the time he was elected—1973, 1974. So he tried desperately to try and bring back industry. In 1980, for example, he allowed GM¹²⁰ to create what was called the Pole Town Plant¹²¹. And in order to do that, they demolished fifteen hundred homes, six hundred businesses, six churches. And there was a huge protest movement but GM said, "We'll create 6,000 jobs." So the UAW¹²² went along also, and there have never been more than 3,000 jobs there. But that didn't stop...I mean, 3,000 jobs even. But by the way, there are two other GM plants that were employing 35,000 people, were shut down...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...and replaced by this one plant. So by 1985—this was in 1980—in 1985, crack came to Detroit. And very shortly we began having a drug economy. You know, kids create, sell these little pellets for five dollars. And kids started saying, "Why go to school?" with the idea that some day you'll be able to make a lot of money, when you can make a lot of money right now on the street, rolling. And this is what they began doing, and it was right...there was a lot of violence, a lot of killings. In 1986, there were

¹²⁰ *General Motors (GM)*: A U.S.-based automobile company.

¹²¹ *Pole Town Plant* is a GM plant officially known as the Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Center) built in Detroit in the early 1980's. The construction required the bull-dozing of 1500 houses, 600 small businesses and six churches in an old Polish neighborhood to build a plant that GM promised would employ 6000 workers at the same time that it was closing down two other plants which together employed 30,000. The plant has never employed more than 4000 people.

¹²² Founded in 1935, The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) claims to be one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America.

47 young people killed in street violence and 365 wounded. And Coleman didn't know what to do.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: He said, "We've got to have jobs. He says we can't depend on the auto industry for jobs anymore. We've got to have a casino industry¹²³. That will create 50,000 jobs."

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So we created an organization to...to struggle against it. And we actually managed to defeat him on this proposal, which had already been defeated three times. And we only have casinos now because Windsor created a casino, and people could literally see the money, swimming over the Canada.

Emily: Huh.

Grace: So they voted in casinos in Detroit. But during the struggle, Coleman said, "You're just a bunch of naysayers. What is your alternative?"

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And that forced us to begin thinking about what is our alternative? What do you do with a city like Detroit, which is a beautiful setting on the Detroit River, has beautiful institutions—museums, universities? Has a population that mostly came from the country, but isn't going back to the country? Which is now abandoned to such a degree that you...very often you see more prairie...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...than you see homes. So Jimmy wrote a document called "Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling." And, in it, he talked about how we need to see the 21st century city as a collection of communities that...and we have to bring the country back into the city. Instead of carrying on this process which has been going on for the last three, four hundred years, where you depopulate the countryside and, you know, urbanize everything, and, you know, and pave over everything green, and build higher and higher skyscrapers, what we need to do is to think about...begin thinking about the city in a different way. And he said the people who can begin doing this thinking are essentially the young people, that they...we can...we can involve them in ...in doing things that will begin to be an example of some different way to redefine and to re-spirit the city. And so we...Detroit...created Detroit Summer, partly in order to show how to rebuild the city and also to begin as an example of a different kind of education that really involves young people in things that matter to their lives. And that's how Detroit Summer started. It's now ...

¹²³ The *casino industry* constructs legal gambling establishments.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...been in existence for twelve years.

Emily: Hmm. Um-hum. Since 1992.

Grace: '92

Emily: Yeah. So what are your favorite projects out of Detroit Summer?

Grace: Well, I think my favorite is the Bike Program.

Emily: The Back Alley Bikes.

Grace: Right. Back Alley Bikes. And this was created by the young people. You know, the things...one of the things we do, we started out with community gardens and public murals, which the young people paint in consultation with the community, in order to give the sense of public space and restore community. And then one of the young people came up with the idea of bicycles as a way for young people to get around. Because one of the problems that we were having with Detroit Summer was that young people had to be chauffeured every place that they went. We'd have to...we'd have to get a car to take them to the projects, the parents would have to bring them down, so forth and so on. And someone thought, well, if we got people to donate bikes that were used and in bad repair, and we offered these to young people if they would repair them, then they could own them. And so this program...they...it's amazing. There's a room in...we have a space called the Youth Space on Cass. It's a room this size, and all over the floor you see bikes in different states of repair. And you should see the young people walk in and say, "That's mine." And then take it and repair it. And, you know, just...just begin to have a form of mobility so they're...they're not dependent on their parents to chauffeur them every place they go.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And we're also, at the same time, reducing the emissions, so the air is more clearer, cleaner. And we're creating a form of community, because when young people are all over the streets in their bicycles, it makes a difference. Cars are like chariots. You know, they sort of isolate everybody.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: But bikes are a way to socialize. So that's my favorite program.

Emily: Um-hum. You know, I've volunteered with Detroit Summer for a few years now, and I've noticed that a lot of the leadership in the organization are women.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: Why do you think that's so?

Grace: Well, first of all, I think the time has probably come for women's leadership.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: The...you know, the last...two weeks ago, mayor Kilpatrick appointed a woman police commissioner.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Her name is Ellie Bowling Cummings.

Emily: Bowling Cummings.

Grace: And she's like Tiger Woods, she's of Asian and African American extraction. And when I went into my water aerobics class the next morning, everybody was talking about it. And one of the women in particular, her name is Nora, Nora Wheels, said, "You know, it's time for women to take over. We've been abused; we've been helping everybody now. They make such a mess, the only person who can lose it and clear it up are women." Well, I...I think that's going a little overboard.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I do believe that the sort of hierarchical, patriarchal way in which we're doing things has created such a mess that people to whom the more natural, informal ways of organizing around kitchen story...kitchen tables are telling stories and things like that, that that's a much more natural way of organizing as we move into trying to create something new. And I think that's basically why we have many more women than...than males.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: We do have some, and they're very nice.

Emily: Um-hum. Yes, yes. They are. So can you tell us a little bit then about your understanding of the term "Feminism." Because you've been talking about women's leadership here.

Grace: Well, I...I'm not an -ism person. I don't like -isms. And I also am very aware of the fact that my attitude toward sexism comes out of a very different period from yours.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: That I had to find my own way in a very individual way. When I was fifteen, for example, I read this book called *Women in Economics* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. And, you know, that...that book has a picture of it. She talked about, you know, I'm not sure whether it had a picture or not, but she talked about how little girls sit on their daddy's knees and tuck them under the chin, you know, so that they get a doll or a new dress. And that...that image has never left my mind. I resolved that would not be the way that I was going to live.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I think that's very different from being part of a movement, the way that folks who came out of the 70's and out of the modern women's movement have become so...I...What I do is I try to think of all these various movements, not so much as isms, but as ways by which each section of our society that has been denied their humanity, is emerging to contribute their special strengths through the creation of a new society. And I think women have very special strengths that we can contribute, that is much more natural for women—I hope this doesn't sound like essentialism—but it's much more natural for women to think of doing things in a more informal way, to think of doing a whole lot of different things at once. They're not as linear in their thinking. And so there are a whole lot of attributes that we bring and values that we bring to the creation of a new society.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So I don't think...I...if I were to characterize myself as something particular, I would say I'm old. [Laughter] That's what I am more distinctively than...

Emily: Well, yeah, you're 88, yes [laughs].

Grace: And I have a lot to say about being old.

Emily: Okay. So would you consider yourself a feminist before you, or after you consider yourself being old?

Grace: No, I don't consider myself an -ist of any kind.

Emily: Okay, so tell us what you have to say about being old then [laughs].

Grace: Well, you know, very few people live to my age and still have their marbles¹²⁴.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And I'm very, very fortunate that that's the case. I'm very fortunate also that by virtue of having been born in the first part of this 20th century, I've lived through most of

¹²⁴ “*Still have their marbles*,” is a colloquial term referring to a person's mental facilities. In this sense it refers to an elderly person being able to think and reason clearly.

the great events and had a chance to participate in most of the great movements of the 20th century. So I...I have a sense of the difference between centuries. I have a sense of how much of the first half of the 20th century was dominated by linear ideas. Like sci—scientific socialism for example, that had come out of 19th century thinking. And I was able, I came through the splitting of the atom, and this...this recognition that we had to change our ways of thinking because, as Oppenheimer¹²⁵ would have...human beings had experienced sin that the...all...that the way that we used to blame everything on everybody else and not see our own need for transformation, that we had to get beyond that. That a lot of what we had to do had to be a combination of transforming our environment, and at the same time transforming ourselves. That that old polarity and duality between the subjective and the objective could no longer hold. So I've...I...I not only lived through that period, but I also was so involved in the Black Power Movement that having gone through it, I'm able to look back on it and see what some of its limitations were. So I think about power very differently now than I thought about it in the 60's. And I think it...I think it's great to be an old person—and still have your marbles of course.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: If you don't, it's tough. But I, I think that our society...I think for example, you're always reading the statistic about how many more old women there are than old men. Well, they put that in front of me, and they think that you spend most of your time as an old woman looking for an old man.

Emily: Hmm! Um-hum.

Grace: Looking for a man.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And what I've experienced...Jimmy died in 1993, and it was tough.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Because we had done so many things together for 40 years. But I've had now almost ten years on my own.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I've had to do things on my own and think things through on my own. And that's been a great blessing.

¹²⁵ *J. Robert Oppenheimer* was the director of The Manhattan Project, where the Atomic bomb was invented and produced. He is commonly known as the "father of the A-bomb." Upon seeing the impact of the bomb, he advocated for more control on atomic energy, eventually having his security clearance revoked.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So, I...I've learned, I think about how things that are negative, not just seem negative, but that are negative, also are opportunities for...for going beyond where you've been. And I would hope very much that...because you're not, probably not going to speak to many old activists.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And I hope very much that...that folks, when they leave this place or when they hear what I have to say, will think differently about the old people whom they meet. That they can...will think about how so much is being wasted when we are not asking some of these folks to give of what they've learned. And I spoke last week at a leadership conference, women's conference, at University of Michigan-Dearborn, and this was the burden of my speech—that there are so many women out there who have lived all these years who have time now to give and want to give, and we really need...our children need them so badly. And we have to find ways to engage them. It's not going to be easy, because, you know, people fall into believing that they're useless. And how to give people the idea that they have so much to contribute. And to...to recognize that when they put forward overtures indicating that they do want to serve.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So that's what I've lived as an old person.

Emily: Hmm. Um-hum. Um-hum. You mentioned earlier how you've been on your own for ten years now, and you had to learn these new things about yourself. So what have you changed in the last ten years about your life?

Grace: Well, one of the most important things that happened to me was actually shortly after the publication of my autobiography, I went to a conference in UCLA¹²⁶, at UCLA organized by Scott Kurashige¹²⁷ who's Emily's partner/husband. It was called an activist...Asian American Activist Serve the People Conference. And I had a wonderful time! Prior to that I'd had very little contact with Asian Americans. And I spoke. And the young people asked questions. They asked questions about the difference between rebellion and revolution! And I'd been dying for somebody to ask me because I had so much to say about it.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: And so that...that brought me into contact with the Asian American young people in a way that I'd not been for many years. So that's been a very marvelous part of the last period.

¹²⁶ *University of California, Los Angeles* (UCLA), is a public research university founded in 1919.

¹²⁷ *Scott Kurashige* is an assistant professor in the Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies Program, the Program in American Culture and the Department of History at the University of Michigan.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Ah, what else has been very important? You know, when you're...when you've been living with someone for a long, long time, you're so used to being able to share things. I mean, you go out and you see something and you not only experience it then, but you have a chance to come home and say, "Oh, look what happened today. Look who I heard," so on and so forth. And you miss that a lot. But when you don't have it, then you do a lot more thinking on...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...on...you have to find ways, you have to create ways whereby you share things. They're not just given. And that's been one of the things I've had to do during this last period.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And things just began falling into my lap. People asked me to do different things and I started doing them.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: So I've been almost more active the last ten years than I was...was in the previous period.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Um-hum. So do you see...what is the connection that you see then between your activism and your scholarship? Or anyone's activism and anyone's scholarship?

Grace: Well, I...I talked earlier about how when I was at Bryn Mawr as a graduate student I was introduced to Hegel. And I used to really get...I didn't understand it particularly, but I used to read it almost like you listen to music.

Emily: Hmm?

Grace: I felt there was something in it that...that I had to sort of internalize. And what I've learned since then, as an activist, is how important it is to think dialectically, because that's what Hegel's thinking is characterized as, described as. The tendency for intellectuals, and for the human mind in fact, is to create a concept and then get locked into it. Everything becomes what Hegel called a fixed concept. A category. And we get so locked into it that we don't realize reality is changing. And what I've learned is how much reality has changed and is changing all the time, and how we're all always being challenged to break out of the boxes...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...that our minds tend to create. In the German, the two words are...I mean the English words are understanding and reason. And the German word is *verstand*, for understanding, and the German word for reason is *vernucht*. And the idea of reason as distinguished from understanding is to think beyond the polarities of the present.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And try to think of a new affirmation and then using that affirmation to help you to create things that enable people to open up their imaginations and move out and be free. Most people have an understanding of Hegel I think that is kind of narrow. What Hegel was talking about was how we could become self determining, how we could really understand that being human means being able to make choices, and how important it is not to see yourself as determined but as self determining, and to use the obstacles that emerge as springboards to get beyond determinism into self-determination.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: So every time something doesn't work or something works too well, I say, "Got to get beyond that."

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Got to think beyond that, got to see every obstacle, every failure, and even every success as a challenge to go beyond. And that's why I think...So thinking and acting to me are so intertwined.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: They're not separate from one another.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And I think that's one of the difficulties. People say, you know, like a cliché, without theory there is no revolutionary practice, and so forth and so on. But it's very hard actually to practice this.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: You can't practice it unless you practice, obviously. But you also need to see obstacles as challenges and as opportunities and not give up so easily, which is the tendency to do. People...people get...I've talked to people who were very active in the 60's but don't see the present situation as an opportunity. The present situation is a tremendous opportunity to be creative and to be imaginative.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. You mentioned the slogan, or the notion of self-determination.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: And that was very much a slogan of the 60's.

Grace: Um-hum.

Emily: Of, you know, Black Power Movement, and even the women's movement. And so I was wondering how you see your work in relation to the women's movement?

Grace: Well, I don't have an awful lot...I don't have contact with many women's organizations. I may send a contribution in now and then, to this organization or the other. But I...I guess I don't believe in getting stuck...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...in any one identity. I think that our tendency...it's so easy to become fragmented because we live in a fragmented...fragmenting society. It's so difficult to be whole.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: To see yourself as many faceted, to see how many possibilities there are in who we are. If, you know, here I've been Afro-Chinese; I've been Asian-American. I've been...I've had the...the opportunity to know so many different people and work with so many different people off all ethnicities and of all ages, and of all classes. And I...I don't believe...I think the tendency in much of the radical movement, certainly during the first half of the 20th century, was to believe that one class, one group, had all the answers. And that's impossible! Society is so complex. And humanity is so...you know, is evolving. You know, we may not be getting new thumbs or...or...toes or something like that. But we are just at the very beginning of human possibilities. We haven't even begun to explore those.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: And that's why it's so important not to get stuck. And you can use philosophy to help you get unstuck.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: But philosophy can also trap you. I mean, ideas are a terrible thing.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: They can trap you as well as enlarge you.

Emily: Um-hum. Um-hum. Hmm. Well, a few minutes ago, you had mentioned the notion of being able to practice, you know, being able to work as an activist. And many students after they read your autobiography, they often ask, how was she able to survive to pay the rent, and do her activism, and do her scholarship, and have her marriage? And so how were you able to...to do this?

Grace: Well, for one thing, everything in our house is second hand.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: All of my clothes come from, you know, something like that. Ah, and I was brought up in a frugal period, you know. I was brought in the period when if you didn't finish everything on your plate you were told about the peasants starving in China. So folks who have been raised in the post-War world, what happens is that you don't believe in being trapped in this society, but by the time you graduate, you owe so much in college loans, you have to buy a car in order to get to your job. You think you have to pay a high rent so you'll be safe for your job. And before you know it, you're in the rat race¹²⁸. And how people are people going to get out of the rat race I think is...is the challenge. I...what I did when I was in college, in addition to having a few scholarships, I used to type, and made my money by...by typing. And when I...all during the years that I was an activist, I was a Kelly Girl¹²⁹, basically.

Emily: Temporary.

Grace: Yeah. Temp—temporary worker, that is.

Emily: Office worker.

Grace: And we lived very frugally, which is why I have so very few teeth now.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: You know, and just go to dentist and they sort of drill and fill.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: But I...I think that folks who are...who have grown up in the post-War world are so caught up in wants rather than needs. And how are they going to break from that, I don't know. I'm glad to say that many of the young people who are coming to Detroit

¹²⁸ The “*rat race*” is a colloquial term, which usually refers to a struggle to maintain one's position in work or life.

¹²⁹ *Kelly* provides temporarily clerical services and started by William Russell Kelly in October 1946, with an office in Detroit, Michigan, and two employees. “Kelly Girl” refers to the women that were typically employed by company. The “Kelly Girl” provided calculating and inventory services, typing and copying.

Summer now, many of them after they graduate come to Detroit because they think there's the possibility of starting afresh, that you can begin producing your own food. That you can begin living simply. That this is the chance not only to do something different with your own life, but to do different...something different for the whole society and begin creating a new model. And so that's one of the great gifts I think of Detroit Summer—to understand...Let me give you an example of what I mean. I've just written this column about how we need to use the lessons of the 60s for the present time. In 1963, the four little girls were killed in the bombing of the Birmingham church¹³⁰. We called for the boycott of Christmas. We said that when such an atrocity happens, we can't do business as usual. Today, with the Iraq war, with the ways that our young people not only losing their lives, but their humanity in what they're being asked to do. Dropping two-thousand bomb—pound bombs on neighborhoods. And in the way that we're treating Arab Americans in this country. We can't just celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas as usual. We can't just watch football games and not...and shop until we drop. We've got to think that we have choices. We can produce something different. Maybe it won't change your life for all time. Maybe it won't change society for all time. But each of us can choose to do something different, because we recognize that for our own humanity we have to.

Emily: Um-hum. Well, I just have a few more questions for you. And I like to ask these questions at the end of every interview I do. So you can indulge and say as much or as little as you'd like. And they're kind of trivial. But you're 88 now, and in your whole life what was the memor—most memorable moment of your life?

Grace: Well, I think when I said yes to Jimmy.

Emily: [laughs] To the proposal.

Grace: Ah, see, I don't know...I don't know whether it's the most memorable or a turning point. It certainly was a turning point...

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: ...in my life. Because it meant that I was...I entered into a life that I had never thought about...

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: ...that I was quite unprepared for, and something that very few people up to now have had the chance to experience.

¹³⁰ On September 15, 1963, four white segregationists, angered by a federal court ruling to integrate Birmingham, Alabama's public schools, threw a bomb into the basement of the all-Black Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The explosion killed four young girls. In response, riots broke out and the authorities retaliated with great violence. City, State and Federal officials failed to bring the bombers to justice until the late 1970s, convicting only one of the bombers. The bombing united factional Civil Rights leaders.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: Really to live with someone who is very different from you.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Different from you ethnically. Different from you in terms of education. Different from you in terms of background. I think that's beginning to happen more with young people today.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: I think that how we're going to experience diversity and really internalize diversity is something that we don't even know anything about up till now. But that's...that's what's going to happen.

Emily: Um-hum.

Grace: Because I think that...First of all, I think that the way of life that, aside from the movements that Americans lived, have lived over the last 50 years, have been extremely damaging to our humanity. I think the way that we have not been able to distinguish between wants and needs. I think the way that we have felt that we needed things, and knew all the time that we are being seduced by commercials.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And felt that we would go along with that, rather than looking into ourselves and...and asking ourselves, what is that doing to us as human beings. Is that making us more human or less human? I think that's the big question. I think the question is not just...it's our human identity that's now under attack, that we now have to rescue, we now have to salvage.

Emily: Well, you've given a lot for us to think about and probably one of my last questions for you would be, if you could change *anything* in your life, anything at all, what would that be?

Grace: I can't think of anything I'd like to change.

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: I mean, I guess...I don't know what that would be. Maybe that sounds...I don't know what that sounds like, but I know I've been extremely fortunate in the friends that I've had and the associates that I've had. I know that I've...I've been able I think to...to enjoy the best of what western society has contributed. One of the things that I think I...I think that a lot of people don't appreciate what it is like to be...to face the challenges of being an American.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: I think that to be an American and to recognize on the one hand the terrible things this country has done, but also to see that it's a challenge, it's a challenge to look at those things and to examine why they have taken place, and to understand that one of the main reasons why that has taken place is that we have put economic growth and development in the forefront and made that, given that a priority, and have not made human development a priority. But that's something that's recognizable. It's not something that's obscure. And we don't have to repeat that. No one is making us do that. We have a choice. Everyone has a choice. I got a letter from a young friend of mine who's been living in a Palestinian village. And she looks...she looks like she could be either Israeli or Palestinian. So she was talking to some of the Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint, and she says, "Why do you do this?" And they said, "We have no choice." And she said, "What about the Refuseniks¹³¹?" It may be a hard choice, but you do have a choice. And I think that...the...the ism that we most have to struggle against is determinism.

Emily: Hmmm ... Hmmm.

Grace: The belief that we don't have a choice. And I think if we...if we could internalize that, internalize it as a philosophical concept, and as a practical thing, and begin applying it on our lives, that we could make a big leap.

Emily: Hmm.

Grace: And maybe only ... maybe only a few of us. But everyone who makes the leap is also helping to advance humanity.

Emily: Hmm. Okay. So this is the point where I ask you is there anything else you'd like to tell us or share that we haven't covered.

Grace: Why don't we have some questions and then maybe that'll be asking.

Emily: Okay. Well, we'll turn to our studio audience here...

Grace: Okay.

Emily: ..and ask them some questions. Okay. Do any of you have some questions for Grace? I know you do [laughs].

Audience 1: Um, do I need to stand up? My question is about, well, you were talking about your Hegelian theory and concepts. Am I talk—can you hear me?

¹³¹ *Refuseniks*: Reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces who refuse to continue to fight in what they call a "War of the Settlements". They have signed a letter declaring their refusal to serve in the Israeli occupied territories.

Grace: I...

Audience 1: You were talking about your Hegelian...um, Hegelian theory and...

Grace: Um-hum.

Audience 1: ...and concepts, and I'm curious to know about how you use your understanding of those concepts to do multigenerational, multiethnic organizing, and how you recommend others to engage multiethnic, multigenerational organization and ... yeah, that's my question.

Grace: Well, ah, I referred to this earlier. I think...In Detroit, and my thinking has very much been shaped by the realities of Detroit. You know, I've lived in the same house for the last 41 years in Detroit, and, you see things change. And one of the things that Detroit does to you is it...the reality and the history almost forces you to think in terms of Black and White. The city itself is so segregated, its past is so racist, you can...you know, it's just like you can the...when the casino in Windsor was organized, was founded, you can see the waters swimming...the money swimming over. You can sort of see the...all these years you've been able to see the city polarizing itself—the Whites going to the suburbs, the Blacks ghettoized, I mean, all...you've seen the schools becoming all Black. And so you're mind gets to accept that as eternal. So how do you break through that? Because you know that while that's happening to Detroit, the world is changing. The country is changing. There are cities now in Detroit—in the country—Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, where the majority of the people are people of color, of different backgrounds—Latinos, Asians, South Asians, everything. And here we are in Detroit frozen in Black and White thinking. So one of the things that the young people of Detroit Summer have been doing, and Emily has been a very important part of this, is they're restoring the old Chinatown at Cass and Peterborough. They've created this mural in this neighborhood based on the Vincent Chin¹³² murder. And they painted this wonderful mural so there's people, Black and White and others, go past, they have a sense there, there's something different that they can think about, that they can talk about. So it's...that's, that's practical Hegelianism. That's refusing to be stuck in opposites. That's going beyond opposition—the German words are *gegensatz* and *venaspruck*, that's going beyond opposition—*gegensatz* where two people just sort of confront each other, to *venaspruck*, to driving toward some sort of resolution, to contradiction. That's theory, but it's also very practical, it's very real.

Audience 2: When you talk about Freedom Schooling, what direction would you like practical, I mean, what direction would you like public education to take and what kind of practical measures do you think need to be made?

Grace: What was the first part of the question?

¹³² *Vincent Chin* was 27-year-old Chinese American brutally beaten to death by two white men on June 19, 1982 in Detroit. The two men in this racially motivated murder received lenient sentences for their crime. This case is believed to be a watershed moment for the Asian Americans Movement.

Emily: Freedom Schooling.

Grace: Well, I'll tell you about some of the proposals that the young people made in this letter to the mayor. They said, first of all, get more youth input into the schools, create peer juries, have the board of education elected not only by citizens but include students in the elections, have them involved in the creation. I don't remember all the proposals but what I'm saying is that if education is not based upon the actual lives of the students then it's a form of slavery almost because what happens your what ... what you think should come out of your experiences it shouldn't come out of books. What you get out of books and give back on an exam you forget within a few months or maybe even a few hours. Now, and you know, one of my columns ... just think of how much safer and healthier our neighborhoods would become almost overnight if the curriculum were based upon the experiences of students and what young people did in their community. Just think of how much they could learn. For example there's a group called Creative Change in Ypsilanti which develops curricula that teachers can use that involve kids in the community and the teachers say teaching is so much more exciting and the kids think in terms of, many of them use inhalers by the way because so many kids have asthma and when they study the conditions in their community they learn science and they also learn about being able to do something for themselves. The worst part of living in this society is that you're constantly being disempowered. But what's worse is that we accept this disempowerment. We don't realize that there are very simple things that we can do in our daily lives and our schools to change that. They're not ... they're not esoteric. There's something that a kid could understand. It's adults who have their minds stuck. You know, I, I wrote a column called "Freeing our Minds from School." From the time that you are a little kid you play school, what do you think school is, school is you're there and you get all your brothers and sisters and neighbor kids there and you say "you mind me."

Emily: [laughs]

Grace: That's our image of school. And I was at a workshop on Freedom Schooling one day that involved young people, adults and so forth, and the teacher who's a member of our Freedom Schooling group and teaches fifth grade, brought in a lesson plan and she suggested the we choose the topic and someone chose hip hop and all of a sudden that image we have of school was blown away because we realized that the kids certainly knew as much as the teacher did and probably more about the subject and that there are many, many things on which the books and the teachers learning are not adequate to the reality. Now, I mean does—it's this question really of freeing our minds, it's not always the system that's there. If we begin freeing our minds, we can do things.

Emily: That's very similar to what the students are doing at the Catherine Ferguson Academy.

Grace: Oh, yeah.

Emily: You want to tell them about that?

Grace: The first thing about the Catherine Ferguson Academy—one of the groups that we work with Detroit Summer is the Catherine Ferguson Academy which is a public high school for teenage mothers on the southwest side of Detroit. These are young people who were dropping out of school because they were pregnant or because they were kids who had kids. Now the kids, there's a place for the kids in the school, there are nurseries. They have, the mothers have built a barn, they have planted a community garden, they are raising farm animals right in the city. And Norton, near Martin Luther Boulevard, and now whereas most of the girls were dropping out, 90% go on to college because raising their kids and raising animals and planting gardens and becoming self-sustaining has given them, has empowered them.

Emily: They even did the soil testing for lead.

Grace: Yeah. But the Detroit Summer, one of the Detroit Summer people worked with them to test the soil in the neighborhood for lead, to see whether they could plant gardens. And they will, they, they enjoyed it so much, because they got a sense of the history of the neighborhood they were able to make reports and they were serving the people in the neighborhood, by what they had done. It's just, people talk about self-esteem. And, and it's so ethereal what they're talking about. You don't know what they're talking about. Self-esteem comes from doing something that you think is meaningful.

Emily: Another question from our audience?

Audience 3: I'd like to follow up on something Emily asked you a bit earlier but put a different twist on it. Emily asked something about your, your life in activism and what relationship did you see with the women's movement. And what that got me to thinking about was your generation of women were sort of—and the experiences that you had as a young woman going to Barnard and then Bryn Mawr and then getting married in the 50s—parallel, to some extent, the kinds of experiences that Betty Friedan¹³³ talked about in her groundbreaking book of the 50s where she talked about her generation of women who had gone to all these elite schools and, you know, graduated and they took their education and basically threw it away on housework. So, I'd like to know...[break in tape]...the marriages that these overeducated white women had to escape or felt they had to escape?

Grace: Well, people like Betty Friedan, as she makes very clear, were forced after the end of World War II to return to domesticity, and they live these sterile lives in suburbs, where they...for...had only each other to talk to and talked only about their babies and made complaints about their husbands or something like that. So they were ready for a form of liberation, which she describes. I had known from very early that I was not going

¹³³ Betty Friedan (1921-2006) wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW); a civil-rights group dedicated to achieving equality of opportunity for women. Some credited her with sparking the "second wave" of feminism in the United States, although critics argue Friedan's book only spoke of the problem of white- middle-class, suburban housewives.

to live that way. I was not going to do the equivalent of sitting on my husband's lap and tucking him under the...the chin to get something for myself. That was not my life. And I think that my...I didn't get involved in any struggles during the 30's. I knew that the world was falling apart around me, because it was the years of the Great Depression. And some of my friends did join radical movements, and they did go to different kinds of meetings, which I did not. I...I think I was more interested in ... in doing things with my mind; I was more interested in theory. But what I think forced me to do something different was I was, all of sudden I was out on my own. You know, I ... what was I going to do in my life after I had a Ph.D.? And I...I'm hoping that some of you coming out of college will not find it as easy as it has been in the past to get a job. So you'll have to think, what do I want to do with my life.

Audience 3: Hmm.

Grace: And it's going to involve a lot of struggle. Fortunately for me, I didn't have to struggle with my parents to get some sort of...not to feel that they had been, you know, that they had sacrificed for naught. Most of you when, if you decide that you're going to give your life to something other than what you've been spending all this money and spending all these years preparing yourself for, will have to be able to say to your parents, "Thank you, but I've got to live my own life." Well, that's not going to be easy. I was already at the...you know, I was 25 when I got my degree, and I had already been living away from home for five years. I was not one of Betty Friedan's married suburbanites. But...Let me ask you, what do you think? What should you be talking to your fellow students about, about life and the future?

Audience 3: Well, maybe you should ask one of the graduate students or undergrads rather than...had a chance to speak yet? Rosa?

Audience 4: Should be talking to the fellow students. Or just fellow people, Maria's a professor and I've taken one of her classes, and she, much like yourself, is not necessarily just an educator, but a teacher. You said that you were not going to be a teacher, but from the sounds of the conversation that you've been having with us, you're very much a teacher. You're a role model certainly and ... I think that's ... in response to your question, that's what we need to talk about ... it's like who are our role models, and what can we do to not only emulate them, but carry on their work? So that's one of the conversations that I...that I often find myself having. It's just like, okay, people have actually carried us to this point, what can we do to show them that we're finishing...not finishing, but continuing on with their work.

Grace: Um-hum. Well, I think...I think your generation is going to face this question. Because this country...I mean, we're obviously coming to the end of something. We're going to have to begin thinking about much more basic questions than we have felt it necessary to talk about before. Not just political questions, not against what policy or for or what policy you are against. But what kind of a country do we want to be? Do we want to be a country that is feared? And that we...that we can only get allies by bribing or

bullying them? What kind of people do we want to be? Do you want to be seen as, in our own eyes and in the eyes of others, who value our humanity more than we value things? One of the things I'm urging people to do, Martin Luther King's¹³⁴ 75th birthday is coming up in a couple months. One of the things that he was urging at the end of his life was a radical revolution in values. That we see racism as part of a giant triplet that includes materialism and militarism. And that we begin to think of ourselves as global citizens who can only bring out the best of what is in the American tradition, by caring for people in the rest of the world the way that we care for our own families. We can celebrate King's birthday differently in the next couple of months. We can make a difference. You know, you don't have to overturn the world all at once.

Emily: Hmm [laughs].

Grace: You can begin to stand for something that is more self-respecting than what we have stood for.

Emily: Hmm. Um-Hmm. Ah, if there aren't...Are there any other questions?

Grace: I think we're probably coming to the end.

Emily: Okay.

Grace: We've been here almost...

Emily: Yes.

Grace: ...two hours.

Emily: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Grace: Well, thank you all for listening, being part of this.

Emily: Yeah.

Grace: I get carried away sometimes.

Emily: [laughs] Not at all, Grace. We want to encourage everyone too that Grace has a website you can look at.

Grace: Oh, yes. The Boggs Center dot org.

¹³⁴ *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* is one of the most recognized civil rights leaders in U.S. history and the most visible advocate for non-violence and direct action as methods for social change. King was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. On the 4th of April 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

Emily: ... www.boggscenter.org, which is part of the James and Grace Lee Boggs center to nurture community leadership. And we want to really thank you once again for coming her to Ann Arbor to interview with us.

Grace: Thank you, Emily.

Emily: Thank you so much.

Grace: It's always a pleasure.

Emily: Thank you for the audience too. Thank you.

[applause]

Emily: Cheers. [laughs].

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Cathy Cohen
Interviewer: Elizabeth Cole**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: April 16, 2004**

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Cathy Cohen, born in 1962, is the former co-chair and a founding board member of the Audre Lorde Project in New York, an organization committed to progressive organizing around queer issues across communities of color. She served on the board of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY. Cohen was a founding member of Black AIDS Mobilization, also known as BAM, and a core organizer of the international conference, Black Nations Queer Nations. Cohen has also served as an active member in many organizations, such as the Black Radical Congress, African-American Women in Defense of Ourselves, and the United Coalition Against Racism. Cohen is the author of *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* and the co-editor, with Kathleen Jones and Joan Tronto, of *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*. Cohen, the third African-American woman to receive tenure at Yale, is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

Elizabeth Cole is Associate Professor in the Women's Studies Program and Department of Psychology, the field in which she was trained, affiliated with the new Personality and Social Contexts Area. Her research works to understand the social construction of categories like gender, race and social class. Feminist theorists have long argued that these categories are not natural or essential, but instead derive meaning from specific social and cultural practices and beliefs that vary in different times and places. Cole's research explores questions such as: How do the categories mutually construct each other and work together to shape outcomes such as well being or political attitudes? How do people experience these social categories as parts of their identities? How do members of different groups perceive these categories of difference, and how are these perceptions related to prejudice? To address these questions, she use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Past projects have explored topics such as: political participation among women who graduated from college during the late 1960s, the role of social class identity in women's attitudes towards abortion, and the processes through which race and gender consciousness develop among college students. Currently, she's particularly interested in the concept of intersectionality: how do individuals simultaneously experience racial, class and/or gender identities?

Transcript of Cathy Cohen

Transcript of Cathy Cohen

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest*
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
*We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*¹³⁵

Liz Cole: Hi, I'm Liz Cole, and welcome to another in our series of interviews for the Global Feminisms project. And today, I'm delighted that we're interviewing Cathy Cohen. Welcome, Cathy.

Cathy Cohen: Thank you.

Liz: We're going to talk for about an hour, and then at that point we will open it up to questions from the audience. Um, so I thought we could start by talking a little bit about what your life path has been like to lead you to the place where you are today. And I know that's a really broad question, but maybe you could talk a little bit about where you grew up, if there were formative experience or role models that shaped your life?

Cathy: Sure. Well, I want to start by thanking you again for the invitation to participate in this really important project, and recognizing all the kind of incredible women of color and feminists and feminists of color who are doing just exceptional work to change the world, and so I just feel honored to be a part of this project. But if I kind of think back to where this, I guess maybe all began, at some level, my politics, I would undoubtedly come to locate my early political learning in my family. And not necessarily because there were kind of explicit political lessons taught—you will do this, your politics will be this—but it really was about kind of who my parents were, and what they personified in terms of their political commitments. My father was a letter-carrier, and was deeply committed to labor politics. I used to, I always actually tell this story, that, I remember him coming home one day, and, you know, my sister and brother, we were upstairs, but listening like we often did. And he was talking to my mom, and he said, “Oh, they've asked me to become management,” and you know everybody, we had enough labor talk in our house that we knew what management meant—more money. And we were like, “Oh, we're going to get new tennis shoes, it's going to be really great” and then I heard him say, “I can't do that,” right. That his commitment to kind of the labor union, his commitment to working-class struggle, was much more important than kind of the advancement that would happen by becoming management in the postal service. And it was those types of lessons that we were kind of taught over and over and over again. The same with my mom, who was totally committed to her community, doing work both in the church and in the schools, always kind of providing a listening ear in the community that kind of taught a lesson that you always have a commitment to folks, you know, not

¹³⁵ These lyrics from “Ella's Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

only your family, but folks in your neighborhood, folks who you identify with racially. So, long before I ever knew what a feminist was, heard the word feminist, I think I kind of started to develop feminist politics from my mother and my father and my sister and my brother. It's not surprising to me now that my brother's a second grade teacher and actively involved in the union in the Toledo public schools. My sister works in a factory and has really struggled with folks in the factory to establish a union there. That unfortunately is now kind of taken over by white leadership that is very hostile to workers of color. But I think we all were taught repeatedly, you must have a commitment to community, and you must kind of work to kind of transform people's lives including your own life. So for me I kind of start that political learning back in Toledo. You . . . I can go further. You know and I think, through the years, you are very kind of blessed and fortunate to be in places where there are people who can teach you other lessons, or teach you more lessons. One of those wonderful experiences actually came here at the University of Michigan when I was a graduate student, and my involvement in an organization called the United Coalition Against Racism. It was my first year of graduate school, I think in 1986, and there was this incredible group of largely black women and some black men and some other folks of color and some white comrades who mobilized around kind of explicitly racist expressions on campus, but also the fact that there weren't enough folks of color, students of color, there weren't enough faculty of color, and the University didn't talk explicitly about how they were going to address those issues. And, you know, we did things like take over buildings and sit on committees and negotiate, and, I just, I learned so many lessons about, again, commitment to community. I also learned lessons about divisions in community, because there were times when, in fact, other black students kind of attacked us for in fact working in collaboration with whites. There were certain students on campus that attacked us for having women leadership, for addressing issues of lesbian gay and bisexual and transgender concerns in terms of student body. So, you know, you learn from both kind of the victories that you have and the battles that you engage in and its for me kind of a continuous process of kind of adding to my politics. So maybe I start with racial and labor or class politics, and it was really in under-grad and then in graduate school that I started to have what I think is a feminist analysis that talks about power and oppression and kind of multiple sites. But it had been those types of experiences, those types of interactions, that I think has kind of complicated my thinking, and hopefully my work.

Liz: Well, I would like to talk a little bit more about UCAR because I was here at that time as you know also, and one of the things I remember is that UCAR was really a departure from other kinds of student groups that worked on issues of race on campus at that time in terms of its inclusivity. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about how UCAR came to have that more inclusive focus and what the outcome of that was.

Cathy: Well in many ways you know I could name individuals, there were people like Barbara Ransby and Tracy Matthew and Kim Smith or David Moraz who had, I think, broad political commitments, hopefully we all had broad political commitments. But I think its also really an example of what black feminist scholars talk about when they talk

about intersectionality, that its hard to be a black woman and not understand both gender dynamics and gender oppression, and also racial oppression, and also if you come from a working-class family, class politics and class oppression. And I think it was significant that within UCAR, there were a group of black women who embodied kind of the intersection of all those struggles, myself included. And also that we began to really struggle with and think through, how do we begin to talk about sexual orientation and sexuality as also a system of oppression that we have to pay attention to. So I think, you know, it stems from who's in leadership, who can construct an agenda, how to people kind of understand their position and their status in the world, that allowed or kind of dictated a more inclusive framework for UCAR. And I think also, as I just said a moment ago, kind of bearing the brunt of attacks, you really have to kind of sharpen your analysis to defend why you're committed to making sure that there are white comrades involved in the struggle, that we have to understand kind of the manifestations of white supremacy, even on institutions, educational institutions, and the responsibility of whites to take control—not to take control—to take responsibility for dealing with systems of oppression and institutions that preference and provide more power for white students and white faculty. So I think it, you know, was a moment of the leadership, it was the moment of a kind of positioning of working class Black women, Black lesbians, Black feminists, that really kind of dictated the inclusive nature of UCAR.

Liz: And how did UCAR respond to those attacks when they came?

Cathy: Well, there's a wide range of responses. Some of them I'll talk about here, some of them I won't. You know, I think one of the things I just said is that I think it meant that we really had to kind of debate and talk about what was the importance of having a broad and inclusive agenda. It meant going back and reading things that we hadn't read. It meant inviting Black feminists to campus to help us think. I remember when we invited Angela Davis¹³⁶ to campus, and she actually sat for a couple of hours with us to help us think through the strategies and the analysis that supported the kind of framework and the institution that we had developed.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: It...it meant also I think being mad and angry and confronting people. It meant deciding where your political loyalties were, not just your racial loyalties. And so I think it was also kind of a moment of development for many of us about kind of how we would structure our politics.

Liz: Um-hum.

¹³⁶ *Angela Davis* is a radical Black American activist who worked with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement. She is well known for her arrest as a conspirator in the prison beak of George Jackson on August 7, 1970 and making it onto the FBI's Most Wanted List. She is currently a professor in the University of California system although then Governor Reagan had claimed she would never work in the system again after she had been fired for her openly communist views.

Cathy: It wasn't about kind of running away in any way from race, because we are all kind of strong proud Black women. But it also meant understanding that just because someone shared a racial identity with us didn't mean that they also shared a political identity with us.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: And it was kind of an important and growing moment in understanding the distinction between the two. I'm sure young people today can hopefully understand the distinction between me and Condoleeza Rice¹³⁷. We might share gender and race, but I don't think—God help me—that we share a similar politics. So, yeah.

Liz: That's great. Well, one of the things that this project is really interested in...

Cathy: Um-hum.

Liz: ...is the relationship between scholarship and activism.

Cathy: Hm.

Liz: And that's one reason that the answer you just gave was so fascinating to me, because it seems like your response to this practical mobilization problem was to respond by studying...

Cathy: Hm.

Liz: ...or bringing other scholars here...

Cathy: Right.

Liz: ...to talk with you.

Cathy: Right, I don't think it was just studying, so I don't want to represent it in that sense. Um, I mean, part of it was the kind of day-to-day work of being an activist and being hopefully an organizer.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: So it meant not only did you kind of fine-tune your analysis, but it meant you kind of sharpened your analysis, not only through books but through conversation.

Liz: Hm.

¹³⁷ *Condoleezza Rice* is the first African-American woman to be the U.S. Secretary of State. She was appointed by Republican President George W. Bush in 2005, after Colin Powell, the first African American to hold the post resigned.

Cathy: Through the process of organizing people.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: So if you're trying to bring someone into your organization and they ask that question, you better be able to kind of respond to them in an accurate and I think effective way that explains to people why it's important in certain cases to work with white comrades.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Why it's important for an organization entitled "United Coalition Against Racism" to think about questions of sexuality.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Right. And who's included. You know, to have that debate about who's included even within Black communities.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Who as students or who as a represent as a rep—organization are we representing.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: So it wasn't just about kind of book learning, and I want to kind of reject that dichotomy anyway...

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: ...between there's scholarship and then there's activism.

Liz: Right.

Cathy: And sometimes there is. There's a clear distinction. But sometimes in fact we would hope that scholarship informs the work that we do as activists and organizers and vice versa. That the work that we do as organizers and activists hopefully has to inform the scholarship that we pursue.

Liz: Very well put. Um, well, that's a great segue into what I'd like to ask you about next, which is, I'd like to talk a little bit about your book, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, both to understand this dynamic of the relationship between scholarship and activism.

Cathy: Hm.

Liz: Because it's a book that's won scholarly honors, but at the same time it appears to have grown out of your political involvements.

Cathy: Right.

Liz: And I've also...I also understand that you've received criticism about the effect that the book could have on Black communities. So I thought maybe to start, for those who aren't familiar with the book, could you summarize it a little bit and tell us about how you came to write it?

Cathy: Definitely. I laugh when you say summarize it. Remember, it started as a dissertation that was like 600 pages long, and so the idea of summarizing it, it could be difficult, but I'll try to do it. The work is really focused on understanding the political response to HIV and AIDS, by primarily traditional Black leaders in organizations, newspapers, magazines, and Black elected officials. You know, there was a puzzle for me when I started this work, which was in late 1980's. It was really kind of the emergence of AIDS on a national scale where we had already experienced Rock Hudson, people were talking about HIV and AIDS. And I knew from a personal...on a personal level, that it was impacting Black communities because I was integrated and rooted in Black-Lesbian-Gay communities. So I had friends who were HIV positive. I had, you know, groups of friends and networks that were talking about these issues. And when I looked to kind of AIDS coverage on television in magazines, what I primarily saw was white, gay and lesbian folks demanding that in fact the country, the government, the public officials pay attention to this. And so it was the puzzle for me of...of understanding that this was a disease impacting Black communities. And I probably even at that moment didn't know how much...

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: ...it was impacting Black communities. And the lack of mobilization I saw around this issue, especially from a community that had a history of mobilizing around racism, injustice and white supremacy. So the book was really kind of an attempt to really understand why the lack of mobilization. And as I often say, I think there was probably more mobilization than I knew, so once I started researching, I found in particular that Black gay men were doing a lot of work in certain Black communities, in urban Black communities, like in New York and in Los Angeles. But that traditional leadership, whether it be in the Black church, be Black elected officials, be the editors of the *Amsterdam News* or *Essence* magazine¹³⁸ really kind of wanted to shy away and deny that this was a significant issue for Black communities. And so part of what the book tries to do is to put that in a historical context, to understand that it's...while clearly a lot of that is driven by homophobia, that it's not just homophobia, that there's a history of marginalization that the Black community has experienced, where they've been defined as outsiders or secondary, and that through that process, there's a real reluctance to kind of engage your own stigmatized issues.

¹³⁸ *Amsterdam News* is an African American newspaper; *Essence* is an African American women's magazine.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: And that many...for many Black traditional organizations, they've chosen what many people have called a kind of politics of respectability.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Where we attempt to kind of prove ourselves to be good enough, to be normal, to be upstanding, with the hope that maybe if we're good enough, you'll include us in the American Dream, the American fabric. The problem is, is that if in fact we're going to articulate this idea of community, then it means we take all of the diversity of that community, and that we also have to kind of really explore to what degree we're willing to join a kind of normative structure, a society that says you have to behave in certain ways, you have to be normalized in certain ways, and you have to have certain types of identities whether they be heterosexual or proper Black women. And so the book really tries to kind of struggle with the question of respectability and crisis and...and difference in Black communities.

Liz: And so what kind of responses have you gotten both from inside and outside...

Cathy: Inside and outside.

Liz: ...the academy?

Cathy: Well, you know, I've learned the lesson that books take a while as we say to trickle down.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: So the first couple years, the book was really kind of read by other academics. And I think I was very pleased and overwhelmed that most people I think thought the book contributed to our understanding and thinking around Black politics. That it tried to give voice in particular to the diversity and the contestation around politics and identity that we find in Black communities. That it didn't present a homogenous Black community where we all share the same politics and all have the same kind of racial agenda. And in particular for feminist scholars, for folks interested in lesbian-gay politics, for individuals interested in social movements, who are always kind of interested in non-traditional extra-systemic ways in which people engage politically, I think the book was very well received. There are always [laughs], there...And I would hope that in fact there'd be at times negative response, because if you don't get some response, negative response, it means that you probably haven't said enough.

Liz: Hm.

Cathy: You haven't said anything maybe important. Um, and I think there have been others that would suggest that the...you know, there's the old argument you shouldn't air dirty laundry. So, you know, you shouldn't necessarily talk about different parts and the struggles that happen within Black communities. I think other individuals would say that, wow, studying HIV and AIDS is an important issue. It may not be the most important issue when thinking about, for example, the political agenda of Black communities. But overall, most people have been, or most academics have been very receptive. What I think I find more rewarding even, not that I don't appreciate the response in the academic community. What I found more rewarding is that in a couple...a kind of...after a couple of years of the book being in the academic community, it started to in fact find its way to activists who were often, say, on the front line of providing services, struggling around funding for HIV and AIDS in communities of color. And so over the last two or three years I've been asked to come and present the book, the ideas in the book to, you know, national AIDS organizations or state-based AIDS organizations -- individuals who don't in any way have a relationship to the academy, but who think that there were things in the book that would be important to informing the work that they do on a daily basis. And that really has been very rewarding. I feel good about that work. And I have learned a tremendous amount from kind of talking to people about the practicality of thinking through these kind of divisions, and the practicality and the dynamics of kind of people's struggle around identity within their communities and within their neighborhoods and within their schools. So, it's been good.

Liz: Well, it's clear that this book is probably your largest academic endeavor to date.

Cathy: Yeah.

Liz: Although it's also clear that the themes in the book are something that resonate throughout the other work, scholarly work that you've done.

Cathy: Sure.

Liz: But I'm wondering if there is an organizational experience that you've had that you think of as sort of defining of your work in a similar way?

Cathy: Hm. That's a great question. It might be the work that I've done with the Audre Lorde Project in New York¹³⁹. I think of the Audre Lorde Project as just an outstanding organization. It is...it was started as a lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender organization servicing and advocating and struggling for people of color, queer people of color. Queer meaning in this case kind of those engaged in what are traditionally understood to be kind of non-normative sexual behaviors. But again, because of who we all were in terms of folks around the table, we understood that our lives weren't just defined by kind of sexual oppression.

Liz: Um-hum.

¹³⁹ Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was an African-American lesbian poet and feminist theorist.

Cathy: And that for many people, they would say that the primary basis of the discrimination, inequality, oppression that they experience came from race or came from the interaction of race and gender or class. And it real—and so the Audre Lorde Project I think exemplifies both the politics and the writings of Audre Lorde, but also kind of the more complicated understanding of struggle and community that the folks around those initial tables that were planning this organization also understood from their lived experience. So the Audre Lorde Project is an organization that's based in a Black community in Brooklyn, New York, in Fort Green, with the mission of advocating and struggling for queer folks of color as well as communities of color.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: So the Audre Lorde Project has been, for example, very active around some of the police brutality cases in New York, even though those cases wouldn't traditionally be defined as kind of, you know, issues around sexuality. The idea behind the Audre Lorde Project is to kind of begin to make those links, to understand kind of the ways in which the state regulates all sorts of behaviors and all sorts of identities, and the...if you don't begin to kind of connect those dots, let's say, then you can kind of fight on one realm or one dimension and miss, in fact, the ways in which the state regulates those you care about in all sorts of other dimensions. So, for example, if we talked about gay marriage, there is a movement afoot, I guess, for some, to want access to the institution of marriage. I think there are some progressive lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender folks—I put myself in that category—who understand the history of marriage, the way in which the institution was used to kind of signify who was a citizen and who wasn't, who was proper and who wasn't, who worry about kind of what happens when we begin to again solidify those good lesbian and gay people who marry and those who don't, who understand and worry about what happens to heterosexual people who don't marry or who don't marry and have children “out of wedlock.” And so understand kind of marriage as an institution of regulation. So if we understand the impact of marriage in all those different realms, maybe not directly on me, but the people that I love, and the people who I live with, then I have a responsibility, because, you know, that's my interest also to protect them and to fight for them, as well as to fight for myself. To oppose marriage, even though it might seem like it's just a basic equality issue...

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: ...to me, it just, you can't think of marriage and you can't think of politics along that dimension.

Liz: So that's something else that the Audre Lorde Project has been working on?

Cathy: Um-hum. Yeah. The Audre Lorde Project works on, I mean, issues like marriage. It works on issues around police brutality.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: It works on issues around welfare reform, when in fact very few organizations wanted to talk about welfare reform as a devastating issue on Black communities, as an attack on Black women and women of color and their children. So the kind of significance of the Audre Lorde Project is it really is an organization I think that provided me with an outlet for kind of thinking broadly about politics. And kind of the multiple realms and multiple dimensions where we have to fight. Yeah.

Liz: Um, great. Well that anticipated my next question.

Cathy: Oh, that's good.

Liz: So let me ask you, you've done a great job of summarizing some of the key ideas of your book in a very short time, but that sort of brings to me to want to know, so what are the kind of questions that are...

Cathy: Hm.

Liz: ...animating your work now.

Cathy: Right. Um, you know, I'm always concerned with the question of identity and who belongs and who doesn't belong.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: I mean, in the book, one of the major themes -- I probably didn't talk about it -- is this question of how do we understand membership, and who is a member and who isn't a member and what is that membership based on. One of my concerns in the book was, when we talked about Black communities, and being committed to a Black political agenda, that were all sorts of ways in which Blackness was contested. And so it wasn't just kind of phenotypic, you know, if you looked like you were Black, but that there were also normative standards for what Blackness was. The example I often give is, I was teaching a course I think at Yale¹⁴⁰ on Black politics, and we were talking about the Supreme Court¹⁴¹ or something and talking about Clarence Thomas¹⁴². And, you know, the room had...I think half the students were African American and maybe five were...so ten were African-American and ten were...five were white and five were Latino. And there was a kind of heated argument between one young African-American man and one young African-American woman about Clarence Thomas. And at one point she said, "Well, he's not Black anyway," right. And I noticed that the white students were like, wait a minute, you know, like I saw him on TV, you look Black to me [laughter]. And at

¹⁴⁰ *Yale*: Ivy League University in New Haven, Connecticut.

¹⁴¹ The *Supreme Court* of the United States is the highest judicial body in the United States and leads the judicial branch of the United States federal government.

¹⁴² *Clarence Thomas* is a conservative African-American justice on the Supreme Court, who before his confirmation was accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, an African-American woman who had worked for him previously.

that moment, you know, what was happening was she wasn't talking about phenotypic description. But she was talking about kind of a normative understanding of what Black people do in certain situations...

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: ...to advance other Black people. Or to advance a kind of progressive agenda. And so what the book tries to do is to kind of really question not only kind of phenotypic Blackness, but how do we decide who's Black enough for the community to mobilize around. And oftentimes, when thinking about HIV and AIDS, those who are most at risk, Black gay men, Black men who sleep with men, Black injection drug users, Black women exchange...engaged in kind of sexual exchange for money, are not always considered Black enough, right? That somehow their behavior questions their authenticity. And so I was hoping in the book to kind of really push through what categories mean, like membership and identity. And I'm hoping that the new work that I'm doing now also tries to push through kind of questions of, or concepts like, in this case deviance and agency and resistance. I have a new piece out in *The Du Bois Review*¹⁴³ where I'm trying to figure out how do we begin to take a different approach to behaviors that traditionally have been pathologized within Black communities. And when I say within Black communities, meaning behaviors that have been pathologized, not only by whites towards Black communities, but that often have been pathologized by white scholars. So if you go back to Dubois or if you read William Julius Wilson¹⁴⁴ or any number of other books, you will find things like unwed mothers being pathologized, as having kind of a different set of norms or values, a whole discussion of the underclass. And I'm asking scholars who are committed to those communities to maybe step back. And it's very hard because people get very upset with me about this. To step back and figure out if there's something of really significance and value in people making non-normative choices. And what I mean is...the easy case, for example is, what is it...what should we learn when people who have very few resources—young Black lesbians, right?—who have very few resources, who don't have the protection of being middle class and a professor, so I can talk about being out and things of that sort, when they come out.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Like what is...you know, is that an act of deviance or an act of defiance. And if it's an act of defiance, how do we begin to link that ability and that agency, as limited as it is, to like larger resistance struggle...struggles? How do we begin to re-conceptualize resistance? So that I think, for some people is the easy case. The harder case where people take issue is, how do we understand, or should we understand, for example, young people who engage in sexual relationships that don't...or intimate relationships, that don't

¹⁴³ *The Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* is a journal focused on social science research on racial issues, and is edited by two Harvard professors.

¹⁴⁴ *William Julius Wilson* is the Director of Harvard's Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, he has written extensively about urban poverty, urban race and class relations, and social inequality in cross-cultural perspective.

fit some norm? That in the past, researcher after researcher has demonized as these kind of bad things. And in certain ways there are detrimental consequences. You know, there are detrimental consequences from pregnancy if you don't have enough resources. But is there something that we need to try to figure out or try to learn from when people make choices in pursuit of desire, in pursuit of happiness, that contradict messages that are strongly enforced, for example, by the state, by their communities? I mean, there is a level of defiance there that I think you can write off very easily as pathological, or we can try to understand and understand it possibly as having...at least exerting some level of agency, if we don't call it resistance. And if we begin to understand the exertion of kind of limited agency, constrained agency, is there a way to kind of learn from that as we build political movements and social movements? My concern is that quite often when we look for politics, we look for politics in very traditional places, right? So if you go to a union hall and join a union, then you're political. If you protest the war and go onto the street, then you're political. Even if you vote, some people would say you're political, at least exerting some type of politics. And I'm not suggesting that engaging in "non-normative behavior" is politics. I, in fact, don't want to do that. But I do want to suggest it is about some level of agency that I think we can use and we can think about that might help us understand how to get young people, for example, into politics, into a place where they can work to transform their neighborhoods and their states and their country.

Liz: What do you think it would take to help them convert that kind of agency into a political agency?

Cathy: Well, I think first and foremost, one of the things we'd have to do is actually have a political agenda that spoke to where they were and what they were interested in. You know, I worry that we have kind of a politics that's defined around as...nothing against the middle class, because...I've experienced social mobility from the working class and the middle class. But I think we have a power...a political agenda quite often in Black communities and communities of color and even in feminist politics that is usually defined by the experiences of those with greater resources. And so it can often be about kind of middle class issues, about a certain type of access that other people will never experience. And so if we could figure out—and I say this in the paper and I think other organizers will tell you—it seems to me the first thing we have to do is listen to folks. Like what are they concerned with? What drives their desires and their hopes and their dreams? And also their fears and their hatred at times, and alienation for, you know, whether it be traditional institutions, the state, or...or the academy. So I think that seems to me the first thing is to kind of actually listen. And the second thing I think is to get into a position where we can help kind of organize—and I don't mean impose, but I mean provide resources to organize folks in communities of color and in resource poor communities, so that they can then take their articulation of the political agenda and push it forward. And, you know, that's a different way of thinking about invest—investing in poor communities. I mean, one model is also...is a social service provision.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: And we always want to kind of deal with and respect people's basic needs. But I think another basic needs is kind of political efficacy and political power. And so in addition to social services what else can we provide to communities of color and to poor communities to help with the kind of process of political empowerment. And I think hopefully that's another direction that we can really begin to kind of pay attention to.

Liz: Well, I feel like the whole conversation we've been having is sort of skating around this next question that I would like to ask you but...

Cathy: Okay.

Liz: ...when I first contacted you about doing the interview, you expressed some reservations about whether you were an appropriate person and that...

Cathy: Right.

Liz: ...maybe you were more of a scholar than an activist, and did you belong in this group?

Cathy: Right, right.

Liz: Um, I feel like you've been making these connections between political work and academic work. But I wonder if you could speak to that a little bit more directly. How do you see those interacting either in your own career or more...

Cathy: Right.

Liz: ...generally. Because a lot of students we work with often sort of talk about it in terms of a dichotomy. You know, "I don't want to be an academic, I want to be an activist." Or...

Cathy: Right.

Liz: ... "I don't want to be in that ivory tower," so...

Cathy: [laughs] Me either, that's right. Um, you know, it's a hard thing to try to bridge. And I'm not sure I would...you know, this was what we were talking about when you called. I'm not sure I've figured out how to be both an activist and a scholar at the same time. You know, I have a real skepticism for academics who say, "Oh, I do my political work in the classroom." Which we undoubtedly do political work in the classroom, but to me that can't be the extent of your political work. And that's not to deny kind of the importance of ideas, to kind of animating all of the work that we do at...in terms of politics. But it seems to me that part of what it means to be a scholar-activist is not only to kind of engage political questions in your work. But to place yourself in institutions, in organizations, where you can be held accountable for the work that you do. It's...I mean, part of... a big kind of connecting point for me is this question of accountability .

Liz: Hm.

Cathy: Like who do you answer to? Um, and, you know, there's a clear power dynamic in classrooms between the professor and the student, so you don't really answer to students. So the question for me becomes, really, how do I construct a kind of life, not just scholarship or activism, that's about kind of political activism and social transformation? And I don't think I always get it right. My guess is I don't get it right a lot of the time. But I...I do think that—and we were talking about this earlier—that part of my motivation for the work that I do is about kind of practical concerns. So I'm starting a new project on African American youth and their politics and their sexuality. Now a lot of the reason I'm doing this work is because I love my nephew and niece, and I worry that Black people, we're losing a generation of young Black people. And I wish I could say, oh, there's a bigger motivation, and it is. I mean, commitment to Black communities. But that's in the abstract. I mean, it's because I see, for example, if I watch BET¹⁴⁵ and I see the images of young Black women, I don't want my niece to understand that that's what's portrayed to her through popular culture in terms of who she is. And when I kind of look at my nephew who I love, I love them both, I spoil them both, but, who's older now. I remember when Terry was born. He's now 28 and has—you know, he and I have talked about this publicly, so I'm not revealing anything—has had encounters with the criminal justice system. I feel like I need to do something, both in terms of my scholarship and in terms of my activism, of course on a personal level, to kind of not only provide him with resources so he can navigate that, but to really kind of change those institutions, because if I help him navigate it, there's some other kid that may not have someone with those types of resources that can help them navigate it. And so to me it's about kind of what are the tools that I have at hand to do that type of work? And one of the major tools that I have is the ability to kind of write and have the time to think, and to talk to people and to gather data, that might help in a process of changing those institutions. Now, you know, my worry is that places where we would expect to find scholar-activists or more scholar activism, places like women's studies programs, gay and lesbian studies projects, African American Studies, Latino Studies, Asian American Studies programs and departments, have become more and more detached from actually the everyday lives of the people that we supposedly represent in those institutions. And I'm not...and so this goes back to my skepticism about kind of scholar-activism, because I think quite often people assume that because they're in those more marginalized spaces on academic campuses, that being there is just a...is their politics.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: Um, and I want to suggest that those institutions and those spots, while marginalized clearly, are still professionalized, they're still part of academic institutions and that there's still an absence of accountability to the folks just kind of, as I often talk about, just outside those gated communities we call universities, right?, to hold us accountable for the things that we write and things that we say. So when you called and said, we're doing this great project on global feminism, and you started telling me the

¹⁴⁵ *BET* is an acronym for Black Entertainment Television network.

names of people who were going to be interviewed, I thought, well, those are exceptional people who spend kind of their daily lives, day in and day out, you know, I keep talking about on the kind of front line of engagement in neighborhoods and communities, where they are held accountable and they're in organizations, where the democratic process, and...that's different I think than the work of...my work. Even though I try as much as I can on a daily basis to make sure that I'm located in institutions where I can be held accountable.

Liz: But you were telling me at lunch that one of the missions of the institute that you're directing now is to make those kind of connections outside of the University. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.

Cathy: Sure. Sure. I have the privilege of directing the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago. And there are many goals of the center. One is about kind of producing, you know, important intellectual work from largely a comparative race framework that understands the intersection of race with other identities and ideologies around gender and sexuality and class. We're also quite interested at the Center in supporting the work of both undergraduates and graduate students by engaging in the curriculum and helping to redefine the curriculum. But the thing I think that the Center is most engaged—oh, I'm using engaged—most committed to that I'm proud of, is this idea of producing engaged scholarship. And the idea is that we want to produce scholarship that holds to the rigor of the academy, of course. But that we also want to produce scholarship that is relevant and applicable and accessible to folks who may not be located in the academy. We want to produce scholarship that will help people transform their own lives, with the recognition that people are already doing, you know, really important work outside the academy. So it's not like they're waiting on us to tell them the truth. It's really kind of how to do you work in a principled way in partnership with institutions, with neighborhoods, with communities that aren't a part of the university. And how do you do that, when oftentimes, those neighborhoods and communities are very suspicious to say the least, of what happens within the university. Universities where they generally don't feel like they can, you know...they want to send their kids, universities where they don't feel they can walk on campus without the police harassing them. Universities that have engaged in urban development and kind of wiped out neighborhoods. And so it's...the challenge I think for us is to kind of think of this as a long-term project, and the idea isn't when we talk about engaged scholarship to go out and study a community and write a book, and then maybe come back and present the book at the library one Saturday. But how do you really build principled relationships and partnerships where there's going to be some negotiation, where you have to figure out ways to share power, where there has to be the acknowledgement that we come with more resources, but they may come with more knowledge about neighborhoods and communities. And it really is not easy work. You know, I think it's one thing to say that's what you want to do. And I think unfortunately far too many research institutes don't even say that. Or if they say that, what they mean is "We'll open up our seminar room if some community group wants to come to campus and have a meeting." But we're really trying to figure out how do you promote this type of scholarship? How do you promote that type of scholarship also in institutions where the incentive structure is not to go

outside the university, right? So if you're a junior faculty member trying to get tenure, and we're suggesting you go outside and build long-term relationships and your tenure clock is running, what are the choices that you're going to make? And by the time that you get tenure, you usually already have a research agenda, so now we're suggesting that you change your research agenda or you open it up a bit. It becomes very difficult. So even to do something like engaged scholarship through the Center, it means that the Center has to be engaged in a political process within the university to try to change some of the incentive structures there.

Liz: Well, as we're getting towards the end, I would like to ask you some more general questions. And one question that we try to ask everyone is, would you use the term feminist to describe yourself or your work?

Cathy: Oh, definitely. Yes.

Liz: Uh-huh.

Cathy: Um, and I know there's a controversy—well, not a controversy—I know that there are a number of Black women who, where we would probably describe politics in the same way, and the analysis of power and understanding patriarchy and patriarchy's intersection with race. And concerns about misogyny. We might all kind of start down that road and go down that road. And then if you ask what would be the label?, I would say feminist and a number of Black women in particular would say womanist. A number of Black women think of feminism as a primarily white identified and controlled and occupied term. And I understand and I would even say respect that position. But for me it's about reclaiming. It's about kind of the numerous Black women that engage in what I would argue are feminist politics. And claiming their histories and who they are, whether it be Ida B. Wells, or Ana Julia Cooper—I mean, you know, you can go down that list. And so that's important for me. It's important for me also to not kind of give over the term feminist to white women only. And I'm not...you know, not saying white women are saying, "This is our term." You know, it's also important for me to kind of use that term in the same way I use progressive or radical, and the same way I talk about white supremacy. It to...kind of...to me a kind of political and historical accuracy so that people understand the politics and the analysis that I'm engaged in. And it's, you know, it's also important to use the word feminism for me to just begin a dialogue.

Liz: Um-hum.

Cathy: I know when I use the word feminist in my classes, there are a lot of young women who are just like, "God, not you too!" And so...and, you know, they're thinking, second wave feminist, don't like sex, don't laugh. I hope that's not me. So...and so to even struggle around and to kind of educate ourselves around the ways in which ideas and terms and labels change over time, from first wave to second wave and now third wave feminists. So for me it's important to kind of take on that title, take on that label, to combine it with Black, so that I'm a Black feminist, to combine it with progressive or radical. To make sure that it's embedded in a whole, you know, whole kind of

configuration of labels and politics, that I think changes what feminism means for me, from what maybe others might mean, how they might use it.

Liz: Well, while we're talking about terms, I wonder if you could also talk about what you mean when you say progressive, because this tape will be viewed by people from all over the world.

Cathy: Right.

Liz: And that might not mean the same thing to them.

Cathy: I'm sure it doesn't mean the same thing. I'm a big believer in kind of historical specificity. When I'm talking about progressive, I'm talking about a political analysis that understands the intersection of—let's see, it's too academic—multiple systems of oppression and that the commitment isn't just to gain some level of equality within the status quo. So to be able to marry, because I'm a lesbian, or be able to marry even though I'm a lesbian. But to really kind of think about progressively transforming the institutions, the state regulation that defines our politics today. I think, you know, we have to think about new ways and new structures in terms of the distribution of resources in this society. I mean, we didn't really have a chance to talk about class politics, but, you know, there is an increasingly smaller and smaller group, even within the United States, not to mention the United States, that controls most of the resources of the world. And so how do you not begin to talk about and have an analysis about changing that? It's not that...And I'm lucky to have lots of resources now, but, I...you know, I was talking to my partner, Beth Ritchie, last night, and I said, we were saying, it's we almost feel guilty. And notice almost [laughs], um, but we do feel guilty. It's like why do we get more resources than other people? And so there...I think there has to be discussions about kind of, not how to...how do we...how do we get a few more people into those categories, but how do we really redistribute resources. And then that takes us to kind of other terms that people don't want to discuss anymore, like socialism. So for me, in terms of progressive, it just means not only kind of recognizing the inequality, but also recognizing kind of the status quo and making a commitment to changing both the inequality by changing the status quo.

Liz: Um...So it sounds like you see your work as being an extension of or even continuous with certain traditions within mainstream feminism, or...how would you characterize that relationship?

Cathy: Well, I think it would depend right on first how we were defining mainstream feminism. Um, like there are probably many mainstream feminisms. There's a mainstream feminism within Black feminism that might look different than mainstream feminism in other places. You know, I think that in fact there are things...there is an analysis that comes with the feminist label, let's say; a concern around gender inequality, a concern around the dominance of patriarchy, I mean, the existence and the dominance of patriarchy; misogyny and hatred of women; and the ways in which those, we might even call assumptions get structured into the kind of production of a society. As well as

kind of the closeness to how we understand normal sexuality, hetero-normativity to function in the world and in the society. So in that sense, sure, if those are kind of the basics and the assumptions of feminism, that's definitely a part of what I would say my politics are committed to and my analysis is a part of. But I think hopefully feminism is also in transformation. Maybe not, but I hope it is. And it means that if you take into account other factors, or the intersection of race, then you have to kind of really think through a position on...not a position on patriarchy, but the ways and the contours, the nuances of patriarchy. How do we understand, for example, Black men's male privilege within a white supremacist or racist society. So can they be allies with Black women on certain fronts, and when in fact do they participate possibly more effectively than white men in the destruction and demonization of Black women. One of the things we were talking about is, you know, I'm obsessed these days with this Nelly¹⁴⁶ video. You all know [laughs], um, "Tip Drill." Um, because to me I can't...I mean, if...for the audience who hasn't seen the video, it really is just the most degrading representation of Black women that I've seen in a very, very, very long time. And the commercialization of Black women's bodies. And it's done by a Black rapper, Nelly. And so, you know, to understand Nelly's position within a corporate structure, the music structure, where at some level he has very little power to make "final" decisions. But to also understand his power to make a video like that, and the kind of concerns and the representation that he puts forth about how he thinks about and I think communicates how other Black men should think about Black women, Black women's bodies, Black women's agency, and their significance in the world. And so...so, you know, feminism informs that. Black feminist analysis I think is more instructive for me in thinking through the Nellys of the world. Because, you know, I think we've...we have a clear sense of kind of the larger macro structures. I think it becomes...it's kind of time for many of us to really define and pay attention to, not that Black feminists haven't done this already, the contours and nuances of power and contestation within our own communities and to take a political stance against those issues also.

Liz: Well, let me ask you sort of the biggest question then. Which is how do you see your work intersecting with work going on in other parts of the world...

Cathy: Um-hum.

Liz: ...either through professional relationships that you've had or...?

Cathy: Hm. It's...if there is one major disappointment, I'm sure there are many areas of disappointment, but if there is one major area of disappointment in terms of my political work, it's that it has had very little international connection. I feel like I've learned a great deal from kind of transnational movements. But I haven't really kind of traveled to be engaged either in political struggles in other parts of the world or to visit activists in other parts of the world to learn from that. You know, part of that is working class background, even though that's where you just didn't travel out of the country and so you didn't think past, oftentimes, the country, outside of this country. Part of it is just, um...I think at times it's American exceptionalism, even in progressive movements, where we

¹⁴⁶ Cornell "Nelly" Haynes Jr. is a rapper/hip-hop artist from St. Louis, Missouri.

too often I think, think the work that we do here can't be informed by the work that's being done in other parts of the world. Ev— and that's, when we have a level of consciousness, that the work that we're doing here is actually happening in other places. And usually happening in more progressive and sometimes effective ways. And so for example the work I've done around HIV and AIDS I feel has been incredibly beneficial to my learning process, but hopefully beneficial to the work here in the U.S. But I've had very little contact with folks, for example, in the Caribbean and South Africa and Southeast Asia who are also engaged in many of the same struggles, you know, whether it be around, you know, securing drugs for people, or the demonization of women in the process of thinking about HIV and AIDS. I had the opportunity to meet Zaki Akmad¹⁴⁷ from South Africa a few years ago when we were doing “Black Nations, Queer Nations” and that was really an incredible learning experience, to talk about the relationship between the struggle around HIV and AIDS, in particular in Black communities here, and the struggle around HIV and AIDS in South Africa. And so one of the things I would hope for as, you know, as you grow and get older, is an opportunity to have more of those transnational/international conversations to learn more both about the exception and the rule in terms of the ways in which people are structuring their politics and their political struggles. And to think creatively outside of kind of American capitalism about how...things we might ask for, ways to mobilize people, even ways to engage in kind of educational campaigns so...it's...it's been missing and I'm hoping that it will appear in the future.

Liz: Well, I would like to thank you because this has been just wonderful.

Cathy: Well, thank you.

Liz: And now I would like to give some other people some chances to ask some questions. So at this point maybe we could go to our audience and see if there's something they would like to ask you.

Cathy: Absolutely.

Audience 1: Well, I'll begin. Cathy, it's such a pleasure to see you again.

Cathy: Hi, Dale.

Audience 1: Whether or not you realize it, I think that your work is having an international affect, and I...I had the opportunity to meet Nesha Haniff¹⁴⁸ last week, who I think you may or may not recall from your days here at Michigan.

Cathy: Absolutely.

Audience 1: She and I were on a picket line last week because she's one of many of the lecturers who are without job security and benefits at the university, but that's a

¹⁴⁷ Zaki Akmad is head of Treatment Action Campaign for HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

¹⁴⁸ Nesha Haniff is a lecturer in Women's Studies at the University of Michigan.

further aside that we don't need to explore. But we should explore but maybe not in this venue.

Cathy: Right.

Audience 1: Nesha wanted to know if you could draw some comparisons between student activism on campuses and in communities today, and the way that it was done in -- she called it "the good old days." Right?

Cathy: [laughs]

Audience 1: I...I take her to mean her days...the days back when you and Barbara Ransby and other women of color were working UCAR and at the Ella Baker Center.

Cathy: Right. Well, of course I remember Nesha. And I, you know, please tell her I said hello. Thank you for the question. I have to say I'm a little reluctant to take on these..."the good old days." Because, you know, they were the good old days, because we were young and skipping classes and, you know, and hopefully making a significant change on this campus and also joining with people who were making changes on other campuses. And I think that happens in other places today also. I've seen students mobilize at Columbia¹⁴⁹ and at Brown¹⁵⁰, and, you know, sometimes at University of Chicago, but not as much as I would like. And you were on a picket line just last week. So I don't want to suggest that students today don't do anything. I do think that the political environment has changed drastically. I think we have a con—to say the least conservative political environment where patriotism is running very high. Where to stand on a picket line is somehow to question, you know, your allegiance to the country, to democratic processes, which in fact, standing on a picket line really should exemplify your commitment to democratic processes. So I think that there are kind of higher standards possibly. And I'm not sure of that, but it's...it's hard to mobilize young people in this political environment. You know, there's also the reality that always exists, back then, it existed now, about how many folks you could mobilize also because lots of people feel like look, this is my chance at mobility. I have to be here because, you know what?, I need to get a job. I need to kind of figure out a way to help not only myself but my families. And I think sometimes we can see politics as something that's outside of that process. The other thing, you know, I'll say again, it's not just students, but also faculty. You know, I keep preaching this line about the kind of professionalization and specialization of the academy, as well as places where in fact we need faculty to stand up and provide a different kind of oppositional analysis, but also oppositional practice. And so I'm not sure you have as many faculty members, you know, full...not lecturers but faculty members willing to stand on picket lines today. Or willing to refuse to cross a picket line, or willing to go with students when they take over a building. In 1986 when we took over a building, there weren't a lot of faculty there, but I remember Ernie Wilson, I remember Alden Morris, who brought donuts and orange juice. Neither one are

¹⁴⁹ *Columbia*: An Ivy League University in New York City.

¹⁵⁰ *Brown*: An Ivy League University in Providence, Rhode Island.

here today so maybe that tells us something. But they were very supportive. And so I think that there are a number of factors that have come together. You know, and the other thing that I think, you know, I don't want to go into lots of detail, because we don't have enough time, but we really also have to talk about who find...you know, what types of students are on college campuses, especially research, predominantly white institutions. Oftentimes, those students are middle class students of color who may either have more resources that allow them to protest, or often have had less experience protesting and understanding alienation and systems of oppression. And so I'm just saying the kind of configuration of the population also...a student population, can also have an impact in terms of whether students are willing to protest or not. But I think the good old days are...were back then, the good old days are now. The good old says will be in the future, anytime, you know, young people decide that their futures have to be determined through their participation, whether it be voting at the national level, or whether it be organizing in the places where we exist, namely college campuses for the moment.

Audience 2: Yes, I have a question. I want to ask a question about -- you mentioned class politics. And it was very interesting, also coming from a working class family, and I also went to a historically Black college for undergrad.

Cathy: Hm-hm.

Audience 2: And when I got here, like the kind of division within the African-American community itself, and it was almost really bizarre how the most...most of the marginalization I felt actually came from African American students who had...had gone to prestigious white universities and had like all kinds of misconceptions and prejudices about both working class Black people and people who attended institutions that were not sort of on par with the University of Michigan. I was wondering if you could talk about having gone through some very prestigious institutions, how you think class has impacted that process.

Cathy: Absolutely. I mean, I would, first of all, say that I had the same experience. You know, I...I think it never occurred to me, growing up working class and in a working class community, now, you know, it was before the Huxtables¹⁵¹. I just assumed everybody was work—all the Black people were working class, because all the Black people I knew were working class. And it was really interesting to me, and I think it really came home in graduate school more than undergraduate, that most of my colleagues of color were middle class. And that that had defined their experience very differently. They had gone to, and I would argue, better schools, were better prepared for the rigors of the University of Michigan graduate program. At times I think felt more comfortable and knew how to do things like network and connect better than I did. And while I wouldn't say I felt alienated from them, I think I was often surprised by at times,

¹⁵¹ *The Cosby Show* was a popular TV comedy that aired from 1984 to 1992, focusing on an upper-middle-class Black family, the Huxtables. This family was unlike other Black families previously seen on television because they were solidly upper-middle-class, the father was a respected doctor, and the mother a successful attorney.

the lack of connection, other than a racial identity that we shared. And that's not to say that many of those folks aren't some of my best friends from...from graduate school. But it is to say that the assumption somehow that...you know, and this has been kind of the discussion that was in *The New York Times* recently, that to let in Black students is to necessarily let in working class Black students, especially at predominantly white Ivy League institutions is not the case. So if there's in fact a commitment to both race and class diversity, we probably need to pay attention to both race and class and thinking those through. And, you know, the other thing is, it means that most of the faculty at these types of institutions in terms of faculty of color, have also come from middle class backgrounds. And it...I guess we could argue it possibly shapes the way in which they approach their work. I'm not...you know, I'm an empiricist, so I'd have to like do a study to make sure that's true. It may in many ways impact their relationships and their social connectedness to some of those working class neighborhoods that usually are right around the university, or here in Ypsilanti¹⁵², in...But in, you know, I'm at University of Chicago, so just outside of Hyde Park¹⁵³. They're very different neighborhoods and...and Black folk. So I think you...I think we have to pay attention to the ways in which class has an impact. It's, you know, it's interesting, since I do work on sexuality, there's always a struggle to get people to talk about questions of sexuality. I think it's just as hard to get people to talk in a "real way" about class, especially within marginal groups, and to talk about the lack of representation of poor and working class Black people on campuses. Do I think if you had more faculty from poor and working class backgrounds that it would change much of the research agenda found in for example African American Studies programs? I actually do. Um, I...you know, and, again, these are empirical questions and so I could be wrong. So, yeah, I think...I think it's hard to talk about transforming these institutions without talking about questions of class, as well as they're embedded in kind of discussions of race -- excuse me -- And I think if we allow ourselves only to kind of talk about race without talking about race in a complex way, whether it be around gender or sexuality or class, and of course, the intersection of all those, as well as nationality. You know, we haven't talked about immigrant populations and how they identify racially, that we really miss understanding kind of both different interests, different needs, different ways to mobilize people, different ways to shape effective political agendas. And if we're...you know, if our goal is really to mobilize people to transform things, I think you have to understand where people come from, their social location and...and what they think is important in terms of their identities.

Audience 3: And I have a question about, well, as you were talking a lot about class, I thought that probably my question would fit here. I come from the former Soviet Union. And when I first started reading, doing feminist work and doing gender and women's...looking into women's issues, and started reading feminist work, I could not find the connection between what those people were writing about, like Betty Friedan¹⁵⁴ and my experience. Well, I have never seen a non-working

¹⁵² *Ypsilanti* is a city that neighbors Ann Arbor and is smaller and less wealthy.

¹⁵³ *Hyde Park* is A historically wealthy neighborhood in Chicago.

¹⁵⁴ *Betty Friedan* (1921-2006) wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW); a civil-rights group dedicated to achieving equality of opportunity for

mother and all this. And then I began reading radical feminism¹⁵⁵, but I'm not a lesbian and there was not much connection. Then when I began reading African American feminists, that's where I found the connection to my experience, and that's how I began identifying with the feminism, and that's why I call...well, women like me, the other whiteness.

Cathy: Hm.

Audience 3: And women coming from this post-socialist world.

Cathy: Um-hum.

Audience 3: And then when I came to this country, I thought...so I very much see this...the oppression of women as the issue of class. Before you have a paid maternity leave, normal paid maternity leave, what is there to discuss? Well, we should...which was the approach in the country I come from. And when I came into this country, I was expecting to see a lot of struggle in this...venue struggled for better social security, re-distribution of resources, et cetera. And I was surprised to see so much struggle around sexuality—gay-lesbian issues—which to me looks like...well, using a Marxist term, diverting people from the class struggle.

Cathy: Um-hum.

Audience 3: Because just, you know, saying, okay, we are all accepting bisexual people, we are all for gay marriage, we are all accepting...accepting transgender people, it does not demand anything from...from you. You just say, "I'm such a fine person," and that's it and nothing in the society changes actually. So what's your pos—well, I understand, you know, all the repercussions of what I'm saying.

Cathy: Right.

Audience 3: What's your perspective on that?

Cathy: Right. I...thank you for the question. It was beautifully articulated. I'm going to disagree with a lot of points, but my guess is you would disagree with those, some of the

women. Some credited her with sparking the "second wave" of feminism in the United States, although critics argue Friedan's book only spoke of the problem of while- middle-class, suburban housewives.

¹⁵⁵ Although definitions of what *radical feminism* is have been widely disputed, the audience member is most likely referring to the lesbian-separatist vein of radical feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. This movement goes to the "root" of the oppression of women to find patriarchy at fault in all aspects of life, making feminism the most important social movement. Radical feminists wish to go beyond the institutional reform of sexism and inequality to bring about profound changes in culture and a redefinition of gender: "Radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based upon their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organize politically to destroy this sex class system" (Ann Koedt, "Politics of the Ego" from the *Manifesto of the New York Radical Feminists*, 1969.)

points you made also. So I don't want to sug—I don't want to agree for example that, claiming for example that the state recognize lesbian-gay marriages has no impact on the distribution of resources or the ways in which the state operates in terms of thinking about who is...kind of questions of normalization, let's say. So I...if I somehow kind of suggested that, I want to take that back and try to clarify. In fact, those...those progressive people who are supporting, for example, the movement—and we can call it a movement, I guess—around gay marriage. One of the arguments is, is if you look at all the benefits that people receive from the kind of certification of marriage through the state, that it is about kind of the redistribution of resources. It's about allowing someone who has an immigrant status to have...to marry someone so that they can stay in this country. It's about being able to make health decisions for my partner. It's about kind of who's going to get tax breaks and who's going to...you know, so I in fact think it is a big issue around resources. But I also think we have to think more broadly about questions of sexuality. So questions of sexuality have to also include...first of all, our main argument before that I think when we're talking about queer sexuality. Queer sexuality for me is not lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender sexuality. Queer sexuality for me is sexuality that really challenges hetero-normative expectations and assumptions. And what I mean by that it's people who are marginalized on the basis of their sexuality. So you can undoubtedly include lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender folks in that category. I would also argue that women who are resource poor and have children are marginalized by their sexual decisions and might be considered Queer. Now, I want to be careful because a lot of people will say, "Oh, that's a nice academic argument." And I think at some level it is an academic argument. It's about kind of how do we conceptualize this category "queer". But for me it then becomes, are there political unities between these groups of people that organizers can start to think about how would you build a base for political mobilization. So, you know, so if we begin to broaden who gets included when we begin to think about questions of sexuality, then I think sexuality can have clear class implications. If we talk about, for example, women who are incarcerated, and the fact that the state, or, you know, prisons and jails have very strict rules, for example, around same sex relationships in the prisons and their unwillingness to acknowledge those rules, and the ways in which women are punished for kind of performing those relationships, then that's not just about, "Oh, I'm nice and I'm good, and there are no costs to that." If we talk about kind of same sex activity in male prisons, and the unwillingness of the criminal justice system to acknowledge that activity, and their unwillingness to provide condoms, then the consequences are the possible transmission of HIV, not because people are just saying "I'm good," but because the state is saying, to acknowledge those relationships or those...that sexual activity goes against what we're saying can happen in a prison, right?

Liz: Hm.

Cathy: And so it seems to me that that's part of hopefully what Black feminism does or what radical feminism does, is to say, things that seem like they're like just "sexuality issues" have huge...you know, have a huge impact on how people get to live their lives, right? Whether it be as incar—members who are incarcerated or people who are not incarcerated. How we think about questions of sexuality and women engaged in kind of the enterprise of sexual, you know, exchange of sex for money, if we don't begin to

understand those as both class and sex and usually gender and race issues, then I think we really miss the analysis in trying to intervene in a kind of effective way to kind of transform the life conditions of those women. So, you know, I guess...I guess my plea is that we, again, kind of go back to intersectionality, whether it be Kim Crenshaw¹⁵⁶ or Deborah King¹⁵⁷ or Angela Davis or E. Frances White¹⁵⁸--did I forget anybody? There's lots of people we could talk about—and really struggle with where are these intersections? Because it's not only just what kind of analysis and scholarship, but kind of the moment of intersection is really the moment of building a broader movement, at least to me, right? If you can find those places where people may not agree in terms of racial identification or sexual identification, but where they in fact suffer from state regulation or some “system of oppression,” where they share that experience. It seems to me if we can find those spaces, those are also the spaces for shared mobilization. And I think too often our analyses, while kind of gesturing towards those moments, or even sometimes identifying those, don't take the next step and try to kind of see them implemented and kind of...and the work that organizers do and just the work that we do outside of the academy.

Liz: I think we probably have time for one more question.

Audience 4: I have one question, just with regard to racism and sexism with the Black community, and you had touched on it earlier.

Cathy: Um-hum.

Audience 4: Black women's issues have always been put on the back burner when we talk about issues of racism and how they affect the Black community. So oftentimes women, you know, one day have to decide, “Well, I'll be Black today and I'll be female tomorrow”...

Cathy: Um-hum.

Audience 4: ...and it's like, well, what about how both affect me? And I'm just wondering if you could speak to your fear or concern in terms of the repercussions of dividing the...you know, these two issues that...that have been affecting...

Cathy: Um-hum.

Audience 4: ...Black people for so many years.

¹⁵⁶ *Kimberle Crenshaw* is one of the leading theorists on the concept of “intersectionality” which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

¹⁵⁷ *Deborah King's* 1988 paper “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology” argues that because the experience of black women is assumed to be synonymous with that of black men or white women, it is seen as superfluous to engage in a discussion concerning them.

¹⁵⁸ *E. Frances White* wrote *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. Her scholarship has helped to define the role of women and work in Africa.

Cathy: Right.

Audience 4: And...and what do you think the effects are, just in terms of the whole community, as a whole.

Cathy: Um, I'm going to reveal more and self identify more. I go to this ...I don't...I don't only go, I belong to a progressive affirming Black church, which puts me...makes me a Christian also. That's interesting...yeah, anyway, ah...And part of our mission is to be affirming in terms of lesbian and gay issues, to be progressive in terms of our politics, to engage in social justice, and to root ourselves in kind of Black communities. And one of the things that we all talk about in terms of the mission is providing space where people bring their...their entire selves, right? All of their complexity, all of their problems, all their struggles, all their victories, all their insights. And, you know, when you think about this question of division, there's clearly a political analysis that we all probably share about what does it mean when people have to choose between "being a woman one day" or making that primary, or making primary their racial identity. And usually I would argue it's not a choice, right? It's usually a situation that forces one thing instead of the other. So it's not even...we're not even going to give you the agency to choose, we're just going to make you respond based on certain things. So, you know, it's...we don't want that, and at a political level, it means, I think providing an analysis where people understand the ways in which these things intersect, the need to build kind of movements that expand beyond one single identity, whether it be race or gender. To understand that usually it's always an intersecting moment, even if it's not visible in that way. But I think, and I should defer to you, but there have to be also at an individual level real damage that happens, right?, when—at least I think, and I'm not a psych person, so you could say that's ridiculous but—when people feel like I'm...I'm this, even though I know I'm all these other things. The classic example for me is always thinking about sexuality, and, you know, it's been a big deal actually to go back into a Black church, because quite often in the past it's been...to be in a Black church meant you could be out as a feminist, you could be—maybe...you could be clearly a race woman, but you couldn't be a Black lesbian. And sometimes in some Black churches, you can't be progressive or radical, right? So, what does it mean I think to create spaces where people can bring themselves? And it seems to me that's what, you know, we're going to end here. That's what probably I think is the...one of the things that feminism should do, in any progressive analysis and movement, which is to provide space where people can be their whole selves, and can then use all of those resources that they bring to the table to create...to first envision what a great and wonderful society might look like and then to work towards that, right? I mean, my worry, for example in working with young people is that they can't even begin the process of imagining a society in which they're full members. Like what does it mean to kind of have that type of creativity, that type of imagination, that type of feeling of status and empowerment completely cut off, not from one young person, but from a generation of a whole community. And so it seems to me that part of the politics is creating that space where people can envision, do that kind of imaginary work and then bring all the resources that they have, as well as kind of combine resources with other people to really put that vision into action, and to transform the society. And hopefully,

you know, the work that I do, both as a scholar and an activist and the intersection of the two, can help in that project.

Liz: Well, that is a great place to finish up, and I want to thank you again for coming because this has been wonderful.

Cathy: Thank you so much.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Holly Hughes
Interviewer: Miriam Asnes**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: March 19, 2004**

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Holly Hughes, born in 1955, is a performance artist, which she started doing in New York City during the twilight of the Carter administration. In the early 1980's, she became a member of the WOW Café, a feminist collective on which Hughes is currently co-editing a book. Her work has focused on issues of sexuality, identity, personal narrative, and freedom of expression. Some of her performances include *The Well of Horniness*, *The Lady Dick*, *Dress Suits to Hire*, *World Without End*, *Preaching to the Perverted*, *Turkey! The New Musical*, and *After a Fashion*. In 1996 Grove Press collected five of her early pieces in *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*. She is coeditor, with David Roman, of *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*. She has performed or had her work produced across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain at venues ranging from cultural institutions such as the Hammer Museum, the Walker Art Center, and the Guggenheim Museum to alternative spaces such as Performance Space 122, a home base for urban cultural expression in New York City. Hughes has been awarded funding from sources including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Hughes is currently teaching at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with a joint appointment in the School of Art and Design and the Department of Theater and Drama.

Miriam Asnes is a graduate student in Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan, where she is pursuing research on Palestinian Israelis and Arab Jews. A graduate of Harvard University, she has also worked with the organization Women Against Violence in Nazareth and hiked the entire Appalachian Trail (Georgia to Maine).

Transcript of Holly Hughes

Transcript of Holly Hughes

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*¹⁵⁹

Miriam Asnes: Welcome, Holly.

Holly Hughes: Thank you, Mimi. I can call you Mimi?

Miriam: Yes, you can call me Mimi.

Holly: Okay.

Miriam: Just to give you a sense of the flow, I'm going to ask you a bunch of questions about your work and life, and then at the end we'll open it to questions from the audience. So...

Holly: Sounds fabulous.

Miriam: Awesome. So, I guess I'd like you to sort of start at the beginning. Could you just tell me a little bit about where you were born?

Holly: Actually, does this, does this mean any... [holds up right hand, palm out and fingers up]—I'll test how much of a Michigander you are by holding this up and asking you if this means anything to you.

Miriam: [laughing] It does, it does.

Holly: It does. This is what we do in Michigan, is that we ... when you ask the question of “where you're from” we hold up the hand. There's another part of Michigan, but we don't discuss it [audience laughter]. And really this isn't the most accurate map of Michigan, I mean I would have to saw my thumb off and, like you know, glue it on here [points to an area below where the thumb joins the palm] but we're not going to do that today—I'm going to save that for radio. And I'm actually here [points to hollow between thumb and forefinger], from Saginaw, which is also the navy bean capital of the world, but I'm sure I don't have to tell you that. But that's where I was reared. And I went to school in Michigan, I went to Kalamazoo College, which is a small liberal arts college in the western part of the state, using the word “liberal” in the loosest sense of the word [audience laughter] and in a more academic than political sense of the word, and I attempted to escape Michigan by moving to New York in the late 70's. I was going to be

¹⁵⁹ These lyrics from “Ella's Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

part of this, this I don't know, this *feminist* organization, I don't know if you remember this—feminism was kind of a seventies thing, you know like kind of like when quiche was a health food and John Travolta made his first appearance—so anyways, quiche has come back and so has John Travolta but not feminism [loud audience laughter]. Go figure. And I've come back, to Michigan!

Miriam: Full circle.

Holly: Full circle—[sighs] I was hoping for a different shape. I don't think circle is really my shape. But yes, so I spent twenty years in New York City doing I'm not really sure what. But we can talk about that later.

Miriam: Sure. To go back to the early years...

Holly: The Early Years. Yes. The Wonder Years¹⁶⁰.

Miriam: So, the Wonder Years. What was your relationship with your family like?

Holly: [laughs] My relationship with my family was hideous in a very typically American middle-class white way. We were sort of four slices of American cheese individually wrapped¹⁶¹ in our own private sorrow inhabiting the same, you know, faux-colonial.¹⁶² We were, we were—every once in a while my mother would ask these questions of like, “Why can't we act like a family?” and I thought that was so...that was so descriptive, “Why can't we act like one?” because clearly we're not, clearly we have no relationship to each other, we have no idea how we arrived at this. My parents were middle class, Republican, golf-playing, depressed people living in Michigan, and I had a complicated relationship with them which I'm trying to like, I've parlayed into a career since then [audience laughter]. And it's, my relationship with them has improved a little bit since their death, but not as much as one would hope.

Miriam: So there are four of you. You have one sibling, then?

Holly: Yeah, as far as I know [laughs]. But perhaps somebody in the studio audience will want to address that issue later. Yes, I have a sister, and where is she today since we're in Ann Arbor and my sister lives in Ann Arbor? But that says something about my relationship with my family, doesn't it?

¹⁶⁰ This is a reference to the television show, *The Wonder Years*. On air between 1988 and 1993, the show was set during the late 1960s/early 1970s. It followed Kevin Arnold, an adolescent who was going through his own tumultuous years of growth (i.e. “wonder”) as the U.S. was going through its own adjustments.

¹⁶¹ This is a reference to a processed cheese that is sold individually wrapped. While it does contain dairy, this “American” cheese is generally considered a low-quality imitation of real cheese.

¹⁶² A Colonial Revival styled house. Colonial Revival is a type of architecture that was seen to reflect American patriotism and a desire for simplicity. The Colonial Revival house style remained popular until the mid-1950s.

Miriam: Yes, definitely. When did you leave home?

Holly: When did I leave home? I left home to go to college, but, you know, I didn't have, like—I couldn't really get out of this [holds up hand] you know. But Kalamazoo felt, it felt like an escape from Saginaw, even though it was not the navy bean capital, it was the celery capital of the free world. And when I was eighteen I went to college, and then when I was twenty-three I moved to New York City.

Miriam: What made you move to New York?

Holly: Um, a plane [audience laughter]. I, you know, I came, I was in the process of coming out as a lesbian. I was, actually that's what I did in college, I was in the process of coming out as a lesbian and then I'd go back in as a born-again Christian. And there was a kind of—there was something, there's, there's something related between the born-again Christian thing and the lesbian thing in the seventies, I mean we wore plaid shirts in both things, lots of guitar songs, lots of sitting around in circles. In one circle you talked about brotherhood, in the other one you talked about sisterhood. There was a lot of passive-aggressiveness sort of disguised as political action. But, so I sort of did this back-and-forth between coming out as a lesbian in college, which was kind of, in Kalamazoo in the seventies, was sort of the sound of one hand clapping, really, I mean there was no one to really [from the audience there is the sound of a hand hitting against a leg]—there's that one hand right now, out there in the audience—IT'S STILL CLAPPING! So, you know, I tried to come out as a lesbian and then I'd give up and go back to Jesus. And after a while, He wasn't speaking to me anymore either, actually. He, it was the seventies and He had moved to the Sun Belt¹⁶³ like a lot of people in the Midwest. It was a very grim time. And I, I realized that if I was actually going to have sex with another woman that I had to leave the state, or at least that part of the state. And I saw a nice little pink brochure for the New York Feminist Art Institute filled with all this, this sort of sisterly visions of all this sort of non-hierarchical, anti-colonial work we were going to make in collaboration. I had these visions of like, giant soft sculpture vaginas that we would kind of collectively erect, if I may [audience and interviewer laughter], in Times Square, and how that would topple the military industrial complex [audience laughter]. It was a time of naming yourself after condiments that you would find in your spice cabinet and feeling like that was really striking a blow against the patriarchy. So, I came to New York to be part of this feminist collective, and very excited about it, and I got there and none of the women in the collective were speaking to each other [laughs]. Sisterhood may be beautiful, but it was also kind of nasty at that point. But it got me out of Michigan, gave me a really interesting, diverse group of women, and it introduced me to a new way of thinking about making art, and a connection between my political concerns as a feminist and as an aspiring lesbian and my artistic goals, through consciousness raising; which is what we did back in the seventies,

¹⁶³ The *Sun Belt* is the Southern tier of the United States, focused on Florida, Texas, Arizona, and California, and extending as far north as Virginia. The term gained wide use in the 1970s, when the economic and political impact of the nation's overall shift in population to the south and west became conspicuous.

when we weren't eating quiche or watching John Travolta, trying to re-imagine him as a lesbian [audience laughter].

Miriam: You talked a little bit about coming out. I was going to ask you a little bit about relationships through your life—when did that start for you, or what have been some of the more important ones?

Holly: I think that my relationships—I discovered that I was a lesbian in the typical way of falling in love in the typical sort of pre-lesbian phase in college, and then I didn't know if I wanted to be this woman or have her, and I would sort of—I think the expression was...stalking¹⁶⁴ [audience laughter] would be possibly a polite and probably accurate term for the kind of relationship that we had. And I came out in the context of lesbian feminism, which was a real break from the way that lesbianism was presented in America or experienced in America up to that point. There was a huge influx of middle-class white women into the lesbian world, and there was a sort of disavowal of some of the earlier cultural expression. Doesn't that sound good? Cultural expression. That means, like, ways we dressed up and flirted with each other, cultural expression. There was, there was a break with the birth of lesbian feminism, and there were wonderful things about that moment. There was also a way in which it, there was also a moment in feminism when—there's a whole sort of critique of sexuality and gender which played out in my personal life as this, as a time where it felt like every sort of type of sex and gender presentation was suspect. There was "no gender like no gender," you know, sex was really something that we were really going to possibly get rid of when the patriarchy arrived. It was, I mean I think about what else was happening in America in the seventies, and it was this wild time, but it wasn't really wild in the lesbian femini.—I know there's lesbian feminists who had—they can do their own show with you [audience laughter]. They had fabulous sex! Fine. I'm happy for them. But I was not one of them. I just had this image of coming out because I had this erotic pull towards women and then finding that all the lesbians had stopped having sex. Or it seemed when they talked about sex it would seem like two salmon lying side-by-side kind of wiggling in a dry streambed and I was just like - so it took, I was a, I was a slow starter [loud audience laughter]. And I had no lesbian skills! I didn't know that you needed skills to be a lesbian. But you know, I couldn't throw, I can't catch, sports involving balls frighten me. I'm not a vegetarian, I eat meat, I think all I eat is meat. But I did have a cat. That was what I had going for me, that was my one lesbian skill. And so it took me a while to have relationships other than in the privacy of my own...mind [audience laughter]. To admit that actually I was attracted to really masculine women, exclusively, women that were supposed to have gone the way of the dodo bird¹⁶⁵ with the advent of lesbian feminism,

¹⁶⁴ *Stalking* is to follow or observe somebody persistently, especially out of obsession and/or derangement. However, the evolution of this word also has a less menacing vernacular meaning that indicates that one person may pursue another person indirectly by coordinating schedules and appearances to create more opportunities of interaction.

¹⁶⁵ The *dodo* is bird that became extinct in 1681 due to human destruction of its habitat.

women who were described as butch¹⁶⁶. And so I felt this, like, double-shaming of my sexuality, even as I struggled to understand it as a lesbian, this other sort of like, you know, I'm drawn to this thing that's, you know, and I'm [Holly hits own forehead with hand repeatedly] "Bad feminist, bad feminist, bad feminist"...I was just hitting myself with the State of Michigan, did you notice that? [Audience laughter] It's getting layered in here, isn't it?

Miriam: Definitely. So, when you got to New York, how did you...could you tell us a little bit about what the WOW café is, or how you got involved in it?

Holly: I, there was this period between when the sisterhood of the New York Feminist Art Institute totally collapsed—I mean, it wasn't just silence, it just like collapsed, and a period between when I found the WOW café that, I just felt like a, I felt like a waitress without a cause. Why had I moved to New York City to live in an even crummier apartment and do the same things that I was doing in Kalamazoo? And then one day I saw this poster called, "Double X," it said, "Double X-rated Christmas Party for Women," and it was like, "I am so there." I am there before the doors open - and the doors are not the only thing that're open. And I walk inside and it's in the basement of a Catholic Church, it's a different moment in Catholicism [audience laughter]. And I walk inside and there's racks of thrift-store clothes, tuxedos, prom dresses, military outfits. So the idea is like you can check more than your clothes, you know. Come as you aren't, or as you wish you would be. And I looked at my sort of like purple paisley, gay-is-good clothes and ditched them and got into a, you know, scratchy prom dress. And I went inside and there were women that were performing strip-shows for other women, there were kissing booths, it was a highly sexualized atmosphere, and everybody was—there was a total blurring between who's the audience and who's the performer. And I developed this like collective crush on this group of people who at that point, which was the WOW café, and at that point I, I thought, I'm just, I just want to do whatever they're doing. I want to be part of this group of women. And if they'd been doing like, you know, volleyball, I would be a volleyball player. But at that point they were having fabulous parties like "The Party to End All Wars," a military drag party which realized that we were pacifists, but there were certain fabulous things about the military, like uniforms and having physicals that we didn't want to get rid of [audience laughter]. And you would come to this party, and you could like go into this like little booth and get "examined," and every once in a while this really butch number would, you know, like yell at us (it was so thrilling!). And make us drop to the floor and give her twenty-five—of anything! I didn't know what that meant, but I just was, I was so happy to give her twenty-five of anything I had [audience laughter]. So it was this satirical, strange, out-of-the-way place that was really out of—off of any map, there was no sign on the door, and I started hanging out there, and I started doing theater because that's what they did. They

¹⁶⁶ *Butch* refers to a woman (particularly a lesbian) who displays "masculine" characteristics. Butch women dresses "like men." Often used in opposition to "femme" a term to denote more "feminine" lesbians. The butch/femme dichotomy is a particular representation of lesbianism often seen in opposition to lesbian feminism.

didn't do volleyball, they didn't run a food co-op, they were doing theater. So it just, it was, I, it was peer pressure, really.

Miriam: What was your first performance experience at the WOW café?

Holly: I did a piece called "My Life As a Glamour Don't" and where I got friends of mine to dress up in their—and write little pieces about various fashion mistakes. I, there's a sort of thread through here [makes sewing motion], it's a thread. And, so that was the first piece I did, and then I did this evening, it was really long, in fact I think it's still going on, possibly, called "Shrimp in a Basket," which brought up my concern for personal narrative and seafood. And it was a collection of a lot, everything I'd ever written—I staged everything that I had written, not knowing what "staging" meant or anything like that, but one of, one of the parts of it was this show *The Well of Horniness* which I had written as, actually as a screenplay for a possible feminist porn video. And unfortunately the producer—it was my only contact I think I've ever had with someone who calls himself a producer—felt that it wasn't pornographic enough, that women didn't get horny. So I turned to performance art when I couldn't cut the mustard¹⁶⁷ as a pornographer [audience laughter]. It's kind of a...

Miriam: So, how do you define performance art?

Holly: Besides failed pornography? [Audience laughter] ...which may be the one definition that sticks...you know, I didn't really think of myself as a performance artist even when I had failed as a pornographer. Then for a while I thought I was doing theater, and even though I really didn't go to see very much theater, but I thought what I was doing was theater. But the more I became aware of what was happening under the term "theater" in America, the more that I saw that it was, you know, the way that American theater was wedded to realism and a certain kind of narrative shape that I really couldn't relate to. And this term "performance art" was floating around and became the sort of useful place where people who, people who wanted, sort of resisting codification of art forms for various reasons could sort of gather under this leaky umbrella of performance art. It's kind of the garage band of art forms in a sense. There's people who have resisted defining what performance art is, are people who call themselves performance artists, and it's been people a lot of times who have wanted to work with artists of different disciplines, sometimes they've wanted to break out of realism, they wanted to work in different ways than American theater, which is a highly codified art form, functions. So it's a very sort of amorphous space, it kind of functions like a cultural wetlands. [Audience laughter]. Whatever that means.

Miriam: And what, for you, has been the relationship between writing and performing? You mentioned that you'd have all these things written...which, the chicken or the egg, you know?

Holly: Usually it's better, it's better to write something before you perform it, but sometimes that hasn't happened for me. Well, I really thought that I started out thinking

¹⁶⁷ "Cut the mustard" means to perform up to expectations or to a required standard.

that, okay, if I'm anything in this world, I am, I'm a writer. And I got very excited about that. And then I started to...the ham¹⁶⁸ in me could not be denied. And, and every once in a while I think, "No, no, my strength is in writing." One of the things that is so great about performance art is there's not the sort of sense of compartmentalizing in the, that there is in a lot of theater, where the roles are really strictly defined. But I did a piece, my first solo, *World Without End*, in response to my mother dying, and a way of sort of thinking through my relationship to her, and I realized I couldn't, I couldn't really ask anyone else to do this, and I had some need to eulogize her, so the ham got trotted out again. And that's kind of how it happened.

Miriam: Was that the first time you used sort of a very personal story in your work? Or has that been something—

Holly: I think that that was, that was the first time that it was not totally metaphorical or extremely campy.¹⁶⁹ A play I had written before that had a character in it called Michigan, and so I was thinking, I was thinking more metaphorically. But *World Without End* was directly autobiographical although I think of it as like "new and improved autobiography." That, you know, I mean you're not limited by the objective "facts," you know, to get to the deeper truth, or to get back at people in the service of the larger truth and larger artistic goal.

Miriam: So we've heard a little bit about your work...I would love for our studio audience and for people watching this to get a sense of maybe what your work is like, or maybe if you want to share a little bit with us.

Holly: Oh, I'd be happy to.

Miriam: Excellent.

Holly: Why don't I read something from a solo of mine called *Clit Notes*. [Opens *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*] The first time I was in love with another woman? Well, actually, she was the woman, I was a kid, I was thirteen, in fact this little, this little story would have a much happier ending if there'd been some sort of gay youth organization in my hometown, some sort of North American woman-girl love association¹⁷⁰, but no! The men get everything good. The lesbian chicken, who worries about them? And they, this is a very important part of the attraction: her name was Ah-nee-tah Wendt. Which I discovered sounded an awful lot like, "I need a whip" if you said it enough times to yourself late at night, and I did. She was a Social Studies teacher, which, that's what they called history in my hometown of Saginaw, Michigan. I, I'm sure I don't have to tell you (and I've already told you) that Saginaw is the navy bean capital of the world, and you

¹⁶⁸ A *ham* is person who overacts or exaggerates.

¹⁶⁹ *Campy* describes something deliberately artificial, vulgar, banal, or affectedly humorous.

¹⁷⁰ Holly is making a reference to the North American Man-Boy Love Association, an organization that seeks to legitimize adult males' sexual relationships with young boys.

may have also heard of it in that Simon and Garfunkel song¹⁷¹, “it took us three days to hitchhike from Saginaw,” they had connections. But what, what they taught us in Michigan was not actually history. There were, there’s laws against teaching history in Michigan, so what they teach you instead is amnesia. So by the time I was thirteen all I knew about, say, World War II, I had, I had gleaned from *Hogan’s Heroes*¹⁷²: “funny little war.” I knew that there were slaves at one time in America and the Republicans freed them.

Now, there were forbidden books in my hometown, in fact I think most books were forbidden. They were, they were there on the library shelves but you had to get a special note from home to check them out. I could not get a note, from my home to read a book. My mother used to drop us off at Republican Headquarters to stuff envelopes for Nixon, even when he wasn’t running [audience laughter], it was kind of, it was kind of her idea of daycare: “Keep Hope Alive!”¹⁷³ And Anita Wendt like slipped me these, these forbidden books, books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *I’m Okay, You’re Okay*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and I don’t know. This made me love her.

So this love had this really unfortunate way of expressing itself. Sometimes I’d be, I’d be, I’d be in the eighth grade and I’d be in class and I’d think, “Oh God, oh-my-God, I, I’m going to kiss her. I am going to kiss her, and there is NOTHING anybody can do to stop me!” so I’d just throw myself to the ground and I’d start writhing around hoping people’d think I was merely epileptic, just a little foaming at the mouth is better than having people think you’re queer. Sometimes I would be so inspired by her lectures that I’d start, I’d start taking my clothes off in class. I, I once I took my pantyhose off in class, I don’t have any memory of taking them off, but then there they were, down on the floor in an incriminating taupe heap, and I thought, “You know, something is the matter with me. I mean, if I don’t, if I don’t do something about this, I don’t know, I’m going to end up a Democrat or something.” [Audience laughter] So, I went to the most important sexual authority of that time, and well maybe all time, Dr. David Reuben’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*, and I’ll tell you, just, I mean the table of contents was an eye-opener. I noticed that male homosexuals had their own chapter, but the females were just a footnote under prostitution. So I just read the whole damn thing, and up to this time I think, I guess I was naïve, I thought that homosexuality had, had something to do with you know attraction between two people of the same sex, but not according to David Reuben, oh no [audience laughter]. Not according to David Reuben. According to David Reuben the most important part of a

¹⁷¹ The song “America” written by Paul Simon in 1968, which includes the verse:

“Michigan seems like a dream to me now/ It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw/ I’ve come to look for America

¹⁷² *Hogan’s Heroes* was a TV sitcom that aired from 1965-1971 about allied POW’s held in a fictitious prisoner of war camp somewhere in Germany during WW II.

¹⁷³ Although here Holly is associating this phrase with Richard Nixon, “Keep Hope Alive” is a catch-phrase of Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., Founder and President of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. Jackson ran for president twice in the 1980s. Jackson is a strong supporter of civil rights and has been involved in many American movements for empowerment, peace, civil rights, gender equality, and economic and social justice.

homosexual experience, male or female, is their compulsive erotic relationship to household appliances. This is not fiction. And all that distinguishes the male from the female is that male homosexuals are forever shoving various appliances up their ass, you know, shot glasses, blenders, toaster ovens, and the lesbians are always strapping them on, you know, electric toothbrushes, color TV's, washer-dryers [audience laughter]—'Ladies, start your engines!'

Well, so I'm thirteen years old, and it, I don't know, it seems like a very shallow and materialistic form of love [audience laughter], and I noticed I thought that being a homosexual, if you wanted to be any good at it, would take a lot of leisure time, not to mention electrical outlets. And you know, it was a little hard on the environment, so I read on, and Dr. Reuben said that like cancer, impending lesbianism had its warning signs, the most ominous of which was, and I quote, "the enlarged clitoris of The Lesbian which can be inserted into The Vagina of her partner achieving a reasonable facsimile of...The Real Thing." Whatever that is. So, I read on, and Dr. Reuben said that "the most prized lesbians" and I thought—wait a minute. *Stop the buses*. I had no idea there were going to be prizes. Oh my God! [Audience laughter] Here I am, I'm in the Midwest and I'm in county fair¹⁷⁴ country, and all of a sudden I can see the next Saginaw county fair. I mean, I there's the lesbian barn, I mean, I don't know how I missed it, it was there all along right next to the Holsteins.¹⁷⁵ Just down from, down from the Clydesdales¹⁷⁶, and I could, I could see all the people out on the midway¹⁷⁷ saying, 'Come on down at four, they'll be judging the lesbians. You don't want to miss that.' [Audience laughter] And I, I could see in my mind all the like 4-H¹⁷⁸ kids leading around all those lesbians that they had hand-raised, you know, suckled from baby butch all the way up to full-blown bull daggers!¹⁷⁹ David Reuben didn't say what kind of prizes you could hope to win for being a lesbian, but I think, I don't know, I thought a few surge protectors might come in handy. And he said, he said that some of the most prizewinning specimens had clits four, five, even six inches, I don't know, long, I guess. He didn't really say, but I think, you know what I did—I went to, I went to my father's workroom. I got his tape measure. It was twenty-five feet long—you've gotta believe in yourself. Don't forget that! [Audience laughter] I figured, "that oughta do it!" [Laughs] I got my mother's hand mirror, I went to my bedroom, I pulled up my skirt, and I ran into all sorts

¹⁷⁴ A *county fair* usually held every year at the same location in a county, especially for the competitive showing of livestock and farm products. Considered a big event for rural communities.

¹⁷⁵ *Holsteins* are any breed of large black and white dairy cattle originally developed in Friesland.

¹⁷⁶ A *Clydesdales* is a large powerful draft horse with white feathered hair on its fetlocks. The breed was developed in the Clyde valley of Scotland.

¹⁷⁷ The *midway* is the area of a fair (or carnival, circus, or exposition) where sideshows and other amusements are located.

¹⁷⁸ *4-H* is a youth organization that is most prominent in rural communities. The main point of the organization is to organize many competitions for youth, especially in the area of livestock raising.

¹⁷⁹ *Bull dagger* is a derogatory term for lesbians, particularly directed to women who are butch. This term also was more popular in the past and has since been replaced by the equally derogative term, "dyke." However, when used by queer women the terms "bull dagger" and "dyke" can both connote empowerment and community.

of problems. Because I couldn't find anything between my legs that looked like it could be inserted into the body of another person, no matter how large it got, and I thought—I began to doubt the very existence of my clitoris, I mean it, it didn't seem like something someone in my family would have [audience laughter]. Not after all that, that work for Nixon.¹⁸⁰ It didn't really seem like something someone in Saginaw, Michigan would have. Or maybe they had them but Simon and Garfunkel took 'em with them when they left [audience laughter]. So I just measured everything between my navel and my knees, I took the best score, but nothing was even six inches long. And I knew right then that, you know, I'd, I'd never win any prizes for being a lesbian. I mean, maybe I, maybe I wasn't a dyke after all. I just didn't measure up. So that's a little excerpt from...

Miriam: Thank you so much, Holly. Take a good sip of water after that one. So, I think that it's become a little bit obvious to everyone that you use humor quite a lot in your work.

Holly: What do you mean by that? [Audience laughter. Holly yells at them] It's not funny!

Miriam: I know, also, do you, has that always been something that's come naturally to you, or is that part, something you got from the women at the WOW café?

Holly: There were a lot of things I got from them, including a moldy BLT¹⁸¹ that's in my purse over there that's stinking up this whole place [audience laughter]. But I think that I was a, I was such a strange child, mostly that, that I was just literate, and the theory of evolution made sense to me. And I didn't have a gender, I was kind of like Cousin It¹⁸² on *The Addams Family*¹⁸³—oh, that's going to translate well into Poland, China and India. But if they don't know what Cousin It is, it's time they learned. So, my one way of coping was by making jokes. So that was, that was a, and I think it was also, had to do with being a gen...the first generation to grow up with television, and being really inspired by really terrible TV shows like *Gilligan's Island*,¹⁸⁴ *The Addams Family*—these shows were, you know, other American artists talk about Jackson Pollack,¹⁸⁵ they talk

¹⁸⁰ Richard Nixon was a Republican and the 37th President serving from 1969-1974. During his Presidency, Nixon succeeded in ending American fighting in Vietnam and improving relations with the U.S.S.R. and China. But the Watergate scandal, in which he was involved, divided the country and ultimately led to his resignation.

¹⁸¹ *BLT* is an acronym Bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich.

¹⁸² *Cousin It* was a character in the TV show "The Addams Family" who had long hair covering its entire body including its face.

¹⁸³ *The Addams Family* debuted in 1964 featuring a macabre family including Gomez Addams, his wife Morticia, their two children, and various other family members. The story is of a loving family with well-behaved children—the ideal American family if they were not monsters.

¹⁸⁴ *Gilligan's Island* was a popular TV comedy sitcom from 1964 to 1967 in which the seven main characters are shipwrecked on an uncharted tropical island.

¹⁸⁵ Jackson Pollack was a U.S.-based artist known primarily for his innovative work in the 1940s and 1950s. He was famous for his unprecedented physical involvement with the act of painting itself. In the style of works he is most known for he spread his canvases on the floor, dribbled paint, sand and broken glass on them, smeared and scratched them, named them with numbers.

about *Waiting for Godot*,¹⁸⁶ and you know, I see *Gilligan's Island* and *The Adams Family* very much as sort of my *Waiting for Godot*, as my Jackson Pollack.

Miriam: Excellent. (Holly laughs). I see that.

Holly: Do you see that?

Miriam: And how has your work been received by different audiences? I mean, I know in the bio I read, you listed all the different places you've been performed or been produced. Any memorable, particular times you've been performing?

Holly: I think that a lot of my work—I see my work in conversation. Even when it's solo it's, it's imagined as a conversation. And it's a conversation that I wouldn't have begun, *begun* if I hadn't been part of the WOW café, if I hadn't been part of this tiny little world that seemed—like, what I was thinking about, what was funny to me, what was political to me, was going to be understood, and people would challenge me, and there would be work there that I would respond to. I also, one thing that unified people at WOW is that we had somewhat of a critique of feminism as we were experiencing it in New York in the early eighties. And part of it had to do with sexuality, and our desire to sort of place sexuality at the center of feminist discourse. Part of it had to do with style, about, in some ways borrowing and building from a sort of campy tradition that a lot of gay men had pioneered rather than a more earnest style that had been typical of other feminist art projects. So, I saw my work also in conversation—and this is like *World Without End*, *Clit Notes*—in conversation with other feminists. I mean, I think that a lot of times there's a sort of feeling that if you're speaking from a stigmatized subject position—and if you can't speak at all—from a stigmatized subject position, that your work should be addressing a mainstream audience. In other words, if I can't convince Jesse Helms,¹⁸⁷ you know, that gay people shouldn't be, I don't know, rounded up and branded, then somehow I'm not doing my work. So I imagined it in conversation, and I had a lot of disputes with feminist and lesbian and gay critics who saw my artwork as kind of a response to feminist and gay theory as it was being lived out at that time.

Miriam: How do mainstream audiences receive your work?

Holly: Well, mostly they don't receive it [audience laughter]. Although if you, you know, spent \$49.99 at my website, they could receive it and you could send me to...No, mostly I don't perform—I have performed a few times to more mainstream audiences but

¹⁸⁶ A well-known play by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). *Waiting for Godot* was written in 1953 and is categorized as Absurdist Theatre. There is almost no action in this play, rather everything is expressed through jokes or reflections on life

¹⁸⁷ *Jesse A Helms* (North Carolina, Republican), served five terms as a Senator and epitomizes the ultra-conservative Religious Right. He is loudly and overwhelmingly critical of queer individuals and rights, public funding for arts, and most social, cultural and welfare programs. Regarding the National Endowment of the Arts funding that Holly speaks about, he said, "What is really at stake is whether or not America will allow the cultural high ground in this nation to sink slowly into an abyss of slime to placate people who clearly seek or are willing to destroy the Judaic-Christian foundations of this republic."

I've sort of gone with the Kate Clinton¹⁸⁸ idea about the mainstream that it's shallow and slow-moving, and it's the tributaries where the action is. I think that my work is preaching to the converted. But I—and I borrow from that expression which David Román,¹⁸⁹ who is a theorist, uses—and talking about being a progressive person in America as an act of faith. It's really, there's nothing to go on except faith, particularly at this moment, and it's a faith that, like any kind of spiritual belief, is in danger of being eroded. So there's something active that happens between the audience and myself, we're not necessarily all in agreement, but we're inspiring, challenging each other, and reminding ourselves that just because our worldview is not part of commercial culture doesn't mean that our critique's not valid.

Miriam: In sort of all these different performance experiences, have you had some, have you had any experience with, censorship, say?

Holly: Oh, how many hours do we have? [Audience laughter] I hope we have several hours for this. Yes, I have. Censorship is my middle name. At first, my first early experiences with censorship were about my wanting to make work that was about a kind of irreverent lesbian sexuality. And just by reclaiming this word “horny,” which, of course, relates to male sexuality, I remember having huge fights with feminist groups who thought this was just horrible. And I had been really inspired by Drag Theater and wanted women to have the same opportunities to have big wigs and lots of eye makeup and phony accents and late at night—it all seemed fabulous to me. What's not to like? It, that it wasn't incompatible with feminism. So I had various experiences early on, where I remember *The Well of Horniness* was, had a long run in Washington, D.C., and on opening night people's tires were slashed and flyers were, you know, destroyed for the show and things like that. And I had other disputes but I mean, it's more of a sort of a *dispute*. But in 1990, I was one of the artists whose work came under attack by right-wing politicians and had National Endowment for the Arts¹⁹⁰ funding that was awarded to me taken away. So, that was sort of my induction into—that's when it became my middle name, as opposed to just my hobby.

Miriam: [Laughs] And how long did that take to work through? I know it was sort of a process.

¹⁸⁸ *Kate Clinton* is a stand-up comedian and writer who focuses on issues of politics, gay rights/humor, and feminism. She wrote *Don't Get Me Started* in which she critiques and satirizes marriage, the gay community and politics.

¹⁸⁹ *David Román* is a professor at the University of Southern California and teaches in the areas of theatre, performance, minority studies, queer studies and American studies. Much of his work has been looking at performance and AIDS. He has also studied a women's cabaret performances and co-edited, with Holly, *O Solo Homo*.

¹⁹⁰ The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is the largest annual funding provider of the arts in the United States and is the official arts organization of the United States government. The mission of the NEA is to support excellence in the arts—both new and established, bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education.

Holly: It was a process. It was, it was quite a process. The initial denial of the grant was in 1990, and the sort of last stage of that chapter was in 1998 when our case was heard by the United States Supreme Court¹⁹¹. And along the way there were lots of little victories. We were contending that the First Amendment¹⁹² applied to government arts funding. And the First Amendment, specifically in this context, says that the federal government cannot discriminate in the way they give out funding in a way to suppress unpopular or minority viewpoints. Not that I thought of lesbianism as a viewpoint, but, hey, it's you know, it's better than a lifestyle. I'd rather have a viewpoint. Because I see this, like, woman in a minivan going down the Interstate, and maybe she sees a sign that says "lesbian viewpoint next left," so I'll just go with that [audience laughter]. And I'm too sloppy to have a lifestyle, so I have a lesbian viewpoint. And so more than the grants that were denied to these other artists at the same time, it was the principle about whether free speech applied to government art funding. And two courts, two federal courts said, yes, it did, and that this was clearly a violation—along the way, the Clinton administration gave us our funding—but the United States Supreme Court eventually decided that the arts organizations weren't being compelled to consider decency, which is their code word for "No Queers, No Queers, No Queers!" When they just didn't want to come out and say that, you know, a quicker way is to say "decency." Since the arts organizations weren't compelled to take that into consideration, then it didn't violate the First Amendment. So it was a dissatisfying, dissatisfying settlement that we came to. And also part of something larger which was a total, total destruction pretty much of public arts funding in this country for individual artists and artists from outsider groups.

Miriam: Do you think that your relationship with either the queer community or the feminist community changed as a result of the NEA stuff?

Holly: It was a very complicated—my relationship with pretty much everyone, including a lot of my best friends, were really, was really challenged by this experience, because so many people in the art world, including good friends of mine, really bought into the idea that there's no such thing as bad publicity. And by singling out a handful of artists whose work was frankly provocative and intended to be controversial, it was easy to see this as a problem of a few artists, or artists that worked in particular topics, rather than what it really was, which is an attack, first of all on public funding of the arts, but an attack on public funding in general, because this model was used to attack public education, public health, yada, yada, yada¹⁹³. We have public nothing in this country anymore. So I felt that my private experience of it, which was being transformed into a political football, having to continually sort of justify my work, and the sort of psychic damage of having your work held up for ridicule, and including by people in the feminist and queer

¹⁹¹ The *Supreme Court* of the United States is the highest judicial body in the United States and leads the judicial branch of the United States federal government.

¹⁹² The *First Amendment* of the U.S. Constitution (the first ten amendments of which are referred to as the Bill of Rights) reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

¹⁹³ *Yada, yada, yada* signifies that there is more to a conversation or story without detailing the specifics. Used to indicate that the rest of the story is not significant to the overall meaning.

community, and at the same time getting death threats from the right wing, letters like, “I know where you live, I have a gun, I’m coming to New York this summer, P.S. Jesus loves you,” and I’m like, thank you for that P.S.—that’s my favorite death threat. All of that had an enormous...traumatizing toll on me. And plus, I felt like, “we lost.” We lost; we lost the big political goal that we were hoping to achieve. So it was a very difficult moment. I mean I would find in some ways some solidarity with gay people because my work had been clearly singled out because of homophobia, but at the same time then I’d hear critiques in the gay media that, you know, “She’s not really gay! She talked in that piece about sleeping with a guy!” Or, “She’s gay but she’s not queer!” You know, it’s like, oh God, you know “She’s got the wrong haircut! Her haircut oppresses me!” And so it was a very, it was a very difficult experience, and I was caught in this situation where the more I sort of responded to the charges and tried to talk about the issues, the more I think it sort of increased the sense that this was just an individual problem. This was, you know, like Holly, you know, Holly Hughes *mano a mano*¹⁹⁴ with Jesse Helms, as opposed to it being a much broader problem. You know, we want to like individualize and psychologicalize—even though I can’t say that. We want to do it. I can’t say it, but we do it anyways.

Miriam: Did you, did this affect your work in any way?

Holly: It did. It stopped my work, I mean I, and put me into a place of really standing outside my work and judging it in a way that I don’t think is helpful for any artist, and being afraid. I was afraid. I was just—what was I afraid of? I’m not even sure. But it so echoed experiences of shaming and feeling like you were wrong, that it echoed my own sort of self-doubts and it echoed sort of the experiences of growing up feeling completely alienated from everyone else in the navy bean capital, and from my family, and through my political beliefs and, and my sexuality, those levels of alienation. So it reopened those wounds.

Miriam: And then, *Preaching to the Perverted*, you wrote after 1998? After the decision?

Holly: I did, I did.

Miriam: Would you like to talk a little bit about—

Holly: I was struggling for a long time, like, how can I take this experience—I think of myself as somebody who tries to take personal narrative and turn it into political parables, so like it’s perfect! It’s great material! How could I go wrong? But I couldn’t find my way into the story for a long time. Partially because I think I was *in* the story, it was still happening. But then I went to the United States Supreme Court, and I have to say, Mimi, that it was the weirdest piece of experimental theater that I’ve ever seen [audience laughter], and I have seen a lot of weird, you know, site-specific theater.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ “Mano a mano” is Spanish for “hand to hand.” Used here it refers to direct competition.

¹⁹⁵ *Site-specific theater* is designed to be performed in one place or possibly at a certain time. It’s not a touring production, or a piece that can be reproduced over and over again with a relative amount of

And I started describing it to friends of mine, just like the fact that you have to get tickets to go to the Supreme Court, and they're not easy to get, you know [audience laughter], it's a long-running hit, and you have to know the right people. And I remember my lawyer saying, "You know, like if you wanna go to the hearing, you better let me know right away because tickets are going fast." And so I say, "Can I have two?" And he's like—[Holly mimics his look of disbelief. Holly laughs. Audience laughter]—"I'll see what I can do." And it was under the sort of veneer of democracy, it felt like some sort of national detention hall.¹⁹⁶ You went through many—this is pre-9/11—many, many metal detectors, but more than that, more than the endless surveillance, was the fact that the minute you walked into the foyer of the Supreme Court, two hours before the hearing starts, yards from where the hearing happens, the first rule is "No Talking" [whispers] "no talking." And so there's all these different lines. You don't know where the lines are going, maybe they're going to an outlet mall,¹⁹⁷ or Great Adventures,¹⁹⁸ or, you know, the Not-So-Supreme Court, you don't know [audience laughter]. My lawyer said to me, "Make sure you get in the right line" and then it's like, how do you find out what the right line is? And so you're, so it's this chaotic, weird feeling as you go into the Supreme Court, and then you're escorted to your seats by members of the Secret Service, and they seat you in these pews.¹⁹⁹ And I'm not talking about seats that resemble pews, remind you of pews—I'm talking about "Onward Christian Soldiers,"²⁰⁰ *Faith of our Fathers*²⁰¹ pew pews. So I'm telling people this, and they're just like [Holly mimics a look of disbelief], because of course the Supreme Court is completely invisible. There's no photography; there's none of even those little funny court drawings. In fact, the journalists that go to the Supreme Court can't bring any recording equipment, and they can't bring pens or paper. So they're out there trying, you know, after the hearing trying to reconstitute it, and I thought, "These are people who do not like to be reviewed." And on that level, I could really understand and relate to them [audience laughter], but I, somehow I felt that it was wrong. I felt like it was wrong, and I wrote the piece—it began a way for me to talk about my experiences in the culture war and to "out"²⁰² the Supreme Court, not in the most exciting sense of the word "out," but I felt like—just sort

similarity, like a more conventional play. Site-Specific Theatre can also illustrate the specific nature and shared experiences necessary between audience members and performers for their message to be successfully shared such that if you're not a part of that community, you will not understand it.

¹⁹⁶ *Detention* is space in a school where students, as punishment for improper behavior, are required to stay after regular school hours to ponder their errors.

¹⁹⁷ An *outlet mall* is a collection of retail stores housed in one larger building. Each store sells the goods of a particular manufacturer or wholesaler, usually at reduced prices. Outlet malls are generally located near large, metropolitan areas.

¹⁹⁸ *Great Adventure* refers to an amusement park called Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey.

¹⁹⁹ *Pews* are long, fixed, backed benches that are arranged in rows for the seating of a congregation in church.

²⁰⁰ "Onward Christian Soldiers" is a traditional Christian hymn.

²⁰¹ James Cardinal Gibbons (1834-1921) wrote *Faith of our Fathers* which explains the basic tenants of the Catholic Church and why those beliefs are held. "Faith of Our Fathers" is also a Christian Hymn. In this reference, either makes sense.

²⁰² "To out" has become a verb and an action where one tells the secrets of others. This came about from the "outing" of public officials as homosexuals. It refers to the idea of "coming out of the closet," the closet being a proverbial place where one can hide their identity, particularly queer identity, from people around them. When one comes out of the closet, they "out" themselves to those around them.

of peel back and, and show the kind of way this performance was constructed. Well you can tell I've been teaching, now—"This performance has been constructed."

Miriam: Well, that's just a wonderful segue into my next question. Yeah I was really, being a former student of yours, and really and having enjoyed your teaching, I wanted to know a little bit about how you got into teaching.

Holly: Well, it was another accident. Karen Finley²⁰³ didn't show up one day. It's really true [audience laughter]. Karen Finley didn't show up at NYU²⁰⁴ and they called me, and I was like—it was a slow time in the performance art days, it was, I was between gigs, and I was like, "Sure," and then I thought [whispers] "I have no idea." It was at New York University's Experimental Theater Wing, which is a wonderful program, and I was like, "Oh my god, I don't know what—I have no idea what I'm going to do." And this friend of mine who had gone there said, "It's, you know, experimental theater, you can tell them to run around Washington Square Park and do pushups afterwards, and they'll do it." And I got a suggestion from my friend and, and former NEA Four co-defendant Tim Miller about self-scripting, which is just like have people talk for a minute, do a story about what happened to them the day before, and out of that one exercise we did a whole semester of work. The students were great, they were really wonderful. I thought at that moment that that's what was going to be, I could feel the love, and the students were really interested in the idea of taking their own experience and shaping it into performance and really generous towards me as the beginning teacher. So that was my first experience.

Miriam: Have they all been that like that?

Holly: No, they have not all been like that [both laugh]. They have not been all like that. I have a, it's a wonderful job when it goes well, but it's, and it's very exciting, and then when it's not going well, it feels like, it feels like some sort of version of *Groundhog's Day*, the Bill Murray movie where he's forced to repeat the same day over and over again, but you're repeating the same comedy act over and over again and dying, you know "bombing," as they say in comedy clubs, in front of the same people, it's just like you know every day, you know. So it's a kind of performance skill. Whereas one of my students in a class I'm currently teaching, I was trying to teach them about metaphors but I actually think after three weeks, they knew more about metaphors than before I started, I could see them losing knowledge in my presence, which is a very depressing feeling as a teacher, that they were actually smarter and more open before I started in on them. And so after three weeks of trying to find metaphors, they're like, "So, like is death a metaphor?" And I'm like, "No. Death is a reality. It's a reality I'm having right now." [Audience laughter]. "On a daily basis. In front of you. This is what it looks like."

²⁰³ Karen Finley is a performance artist who was also an Adjunct Faculty member of New York University. She was also one of the four artists, including Holly, whose funding was revoked by the NEA—dubbed the NEA Four.

²⁰⁴ NYU is an abbreviation for New York University, a private university located in New York City.

Miriam: So there is a, so then there is relationship for you between teaching and performing?

Holly: Yeah there is, there is. And it's a different; it's a different kind of performance. I mean, it's hard to sustain the fifteen—you know after teaching for a long time, I really haven't, I don't have enough material to stretch out for fifteen weeks. So unless someone else in the class starts doing their act, unless, you know, you trip the switch and other, you know, the circuit gets completed and other people start doing stuff and it becomes a conversation, they have to sit through, you know, my thirty-minute routine over and over and over again. I try to do it in different accents, but it's, really—it is a performance.

Miriam: How did you end up here, specifically, teaching?

Holly: “End up?” You think this is where I'm going to end up? [Both laugh].

Miriam: How did you come, how did you come to Michigan? Again?

Holly: I make that joke because I mean a lot of my early work, I don't know, the narrative arc, if there was anything in the work, was, “Well, maybe I really didn't change the world or do all I set out to accomplish, but at least I got out of Michigan.” And then like I walk down streets here in Ann Arbor that smell like my childhood, and I see my mother's hair walking down the street, you know, on someone else's head. And I came to Michigan after having supported myself—being very fortunate, very privileged, for fifteen years, to be able to work independently, to tour, to do some teaching, but really be self-employed, and that was, and really travel all over the country and some places abroad, doing my work—and then I noticed my teeth were starting to fall out, and I noticed I didn't have any insurance. And I thought, and I didn't have any skills, and that I was also getting old and it was late to get skills. And so I thought that possibly the only thing I could do was possibly get a teaching job? Maybe? But performance art's such a, you know, it's just this weird—as I describe it—this *brat*²⁰⁵ art form, that, you know, you can sort of see like ‘Theater’ and ‘Art and Design’ tossing it back and forth: “No, you take it!” “No, you take it!” “You take it!” “It's yours!” “It's yours!” “It's yours!” I lived in a neighborhood in New York like that, neither Brooklyn or Queens wanted this neighborhood. They'd be like, you know, we...getting kicked out of different boroughs, “No, you have it!” “No, it's part of Queens!” “No, we don't want it!” So, I got invited to be here as a visiting artist a couple of years ago, and, I don't know, maybe it's more evidence of the decline of higher education [audience laughter], but here I am.

Miriam: Wonderful. So you have this joint appointment between Art and Theater. How do you feel being in the art department specifically?

²⁰⁵ A *brat* is a very troublesome child especially a spoiled or ill-mannered one. A “brat art form” could be thought of as a discipline held in contempt by people who conform to traditional understandings of art.

Holly: It's good. How do I feel about it...well, I feel like art has somehow remained more elastic in its definitions than perhaps theater has been, where theater, particularly in this country, has not embraced as much some new technologies, new sort of approaches to narrative, whereas Art and Design is continually like, "Oh yeah, digital art? Come on down!" You know, you know new media robots, you know, conceptual art come on down. You know, sit, sit down here next to painting. Yeah, you guys will get along. And it's, performance art as a term really came out of the art world, and came out of people doing work in galleries, and it borrows from a lot of different aesthetic and political traditions, but that's one, one of the places.

Miriam: Yeah, that's neat. I guess we're getting to the end of our question section, but I did want to ask if you'd want to share perhaps maybe one or two of the most memorable moments in your life.

Holly: Gosh, memorable moments in my life.

Miriam: You've already told us about the Supreme Court that seems quite memorable.

Holly: I told you about the Supreme Court, I told you about taking my pantyhose off in the eighth grade during—I think we were learning about how a bill becomes a law. That was significant. [Laughs] Let's see, I told you about my failure to educate students about what a metaphor was...what were some other significant moments...Well, I one thing that I *love* being able to do at Michigan and that I can only do within the framework of an institution is collaborating with a large group of people, making a piece of theater, for lack of a better word. And I did, I had the opportunity to do that last winter with a group of twenty-five students here at the University of Michigan. And we made this piece *After a Fashion*, and I think I said something at the time that it was about clothing and identity, and how, you know, does consumerism shape identity or the other way around, but really it was a show about shopping [laughs]. But that does sound better than if I, doesn't that sound better than if I say it's about consumerism and identity? Yeah, it sounds much more on the level of the University.

Miriam: I'd take it.

Holly: Yeah, you would take it. You'd go to that. And it was, it was a wonderful experience to work with a group of students from different parts of the university who had different ways of working, you built this community. The aesthetic product you make is only as good as the community is. And then we had the fabulous opportunity of taking it to New York and performing at the Guggenheim Museum last fall. And that was just a great experience.

Miriam: So you haven't really left New York.

Holly: No, I haven't.

Miriam: I did want to ask if there's anything in your life that you could change, what would it be?

Holly: All of it! Yeah! No, I'd be much taller [laughs]

Miriam: Really?

Holly: Would you be?...I would be taller! I know that the way that you're supposed to answer that question is, "no." [Dramatically] "No. I wouldn't change a thing." [Audience laughter]. But, you know, goddamn it—hello, rest of the world—yeah, probably everything. Let's see, where would I start. Yeah, taller would be good. You know, I would have, I would have flossed my teeth more. You know I really thought that wasn't a big...it turned out to be right, that's really important, flossing. I think I would, yeah, there were decisions that I would have made differently. But, then maybe I wouldn't be sitting here with you!

Miriam: Exactly. [Both laugh]. And clearly, this is where you're supposed to be. Sitting here with me. I did want to ask you a question in closing that we do try to ask everyone who's been interviewed for this project. You've talked a lot about sort of your changing relationship with feminism over the years. In a nutshell, how would you define feminism for yourself, or how you've experienced it?

Holly: Right well, I think that unfortunately the sort of really, to me, simple premise of feminism is that women deserve equal rights with men, that our gender system has this sort of inherent discrimination in it, that that premise seems still outlandish and difficult to put into practice virtually everywhere, even as feminism has become, you know, really a denigrated word. A lot of my students don't want to identify as feminists, and especially when they find that I'm one—"We don't want to end up like her! We floss! We're not, that's not going to happen to us!" That, so, I think that, that the idea is that, any feminism is, as any political philosophy, continually changing. The political landscape is changing. I speak about a condition of being here in the Midwest as a middle-class white lesbian, and it's a very different experience in another part of the world, in another part of the city with a different class background. And we have to keep changing. We have to keep changing our strategies, the goals keep shifting.

Miriam: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Holly: I hope we're going to get rid of George Bush²⁰⁶. That's, that's you know, and I'd like everyone that's watching—hopefully when they watch this video George Bush will be gone. And otherwise I just can imagine the audiences in other countries just like going, "Why should I listen to any of these people in America who are just like single-

²⁰⁶ A Republican, *George W. Bush* was the Governor of Texas before he was elected U.S. President in the controversial election of 2000. The 43rd U.S. President, he is the son of 41st president George H.W. Bush. During his term, he primarily focused on the "War on Terror", including an invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq war. He was re-elected in 2004.

handedly destroying the world,” but I don’t know if that was really a comment so much as, or sort of, a nervous tick.

Miriam: Thank you for sharing that nervous tick with us. I would like to turn this over to you, now. We have a great audience with us today, so if you would like to take questions from them, we’d love to hear some.

Holly: I’ll entertain, though not necessarily answer, all questions. Bring it on, as they say here! Who’s first? Grill me, probe me!

Brian Heyboer²⁰⁷: Well I have, I have just a... You mentioned your solo work as being sort of a conversation sort of, you know, with the audience regarding feminism, things like that, and you also mentioned the work that you’ve done with students. Do you sort of think of that as kind of a similar type of, of conversation, or does it function differently, or what do you sort of gain from that for yourself?

Holly: Well, you know I, first I just want to point out—you sat down, so, I was just going to point out that you needed to tuck in your shirt [audience laughter]. That’s part of the conversation. I do think of it as a—what was the question? I was, I was so distracted by—otherwise I think your outfit is really nice. Is there? What is the question?

Heyboer: I don’t know, what do you get out of doing, doing work that’s kind of different people’s narratives in conversation or, sort of what do you enjoy most about that?

Holly: Well, a couple of different things. One it’s, as narcissistic as I am, and I think it’s one of my best characteristics, I’m at this point even a little bit bored with myself, so putting on the hip boots and wading around in someone else’s trauma is, is a relief. I also love to see those moments when, when people realize—I mean, this is going to like, this is like really going to sound like, it’s not even like sappy lesbian feminism, it’s like, it’s like coffee table feminism, but I really believe it! Isn’t that sad?—but that people have, that everyone has a story, that they have, that narratives that matter that connect to larger narratives, and those moments when people make those connections, whether or not they break into the glamorous and fast-paced world of performance art after that, and are able to land a waitress job as a result of that and at the risk of sounding totally corny, and maybe it’s a moment of empowering, a moment of sort of—I’m particularly working with sometimes with young people who, you know, they’re still, they’re still sort of evolving a sense of self, and that, that can be a critical moment when somebody feels like they don’t have anything to talk about, and then, you know, they start talking about that everybody in their family was obsessed with alien abductions. And they would spend their weekends driving around meeting other alien abductees—everybody except the person, this one person in the family, the aliens came for everyone but her. And the moment that she realizes that it’s not just, like a trauma that she has to—you know, the little green men did not want me—that she realizes that that’s a story, that there’s

²⁰⁷ Brian Heyboer is a protégé of Holly’s.

something she can do with that, is a wonderful moment. And if she doesn't do something with it, then I have to kill her and the alien abduction story becomes mine. Yes.

The End.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Martha Ojeda
Interviewer: Jayati Lal**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: April 9, 2004**

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Martha Ojeda, born in 1956, has been the Executive Director of the Tri-National Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras since 1996. Originally from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, she worked for 20 years in the Free Trade Zone factories or maquiladoras. While a factory worker, she studied law in Monterrey, Mexico. In 1994, she led the Nuevo Laredo Sony Movement, where more than a thousand women workers held a wildcat strike to form an independent union to improve their working and living conditions. As director of CJM, Ojeda coordinates the Maquiladora Worker Empowerment Project, a popular education program that conducts workshops for maquiladora workers on labor law, the constitutional wage, health and safety, reproductive rights, and fund-raising with an emphasis on training the workers. In 1997, she wrote a manual on the Mexican Federal Labor Law using popular language and graphics to educate workers about their rights and leadership development. She has been one of the most outspoken voices in women's forums at international gatherings. In June 2001, she received the Petra Foundation Award for her work championing Mexican workers' rights to independent unions, fair wages and safe working conditions in the face of corporate reprisals and government hostility. And in 1999, Ojeda was named "Troublemaker of the Year" by *Mother Jones*.

Jayati Lal is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies and received her Ph.D. in sociology from Cornell University. She is interested in the forms of work and quotidian life worlds in postcolonial and peripheral late capitalism, class formations and the cultural politics of class and gender inequalities in global capitalism, and the forms of subjectivity and politics that are produced in and through these new cultural formations and political economies. Her first book project examines the production of working class femininity in India in the context of neo-liberal reform and industrial restructuring since the 1980s. It is a historical and ethnographic study of women workers in Delhi's garment and television factories, two industries that have been affected by the globalization of production and the global feminization of work. She is currently embarking on a new project on middle class identity and consumerism in India that will examine how the work of consumption reshapes the spheres of domesticity, and the gendered public and private spaces of modernity. This research will undertake a multi-sited global ethnography through a case study of a single multinational direct marketing firm. Her other research projects and interests include global feminisms, labor internationalisms, and cross-border organizing.

Transcript of Martha Ojeda

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*²⁰⁸

Jayati Lal: Hello. I'm Jayati Lal, and I'm here today at the University of Michigan with Martha Ojeda. Thank you, Martha, for agreeing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project.

Martha Ojeda: Thank you.

Jayati: Welcome. So, um, what I'm going to do today is basically talk to you about your life and work and we'd love to hear about your history, the work that you've done with CJM, and have you sort of tell us, um, how you see the future of both the women's movement and the labor movement. I'd like to start by asking you about your personal history. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Martha: I was born in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. That is the border with Laredo, Texas and I grew up in my home town by there, and my heritage was to work in the maquilas²⁰⁹. That was the only life that I was having over there. So just...I thought that we were a teeny town on the map, nothing else was beyond that.

Jayati: Um, you were telling me last night that your mother also worked in the maquiladoras? How did you come to work in the factories?

Martha: Well, more in this in the '65²¹⁰, this industrialization border program start on the border. Mexico and United States was having one program—that was the Bracero Program²¹¹—and this Bracero Program was from 1942 to 1964...was when all the Mexicans men where able to come and work in United States. But they sent all these Mexicans back and everything was over. So in order to stop immigration, they started this industrialized border program²¹² in 1965. But really, was in the beginning just a change

²⁰⁸ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

²⁰⁹ *Maquiladoras* or maquilas are usually garment factories producing for export and are what most people envision when they think of sweatshops with poverty-level wages, long hours, and no unions. While not all maquilas are dark and dirty factories, many violate internationally-recognized worker rights and almost all maquilas in the region of Mexico export to U.S. companies.

²¹⁰ 1965

²¹¹ The *Bracero Program* (1942 -1964) was an agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments that permitted Mexican citizens to take temporary agricultural work in the United States.

²¹² The maquiladora program, or Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was established in 1965 during the administration of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz. One of the objectives of the program was to stimulate the economies of the border states in northern Mexico which for most of Mexico's history had been isolated, both politically, and economically, from the rest of Mexico. A second objective of the maquiladora

of machines and they were exploring...how can we work this program? And really in the '70s, 1970, was the *inbond* plant²¹³ that was one of the maquiladora's twin plants start from one side, one plant, and the other side the other one. So therefore were called the Twin Plants Program. And my mom was the first generation. She started to work on the maquilas. And then I was trying to go to school... and I was in middle school when the management was arriving to look for workers. Most of the labor force were women at that time. So I start to work with my mom - same company - and was a huge company. We were doing TVs. Don't ask me what brand because we were trying to understand what's...what's all the pieces that we were working on? Cables and some electronic stuff...soldering, my mom was soldering. And then...so I think ...I remember that saw just GE. So now I know that was General Electric. But at that time was...one department was doing pieces of TVs and other department was doing Christmas lights and so and so. So we were working in the same company, same chief and everything. But suddenly, one time when we arrived the company run away. Was closed—everything. They were not paying anything including salaries—forget about our benefits and all those things. So then all the womens were guarding the machines²¹⁴. That night I was with my mom and many womens in front of the company, and complaining about the union - why this union was not doing anything in favor of workers? So then we learned that the union was dealing with the company and they were giving the opportunity to the company to take all the machines that we supposed were be guarding right there²¹⁵. Was a lot of disappointment between us workers, when find out that suppose the union has to help us, and they were agreeing with the company and they took the machines. The only way that we can get our payment and everything. So that was the first instance that I was hearing about 'union'. I was angry, upset, I was not understanding because I was having other ideas about union. Ninety percent of us were women, 95 percent of us were women. So we were in the street, right there with no job, with anything. And was a big mobilization against these... these leaders, these charros²¹⁶, leaders, unions, who were the CTM²¹⁷, the national confederation of workers, that was tied with the government PRI²¹⁸ and they were in the power for 70 years. So it was like a paralysis for the labor movement, because they were not allowing the workers to organize.

Jayati: So how old were you when you first started to work?

Martha: I think I was between thirteen and fourteen, more or less.

program was to provide employment for the thousands of unemployed Mexican workers who were returning from the US after the Bracero program was canceled in 1964.

²¹³ The maquila is also known as an *inbond* plant or inbond assembly. Mexican assembly plants are located near the US-Mexican border where most production is exported to the USA.

²¹⁴ The women were guarding the machines in a sense as ransom until they were paid their wages.

²¹⁵ The union had negotiated with the company to allow the company to retrieve the machines from the site.

²¹⁶ *Charros* is Spanish for "cowboys," but is also used to denote that someone is unsophisticated.

²¹⁷ *CTM* is an acronym Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Confederation of Mexican Workers)

²¹⁸ *PRI* is an acronym Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), Mexico's "official" party was the country's preeminent political organization from 1929 until the early 1990s. Until the early 1980s, the PRI's position in the Mexican political system was hegemonic, with opposition parties posing little or no threat to its power base or its monopoly of public office.

**Jayati: And when did you decide to go to law school and how did that happen?
Could you tell us about that?**

Martha: Well, it's a long story, because after...after this work...that was at Transitron Mexicana²¹⁹... then I start to work at Johnson and Johnson²²⁰. That was a garment company. And we were doing all the medical supplies, all the environmental was...the environment right there was blue²²¹. We were sewing these gowns and shoes covers and mask and caps for all the doctors. And when we were asking to have some mask that was protector because of the environment that was so blue they were saying that...that it was not possible because we...they were needing to deliver all the production in the same numbers that they were receiving. But also my supervisor was my union leader at the same time. And I was saying, no way, so you cannot represent workers and defend the company at the same time. The conditions were terrible. So we were not allowed to go to the restroom. So I was facing her—the supervisor—and saying “No way, so if you want to fire me, do it, but I'm not going to pee here. I need to go to the restroom.” When we were having injuries, they would not allow us to go to the health programs, social program that we have. And they were saying, “No, the production, it should be first,” and so and so, and so we were having a lot of problems with her...that she was not representing workers and the only thing that they were wanting was production and every day were more and more production growing. So I remember that my back was hurting me so much...when I was arriving, was dark. When I was leaving, was dark. Always when we get enough of the...of the transportation²²², we have to go across one field so always were...were guys who were following us. Some compañeras²²³ were raped. So it was really hard. But also all the level of exploitation was not just in the production, also our conditions as women because of...and...and for example, in Manhattan²²⁴, mens... just were about five guys who were in the warehouse, but the rest of the floor we were womens, doing everything -- packing, assembling, all the...all the production there and the operations. So then the first thing is when we have...we were needing to have this pregnancy test²²⁵, and I was saying “why?” “No, you need to prove that you are not pregnant.” So what...what's wrong to be pregnant, or what's wrong to be a mother? So why do we have to have this pregnancy test? But with our law—it's really progressive and we have maternity leave—it's 45 days before, and 45 days after of the delivery time. So then therefore, first there was the thing that they were trying to abort, and second that we do not produce if you are pregnant. In our law, you have to have light work and don't get this hard things and being pressured and so and so. So in order to avoid all those

²¹⁹ Transitron Mexicana, a division of Transitron Electronic Corporation, is located in Nuevo Laredo on the U.S.-Mexico border.

²²⁰ Johnson & Johnson is a manufacturer of health care products as well as a provider of related services for the consumer, pharmaceutical, medical devices and diagnostics markets. Johnson & Johnson has more than 200 operating companies in 57 countries and sell products throughout the world.

²²¹ The work environment was polluted with the debris from the materials with which the women were working.

²²² Most likely due to insufficient roads, the bus could only transport the women so far, after which the women would have to walk across a field to their work site.

²²³ *Compañeras* translates to “female companions,” but used in the vernacular it indicates friends.

²²⁴ *Manhattan* is company located in this region.

²²⁵ The company was mandating that the women take pregnancy tests to ensure that they were not pregnant. If their tests showed they were pregnant, the women were pressured to have an abortion.

things, well, we need to go through the pregnancy test, and there were many, many things. But the...the main issue was the salary. Was not enough. The quota was now thousands, and we were making the same amount²²⁶, and they...they were asking for more, so we were asking for better salary, better conditions, environment. Your eyes were blue, your nose was blue, your mouth was...mouth was blue. And also was one department that was...to coat all the...the material...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So it was...there was a part where you have be cutting off the gown and everything. And...and right there was not any protection is...like I was...I remember I was so short...was a table...was so high. And you were having the electricals, all buzz-zz-zz. Really wasn't a moment that you were like this. [Martha gestures here to simulate holding a piece of machinery with two hands in front of her].

Jayati: You were doing the cutting.

Martha: Yeah.

Jayati: Oh, my God.

Martha: So the cutting all the material, the buzz-zz-zz-zz. And I wasn't strong and, and was not any kind of protection of any way. Were many injuries, many accidents, so we were saying, "Hey, someone can be killed, can be dead. You can...right now you are losing a finger or a hand, but then you...you're going to lose your life." On the beginning that was the concern—the salary, health conditions—that we were having. And we were not paying so much attention to the discrimination in the beginning. The beginning was really concerned salaries, and...and working conditions. So was when I decide to face the company and of course the union. Because we were unionized there. And my fellow worker was saying, you talk, you're going to be fired. And we were saying, "So we cannot live like this. So it should be better condition." Was when we faced the union leader and we were asking to change her²²⁷ but we don't want that the supervisor...to be our representative and we want one of the workers be representing the company in order to get more benefits, and so on, so on. That time was when the workers choose me to be the representative in the union. So then realizing "now what?"...now I'm in this union that I hate.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And what's supposed do I have to do? But if I don't want the happen...the same thing that happen with Transitron²²⁸...that they don't pay anything...they just run away...and the Union was, you know, representing and defending worker. So then we

²²⁶ Same amount of money; their salaries had not been increased to reflect the increase in demands for productivity.

²²⁷ The workers were requesting to have a replacement for the current union leader.

²²⁸ *Transitron* is high-tech company and one of the most successful early semiconductor companies.

have to do something. But I don't know. And I was afraid. We were afraid, because we say "what about they...they have a beautiful rhetoric." They really convinced everyone to stay to work overtime when it's...it's illegal when they do mandatory overtime. So...and we were trying to find a way how we can really get the benefits for all of us and not just for the company. So was when...we say we need to learn about the labor law. We need to learn about our rights in order to defend ourself. And I thought that the only way to learn the labor law was going to the law school. But I was not having any penny²²⁹ and it was impossible.

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Martha: So then was when all our compañeras...so we decide that one way to be...try to do a collective way and every Friday...so they start to save some money in order that I can finish the law school. So first I was going to Saltillo, Coahuila²³⁰ but it was five hours from...from the border. So I was working in the maquila during the day...I was trying to do my homework and reading during the nights. I was going to school on the weekends. So Friday, Saturday and Sunday, or so and so...tried to make my classes. And then when we learned that in Monterrey was the other one²³¹...so I move from Saltillo to Monterrey and I was able to keep going to...to the school—to the law school - and learn about the law in order to be negotiating with the company and get more benefits for the workers. When I was in the law school, I was really focused on the labor law. I learn about the criminal, civil and so and so, but my biggest interest and priority was the labor law in order to understand why companies always were getting the major benefits for everything and if we—the workers—were the one who were working so hard for that. So after that...after all...so we were able to improve a little bit our conditions. But when we learned and when I start to demand the contract and benefits...was the first time that I hear about "competitive." They were telling...telling me that they cannot give us more salary because they were needing to be competitive with Proctor and Gamble²³², and they were needing...if we insist in asking benefits, they were shutting down. And they did. So Manhattan shut down and they moved to Ciudad Juarez. They were saying in Ciudad Juarez no unions, no culture of union—anything. So it's paradise. So let's move there. It's more cheaper so they were moving to Ciudad Juarez. So then arrived Sony, and I start to work on Sony.

Jayati: Oh, well, that leads into my next question, because I was going to ask about the Sony case. But how long did it take you just to finish that? How long did it take you finish law school, going to law school the way that you did, at nights and on weekends?

Martha: About, say, six years.

²²⁹ She did not have any money.

²³⁰ *Saltillo* is the capital of the Mexican state of Coahuila.

²³¹ Another law school.

²³² *Proctor & Gamble* is an American based company that began in 1837. The company now has a broad range of production, including personal hygiene products such as soap and shampoo, household cleaning supplies such as laundry detergent and paper towels, as well as snack foods.

Jayati: My goodness.

Martha: More or less.

Jayati: So you were able to finish that while you were still working in Manhattan, the law degree?

Martha: Yes. Yes...no. I finish at Sony.

Jayati: So how did you move from Manhattan to Sony. That's when...when...when you left?

Martha: When, when Manhattan run away...and this was a big difference...and we really improved it²³³, because when I...I learned something in the law school and we learn about our benefits. And they say, "No benefits, we are going to shut down, we need to be competitive," and so and so, then we were able to make them respect the law.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And they paid the severance payment²³⁴ to everyone and one extra month of salaries for everyone when they were moving to Ciudad Juarez. So therefore at least at that time we have a case. So now we enforce it with law. We were able to get this severance payment for everyone. And then in 1979...was when Sony arrive and they started with 25 workers. And at the beginning was the man—manual assembling from audiocassette. Then by '82, it was the first special evaluation.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Big special evaluation was when all these products were arriving -- the VHS and then Beta. VHS and then floppy disk and all these products were growing, and by that time we became seven plants with 2,000 workers.

Jayati: So could you tell us a bit about the Sony case and how it developed? And what the strike was about, and the outcome of the strike. Because that was a very signal event in using NAFTA labor law through the NAO.

Martha: Well, yeah.

²³³ She is referring to how her knowledge of the labor laws made it possible for the workers to demand better working conditions.

²³⁴ *Severance* is a payment is made to an employee in the case of an involuntary work separation such as in the case of discharge, termination, or layoff. Severance pay is generally defined to be a payment the employer has obligated itself to make which is based upon a length of service formula. For example, an employer may have a company policy that a terminating employee is entitled to one month's wages for every year of service. Martha only specifies that the employees were given a month's pay but does not indicate what the official policies of the company were regarding severance pay.

Jayati: So what was the strike about and how long did it last because it was something that was in the papers a lot, and...

Martha: Well, basically the thing is that I think it was the symbol of what really was meaning...this free trade and labor and gender. Because all of us...we were womens - the majority of the labor force but also was all this exploitation because Sony was having a really good facility and everybody can say, "Wow." Was really good building and they are having really good conditions. But was the same - the production was the same. The exploitation was the same. The salary was not enough. And also in the '80s was when you start...these children with birth defects.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: I was in painting department when was the first children with the brain open²³⁵. So...no hair and just brain there. And when I was there, my comadre,²³⁶ Mari...she was asking me to be the godmother. Everybody was happy. And when the children was born like that, we were asking, so what's...what's...what's wrong? If something was wrong in the work or why? And they were saying there was a genetic problem...because between them...or because my compadre was alcoholic and therefore the kid was born like that. But when we were on that machine that was painting automatic...because was slow...no transformation from manual to semiautomatic onto automatic...and all the models were changing in the production. Every time they were more sophisticate to produce. Looking the way that we can produce more, and trying to get the same amount...amount of production with less workers. And...but we always were making the same, with the same money and the only...the agreement with the government to increase salary was almost nothing. And we...we were watching how all this environment - at least myself - how strong was to be from the sunrise to the sunset in that world of noise, assembly line - four walls. And in the beginning I remember, I thought that I was angry against my supervisor. I was angry about the manager and I thought that they were the enemies because that was the thing that I was having right there in front of me, exploiting me, and asking me more production, and "you cannot do this," and like that. We were slaves. But then after that...after a year and after...from electronic to garment to electronic again...and all those things...so we were thinking how really can organize the union. They were not really representing workers. They were saying during all these troubles the company...because they are giving you jobs...so forget about it. But also because most of us were women so they were harassing the workers. And we...we were disappointed with them. Our law is really progressive and they said that we have the right to have a profit sharing. So the company has to pay 10 percent of the profit sharing. But the company was saying "we are not making profit here, because it's for export." For all of us, was really weird. You are working in a Mexican company or in a grocery store, in a gas station - whatever that will be Mexican - you will receive whatever that will be...one

²³⁵ Martha is making a connection between pregnant women being routinely exposed to the paint at work and their children being born with birth defects. She refers to the first child being born with its brain exposed as "the first children with the brain open."

²³⁶ *Comadre* is Spanish for godmother. It is also a vernacular term used to indicate intimate friendship between two women.

extra month of your salary every year because of that 10 percent of profits. And the maquilas, they were refusing to do it. They were saying, “No, we’re no making profit,” but they were growing and growing another plant, another plant, another plant, and I was saying if you’re not making profit, why all these buildings? Seven plants...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ... and all those things, oh, we were facing...and the Union...so forget it, they were not doing anything.

Jayati: So was CTM there?

Martha: There was a CTM. So Tamaulipas—the place where I was born is...was really strong—the CTM. Well, first was in the whole country, okay? They were in the power for 70 years. And therefore we decide that we really need to do something. And when we learned that suppose NAFTA²³⁷ was passed...and they tell us that now we will be working all around the clock because they cannot stop the machines...and we are going to be working Saturday and Sundays and so and so the...the overtime, according with our law is not mandatory. So they were saying “enough.” So we were saying “Enough. It’s enough.” So all the childrens with birth defects, all this exploitation and the codes, the salary the same, so and so...we say “No. We want to organize the union.” And was when I went to Mexico City...I travel and I faced the national leader of the CTM...like Swinney at that time was Fidel Velazquez²³⁸ and I told him that I want to enforce our law that give us a right to organize and we want to form our own union. And he told me that if I will do that—was October 1993—I will get fired. Well, okay, so we were ready. So I don’t think that will be worse than...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...the situation that we’re living. So we return to Mexico - I’m telling you about 24 hours distance that we were traveling. We were doing activities and raising money...fundraising in order to pay a bus to travel over there and talk with him and return. And when we return, we start to organize all the maquilas.

Jayati: Not just Sony.

²³⁷ *North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)* .In January 1994, Canada, the United States and Mexico launched NAFTA and formed the world's largest free trade area. NAFTA has been controversial since it was first proposed. Transnational corporations have tended to support NAFTA in the belief that lower tariffs would increase their profits. Labor unions in Canada and the United States have opposed NAFTA for fear that jobs would move out of the country due to lower labor costs in Mexico. Opposition to NAFTA also comes from environmental, social justice, and other advocacy organizations that believe NAFTA has detrimental non-economic impacts to public health, the environment, etc. In Mexico, poverty has risen considerably since the signing of NAFTA. Wages there have decreased by as much as 20 percent in some sectors.

²³⁸ *Fidel Velazquez* was of the Administration party candidates.

Martha: Not just Sony. We start to organize all the maquilas. And... in order to have an election against this CTM...so, to tell the secretary general that he was just looking for a political position. He was in the Congress, he was a Senator, he was in Mexico City, he was in the States, he was in all the political position and workers were by themselves. So we decide to organize the maquilas and try to win elections. So then I went to the capital of the states when I learned that the national leader was visiting on January 12th. So I was demanding that I was...that I wanted a public debate with the leader of the CTM—demanding the right to organize. And because I did in front of the media...so they were not having any choice...so we have this debate and so fortunately with all the things that I learned where I live...so we won the debate and we won in public the decision that we will have elections.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Supposed democratic election. And we were so happy. We return and we were organizing and getting ready when they sent these people of Congress for the PRI to be the one to do the elections of the city...and please tell me who is going to be election from people of Congress. He was sending these representatives of them to do the election. The election that they did...they was saying just on this side those who wants the CTM, and this side those who wants the independent union [Martha gestures as though directing people to take their place on the side of the party they support]. So those who were on that side for the independent election, that was hundred percent. Then they say anyway...the CTM won.²³⁹ So we took the streets, and we said “No way we are not going to work until we have democratic election.” That’s not an election—any ballot, anything—even if a hundred percent was supposed...so no way. So when Sony was...when really we were taking to the streets we were blocking the bridge, calling attention because the mayor...when we were with the mayor they were saying that the mayor was not in town. But when we were blocking downtown and the bridge, immediately the mayor appeared. He was there. And then he was saying “you need to return to work and I...I will call the national leader and I will ask him for election” and I say “Okay, we will return but we are not going to be working.” So we returned to the plant because we were marching all in the cities and everything and all the people was joining us and we were demonstrating for one week. And those were...was great because we were involving all the community. That week that we were in Planton, that was a demonstration, permanent demonstration, 24 hours a day, 2,000 workers there. The first day the mayor instead of called the national leader—or probably they did but they agree what they do, what they will do. So he sent the fire workers²⁴⁰ and the first thing that they did was giving a shower all the teenagers, womens working there, trying to break our strike. The second day they were sending all the big trailers because we were having to change in them...and the gates...and don’t let the trucks take inside or outside production²⁴¹. No way. So it’s closed—the plant. So then they were trying to roll over

²³⁹ Martha is describing the motions of an election that were carried out to pacify the workers when in fact there was not a democratic election held.

²⁴⁰ Firefighters.

²⁴¹ The women created a human barricade so that the no company traffic could pass through the gates of the work site.

against the workers but no one's moved from there. No one's moved from there²⁴². So then they thought that, oh, if we chase the truck they will break and we will enter. But no, we said, "You want to kill us? We're ready." So the third day, they sent the police to arrest me because Sony was presenting a complaint against me saying that they were losing millions of dollar of production with all the plants closed in those days. And...but at that time, all the workers were...and say "No. All of us are leaders. It's not just Martha. If you want to arrest one, you have to arrest everyone because all of us were there." And then the police were trying to put one against other, they weren't asking to Fela²⁴³ "Fela, like you have to confess."

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Because Lupe said that Martha is the leader. And Fela say "I don't know why she say that, because all of us...we are here and you will have to arrest me." And Lupe: "Fela already confess." Lupe: "I don't know why Fela say that..."

Jayati: (laughs)

Martha: ...so it's not true, all of us, we are here. So then we are all the women there.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...saying we're ready to be in jail with the kids and everything. So and they...okay. So they released me. And we were there...we were doing committees. So many womens were asking support with the community. Then the community start to respond bringing coffee, blankets, food, medicines for those who were fainting and...because even many of them were pregnant, and they were...

Jayati: So you were doing a hunger strike.

Martha: Yeah.

Jayati: Yeah?

Martha: Yeah, hunger strike.

Jayati: How many participated in the hunger strike?

Martha: We were almost all the workers, more than...

Jayati: Wow.

²⁴² The women would not move despite attempts to run them over with cars or trucks.

²⁴³ Martha makes reference to another striker and coworker who confesses to being the leader to try and deter the police from arresting Martha.

Martha: ...a thousand workers...but we were there. But then on Thursday they sent the police and they really beat the workers. And we were in commissions...we were talking in the radio because the CTM and the company were giving a wrong image about the movement. So we were visiting the workers from the other companies and...and then when the police arrived they...they start to beat the workers and arrest many of them. But many of them were in the hospital. So when that happened...I was lucky that at least one of the guys - the reporter of the newspaper - they were with us, and he was wearing a cap like he was in the warehouse of Sony²⁴⁴. So he was able to take pictures and video exactly in the moment of the operation. And then the media arrived and everything. So was a big, big...was the first repression like that was happened against the workers in my...in my town. And the only crime was that we were asking for better conditions.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: For a salary...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...for have a union. So then we were...to the media and say “what is our crime? To organize? To have a union? If, suppose it’s in our law, what is wrong here?” So then the next day on Friday, all the workers for all the maquilas were joining us in the strike. So then the 2,000 became 10,000 workers.

Jayati: God.

Martha: So when all the workers were there. And here is a beautiful video that workers were arriving with signs saying “workers from Bolsas de Laredo is with Sony,” “workers from Del Red,” “workers from Red, ...we are supporting Sony workers.” So all the workers start to arrive, and by Saturday was when the governor said that I was destabilizing the maquiladora industry. And they sent, like, soldiers for all those towns. And by five in the morning, everybody was sleeping in the street, all the womens. And they...at the parking lot...and they arrive and they start to hit womens with the machine guns and arresting them, and breaking our strike. So in that time, three workers - that was Celia, Lilia, and Victor - they went and they...I was in the backside...they push me in a car and they say “You have to go” and I say “Why?” “You have to run.” And they...when they...when they were...they were driving me, they passed just fast and we saw all the trucks...like that they were in war...something like that. All the soldiers in beating the womens and I say why? Why they need machine guns and all this weapons just to break down our strike, and what did we did wrong? So then they cross me at the border. And when I was there was early morning I was in the main plaza. And I was trying to find out what we did wrong...why the police, the governor is there to defend us...is there to enforce our law were supporting the company. Even there is a video where you can see the police coming from inside the company to outside the women’s, old ladies, and...

²⁴⁴ The reporter wore a Sony company hat that gave the impression he was an employee who worked in the warehouse of Sony.

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: ...and beating from the back.

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: And was really brutal. And when I was watching the video...one time another time and I was getting angry and angry. I was saying “how is possible that our government is doing this?” So in the beginning I thought that my enemy just was the supervisor or the manager. But then I...I learned about the system, and how all the system of my country was really tied with this capital...with this free trade agreement. So for us in 1994 when we learned that the Zapatistas²⁴⁵ were raising up and we were raising up just three months after...really it was...was something beyond...that has to go beyond the four walls of exploitation, beyond the four walls of starving, beyond...than your own country. In that time I thought that everything was over and when the union delegate and the government was saying that—“don’t pay attention to Martha because she’s crazy, and you’re going to be in troubles” —and the fight for justice was overseas for them. And when I cross and I was here, I say “So now what? What’s next?” Nothing. How we’re going to survive here in one country that I don’t know absolutely anything²⁴⁶. Language, culture or anything. What are going to do? I don’t want to be living here. I want to go back and be in my country and keep fighting back. So when I saw my compañeros and compañeras crossing the bridge...all of them and say so encouraged for all the things that were happening and said “now we need to keep fighting. Now we need to make sure they really paid for all this. Now we need to go beyond this and we need to find a way to make them responsible for this.” Right there in the streets we were having meetings...just crossing the bridge...no infrastructure, no anything. But everything...we were meeting and trying to strategize what we can do. Was when I...when the...my fellow workers was telling me about...it was one reporter who was looking for me and he was trying to interview me to learn about the struggle. And I thought that was from the CIA and I say “no way. I don’t want anything for...any American, any gringo²⁴⁷, no way. I don’t want to give an interview to no one.” But he was insist and he was so persistent, persistent. So finally I accept and he got all the story testimonies workers a month after I met with him. And he was telling me about all these groups in the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras²⁴⁸...that it was possible to present this international complaint under NAFTA. For us, was hope. For us, was a teeny light that probably we can make this corporation responsible. Because next day it was on the first page of the newspaper...the...a letter from the company thanking...thanking for the government...“thank you governor, because you really bring the peace to the company now we are working and everything is nice” and whatever. And for look, Martha. So the

²⁴⁵ *Zapatistas* a group of indigenous Mexicans, started a movement in 1994 in opposition to NAFTA. The forcefully took over parts of Southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. They oppose neo-liberal economic policies that negatively impact indigenous people.

²⁴⁶ She is referring to having crossed the border into the United States.

²⁴⁷ *Gringo* is disparaging Latin American term for white Americans.

²⁴⁸ The *Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras* is a tri-national coalition of religious, environmental, labor, Latino and women’s organizations that seek to pressure U.S. transnational corporations to adopt socially responsible practices within the maquiladora industry.

Secretary General of the CTM—he was in charge of the police department. So therefore all the police was looking for me. The governor was looking for me. So I...I say “Why? So what’s wrong?” And then when I was meeting with the organizations from the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras...was when I learned about solidarity because they were crazy like me, they were believing...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...in social justice.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: They were fighting for something and was really when started - this cross border organizing.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Many organizations were joining together...international labor rights forum trying to present this research and everything in the international law. The democratic lawyers from Mexico City and so and so, many groups start to come together and try to help and present this complaint against Sony. We spent two years and during those two years...so I was sending letters to the Mexican government demanding return to my country, asking what I did wrong? If in my constitution is a right to speech, the right to freedom of association, if my labor right is a right to organize, so what was wrong? I want to return, and so and so. So three times they were responding. First time they were saying, okay, it’s not any crime against Martha Ojeda Rodriduez. And I say, “No way, I am Martha Ojeda Dominguez.” So they are changing my last name. So I reply and I say “it’s wrong, this last name, da-da-da, so please look in your record.” Then they reply six months after or a year after that it’s not any crime against Martha Ojeda Hernandez. And always they were changing my last name. And I say so it’s like they are blocking their ears. Then I was writing to Mexico City, to the Human Rights Department, and they answer and they say that the labor rights does not belongs to the human rights. So therefore...so I was knocking in the wrong door and they cannot do anything. So I spent two years...I spent two years trying to return to my country. Meantime, the lawyer of some university, Monica Sheuman, she was helping me right here with all the immigration issues and everything. And meantime, I was looking for a job. So I start to work in Coca-Cola right here in the United States. I went to one company and I start to work. And it was weird for me because, oh, yeah, was better condition, sure, the building and everything. But was really weird to me that when they were giving salaries they were paying more to white people...they were paying more mens. And all those who were Afro-Americans or Latinos or...they started to call me Latina and I’d say “My name is Martha.” “No, she’s Latina, come on here.” So then I was not speaking English. I was trying to understand what it’s about. When they were translating... you get five cents increased salary and they got 25 cents. And I say “Why? You were doing the same thing?” And even I was producing more than him.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Why he's making more than me? So for me was weird because in Mexico we were having suppose the minimum wage and other systems. So it was the first thing that I start to find out weird here. And the second thing was that they would start to close some departments here and...and moving to the other side—even to Piedras Negras²⁴⁹. And then those that they were closing here was all those that were...they were using chemicals and whatever. And I asked them why...why they were moving those lines? "Oh, it's because...why...those lines we are soldering with lead and we are moving over there." And I say, "So what? The other side of the river the lead is not poisoning anyone, or what?" They were saying, "Oh, no." So we can give them a glass of milk to the workers and there is not going to be any problem? All right. Okay. And why not here? So I was trying to compare what...what's going on and what was happening right there. So I was finding many things still in this year I was working here. We were following this trail. Many people was asking me to share my experience. So was the first time when were the three hearings—one in Mexico, one in the United States and one in Canada²⁵⁰. So when I was...have to testify in all those hearings it was a challenge because one was the hearing in Mexico...the fellow workers were saying, "If you go over there you are going to be arrested." And I say, "If I don't go, the case is going to be over."

Jayati: This is for the Sony case.

Martha: For the Sony case. So then what we can do? So the case take two years. During two years I start to work in this place...and I was organizing anyway at the same time...the weekends and everything...the evenings. So then we decide that I had to go to the Sony case. So I went to Mexico and when I arrived in Mexico City, was the first time that I found many people from my own country who learn about those because Mexico is so far...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...so big.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So the hearing was in the capital of the state. The problem happened in the border with the United States. So I found many people from my own country that they knew about our case...they were waiting for me...they were guarding me, protecting me. That was really amazing. I feel that we were not alone...

Jayati: Um-hum.

²⁴⁹ Across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, *Piedras Negras* is a crossing point for raw materials into Mexico for the plants in Monclova, Saltillo and Torreon areas and manufactured goods exported back to the US from these plants.

²⁵⁰ She is referring to the NAFTA hearings.

Martha: ...in our own country. We really gave the evidence and the Mexican panel were cornered--they were lost. It was really the truth of all these violation. Even one of the guys of the writers of NAFTA that he was testifying on the Mexican side say, "Okay, was some violations, but nobody wants to be sitting here in this chair and feeling as guilty. So think about the sovereignty." So then they forget the labor rights and they start to talk about sovereignty of the country—what is possible, what cannot...isn't possible, da-da-da. So after two years, they just recommend Mexico to respect the labor rights.

Jayati: Right.

Martha: You say, "Shit, so we were waiting more than two years for this? So is this was the side agreement that supposed will guarantee that the labor rights be respected? Forget it!" So does not have any enforcement, does not have anything. So we felt that we were wasting our time over there. We felt really deception because we believe we were having one hope...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...that probably Mexico will have all their elections with us...will be responsible. You know? Just recommended in the future when in case the workers did this, hundred of workers were fire. Hundred of them were fired. Not just one or two. And they would replace us like anything. So the company was with all the impunity and Mexican government just respect the labor rights and bye. And the workers and the families and the reparation and all this, what? What is just throw away like nothing happened and change the history? So what is this? So for all of us it was really a big deception and that way. So then the last hearing was in 1996—that March 1st of 1996 - when the Canadian panel they were having the last meeting and they were saying "okay, so about this case," the Canadian guys said "Supposed I have to talk for whatever, anytime. But for me it's obvious that it's not going to be any change. So at least I want to give my word to the workers. They have the last word!²⁵¹" And was when I give a speech telling them all our frustration, our anger and how this mechanism really wasn't worth it for labor rights. So after that, the Coalition for Justice was offering me this position and so...In the beginning was really hard for me because I said "I don't speak English."

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: I don't know what is 1) NGO²⁵². The only word that I know is "worker," "union," "companies."

Jayati: Can I just go back for a second. You really already describe really well how the focus of your activism shifted based on, you know, when you were a worker and from shop floor specific agitations, to more of a sort of global focus and trying...you know, because of NAFTA, you know, with the labor-side agreements. So before we

²⁵¹ The Canadian representatives forfeited their speaking time so that the workers could speak during the last minutes of the meeting.

²⁵² An NGO is a Non-Governmental Organization.

go into more CJM, just so we understand what is the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, how is it different from a union that's usually tied to, you know, an industry or sometimes an enterprise. And so what is special, different about the approach for CJM? You've been working with CJM now since 1994, so...

Martha: No. Well...

Jayati: Yeah?

Martha: 1994, I was a worker, I was involved in this...but officially I start to work with them I think 1996 or '97, something, yeah.

Jayati: Okay.

Martha: Yeah, well, first time I met them as organization and I was supporting them...they were having a...one meeting and they invited me. And when I was there I met a lot of people—religious groups, women, unions, grassroots²⁵³, many people from United States and from Canada. And they were really committed to help the workers in Mexico was...when it was happen, all these things. So for me was really interesting how this organization was different of the world that I was learning the traditional union and this...this vertical leadership that they used to have. So that was a thing that we were trying to switch in our union...to be collective leadership and all those things. So when I arrived to this organization and I found these collective groups... that they were trying to work together and trying to pull all their talents and efforts and tried to mobilize, and educate and do something...was when I start to learn about them. In 1989, when NAFTA debates start with Canada and United States, so sure, then at the beginning the unions were concern about they are going to be losing jobs and all those things. But basically the religious groups were the driving force in the Coalition for the Justice in the Maquiladora. They were knocking the door in all the social sectors in trying to form some alliance and try to do something. When they learned that Mexico would be included in 1990 in the negotiations of NAFTA was when they were really focusing in one environmental campaign. And one video was produced—that was a Stephan chemical²⁵⁴ - — the poison of one Mexican community. And it was the really...the true story about how these corporations were killing my people, polluting the environment and everything. So was a big campaign. Many people of Congress went and they were learning that this free trade really was open to pollute the environment a hundred percent, to regulate the law, to not respect the law and all those things. That was the first issues that were raised. And the Coalition for Justice...when NAFTA was passed they say it's okay. So now first was try to bring everyone right here to have a debate, to give arguments to bring people from all the social sector and be opposed to this. But now it's passed. So now what we can do? So then was when they really formed this social platform that this...the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras...bring them together...organizations. In the beginning, as I told you, was just people from the United

²⁵³ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

²⁵⁴ Stephan Chemical is a U.S.-based company that produces chemicals.

States so then when I start to work with them...that was the thing that I was saying...okay, since right now it's a coalition, it's a alliance with many organizations trying to help Mexico, but where are the Mexicans...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...okay? So Mexicans, they should be also here, and was when everybody start to think “trinational label” in order to form this platform against NAFTA. So they pass a resolution that 50 percent of the board it should be Mexican organizations and from those 15 at least 8 should be from maquiladora workers leadership. So that was the way that in the board is reflected all the social sector from United States and Mexico and Canada with all the visions try to be...everyone at the table and try to work together to face this “model.”

Jayati: Could you tell me a little bit about how the relationship between academic scholarship and activism works in CJM, as a coalition. What is the role that you see for academics in research.

Martha: I think that it's all this year...this year we are celebrating 15 anniversary of the Coalition for Justice. And probably I can have half of those years with them²⁵⁵. But I think that has been a long process of learning each other. And when you are with really...on the table trying to work together with all your vision with common goals is when you try to find a way to develop some strategies, tactics, whatever. And we thought that the academic relationship was beyond the university, beyond the school. That it should be one, an interaction between the field, the university, the research...how your potential research can be helping not just to the academic level of all people, also how can be used for the workers? So we were...been doing different research in different ways that has been interact—interactive, for example, the research of Purchasing Power Index that was with Rosenberg²⁵⁶. She went down there. She was in 15 years years, but all those years was workers involved. The workers were the one who were taking the prices, taking the pay stubs, taking everything, bring it all together, giving their view...giving their vision. So right there you see, in her research you see, not just the pictures or not just the numbers.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Also you can see how really the workers vision was involved. And the last little thing that we do is for example, UUP Union—the Universal Professional Union workers from New York State—they developed these ties with the Duro²⁵⁷ workers and they build

²⁵⁵ Martha has been a part of the Coalition for Justice for at least half of the 15 years it has been in existence.

²⁵⁶ *Rosenberg* may have been a representative who collaborated with the workers.

²⁵⁷ *Duro Bag Company* workers assemble shopping bags in factories in the border town of Rio Bravo. The bags are used by giant corporations such as Hallmark and Nieman Marcus. In 2001, workers attempted to establish an independent union, but lost after fraudulent elections and the firing of 150 workers. Many others were threatened and beaten. The fired workers refused to stop organizing, and formed a worker's center.

the center with Duro workers...that the workers can keep organizing. And everything just was born when one academic was attending the union election and they saw the guns, the repression, how the leaders were chasing they saw that was so strong. And after that they were committed in bringing all this unit together and try to work in the field. They were doing research there and they start this common project in trying to...working together.

Jayati: Very briefly, because I want to also move on to issues of feminism and get you to reflect on that. Another point of intersection is also codes of conduct, right?

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: Could you explain some of the work that CJM does around the codes of conduct that are being primarily instigated and instituted through the universities?

Martha: Well, in the code of conduct, as I was saying yesterday, it's for me...it's a tool but it's not the solution...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...or the only solution that can be resolve all the problems here. I think that is just one tactic. I think that for us it's been really hard. We have been having many experience with Philips, with Hallmark, with Gap, with Alcoa—all the corporations have code of conducts. And they looks beautiful on paper. They looks beautiful in the wall that they have because Alcoa—they have in the whole wall a beautiful code of conducts - and they have a hundred awards and ISO 9000 and ISO here and ISO there²⁵⁸. And they are the best in the world, and they have a beautiful rhetoric everywhere. But unfortunately - at least most of them - for example, they have the right to organize but at this time the company's been able to have or to allow the workers to have their own independent union. For example, Hallmark, they have sexual harassment and the big case of Duro was a strong...and right to organization in sexual harassment. And they were saying that they would be sending someone of them and I was asking them "how you going to be doing the money for it? How it's going to be independent? How it's going to be translating the workers? How you are going to be management?" At the end was the management who translated...was the management who choose the workers, so at the end just Hallmark find out that just some church were blocking or...

Jayati: Right.

Martha: ...were not superficial things. But not those things that go beyond this²⁵⁹. I know that all of the corporations have in the code of conduct the right to organize. But it's so

²⁵⁸ The International Standards Organization coordinates an optional program that many businesses worldwide comply with to receive certification to show that their product meets an international standard of quality regarding manufacturing and safety.

²⁵⁹ Martha is saying that the superficial nature of the codes of conduct posted on the walls of these company sites did not necessarily reflect being able to exercise the right to demonstrate or protest against a company's practices.

easy...I just want to know one. One—in these ten years that...when all the workers are been organizing - if these companies have their code of conduct, why they don't enforce them? Does not have any mechanism of enforcement. And even if you saying one independent monitoring...so I just want to be careful. Because in our law, it's so strong. Our law describe what is the minimum wage. Our constitution...what is living wage, what is the right to organize...it's right there. And if I want to bring the code of conducts, you are asking me to replace...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...to replace the law with the code of conducts. You are asking me to replace the workers with the code of conducts and it's going to be independent monitoring. Where are the workers in that picture? Are the workers involved? Are the workers participating? It's not the same...when it's one independent monitoring even for the same community, there is one human right organization what is not contact with the workers...they can have really beautiful good intention. They can be the best priest of the world. They can be the best people in the world. But if they don't know the exploitation in the assembly line, and if they don't bring the workers right here on table²⁶⁰ and ask them what they want and how we can work together, how these code of conducts can help *them*, and what is *their* priority? You can think that it can be one thing or living wage or the restroom or the dinner room or whatever, but what is *their* priority in what they want to fight for, and how we can work together? So I think that it should be coordinated with the field, with the workers. I've been filling many chairs, for example, there was a union from Central America, that they were saying...they were complaining. They were saying "these codes of conduct are replacing the leader of the union. Right now we have the union, but the company does not want to negotiate with us, because they want to negotiate with this community that is in the independent union, the independent monitoring, so what about those?" So I been listening workers' concern about this, about how really is being replacing in this²⁶¹, and I think that there should be another way. I think that it should be including workers, asking them, it should be in a coordinated...it's a tool.

Jayati: Right.

Martha: It's a tool as the shareholder, as all this, but all of these tools, it should be in power of workers. And the workers have to be the one who has to drive that force.

Jayati: Thank you. I'm going to shift focus a bit now and ask you to reflect a little bit about feminism and its importance in your work or relevance to your work, if at all. I just want to start off asking, how do you understand the term feminism, and what do you...what does it mean to you, and in your work?

Martha: Well I think is that...is not easy question. Is not easy question because now that I been so lucky having all these opportunity to be traveling and learning, I was finding how some womens understand feminism. When I been learning that some of them has tried to

²⁶⁰ She is referring to the negotiation process.

²⁶¹ This is a reference to how the codes of conduct were being treated as a higher order than the law.

fight for women's rights, or is tried to improve the social condition between women and right, all those things I been a little bit concerned because with us it's all the...the way that we were living in the border is different. It's about...for us it's like, how is the labor force and what is the role of the women? How the capital, with all these flows, coming here, is being...really labeling the women, gender issues in the labor force, and how is this division is a system who really...put this stereotypes and transfer to the laborers?

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And that's the way that we are trying to teach the workers in a way - in this gender and the global economy workshops - in order that they understand that these stereotypes or whatever is not one war between men and women. It's frame it in the system, frame it in the capital, and how it's transfer, the divisions of labor. So, if it is in that way, yes, I because I'm working with the womens. But if it's in the way that try to just lead the womens like the only ones who are suffering this...they are suffering more, but I think it's not in that way. It's not an issue that womens against mens, or whatever. It's...frame it in labor and capital and how we are producing all these goods that we are not able to...to really afford it, and why we are paying or more exploiting them. And then, so it should be in that frame²⁶².

Jayati: So would you call yourself a feminist?

Martha: If it's framed like this, yes.

Jayati: Okay.

Martha: If it's in the other way, no.

Jayati: Okay. Now, almost 70 percent of maquila workers are women, and much of your work also in these workshops as you've talked about focuses on training about sexual harassment and employer sexual discrimination. You've talked about pregnancy tests, the forcible use of contraceptives in factories. Would you...how does CJM attend to these issues, and would you characterize CJM as a feminist collect—organization or umbrella group?

Martha: Well, if it's an issue that you cannot separate gender of this frame because it's not separate, it's tied in this context, I think that we are because we are focused in this struggle. We are focused on empowering womens in that way - but in the frame of labor. And even in our constituency, for example, in our board, 15 percent are womens.

Jayati: Um-hum.

²⁶² Martha is explaining that depending on how "feminism" is framed, she may consider herself a feminist. Within one framework she does consider herself a feminist because she does work for labor rights particular to women, but within another framework that advocates for the division of women's and men's rights, she does not.

Martha: And our executive committee are womens. So the executive director is woman.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Most of the groups in the border are women. So we cannot deny that gender is really important factor in the context of labor.

Jayati: And you let these issues come up organically from what the workers want? So sexual orientation or harassment.

Martha: Oh, sure.

Jayati: If the workers bring them up, what sort of issues tend to come up? That they want...

Martha: The way that we work is that we have in our meeting...in our meeting once a year. In that meeting, we try to analyze all the challenge that we have, political challenge, with free trade, whatever, since the top to the bottom. And everyone's breakdown and roundtable discussions by sector, by vision, by whatever, and then come out with the road plan. And that's the way that we identify what is the priorities for the workers -- what they want to be doing...focus in the training. And when they say "we want gender, we don't know what is gender, so we want to learn, how is gender?" Okay, so gender in the global economy, that is one of the things. I was surprised just last year, after ten years of NAFTA, just last year in the road plan show up...like all our workshops is focused on sexual harassment and sexual discrimination and gender, but what about sexual identity? So we are not really having any workshop...

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: ...on sexual identity and we don't know anything. So now also, are gays and lesbians in the maquilas, nobody talk about them.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So just until last year. So right now it's one of their priorities that they asking for, that they are identified in, and we...we always are trying to respect everythings. So the workers are asking the time and the issues that they want.

Jayati: Could you talk about issues of culture and race? Because one of the difficulties of CJM is not only are you a tri-national organization, you're across industry, you cross over gender lines, you cross over race lines. How does that impact the actual work of CJM or hinder it? You talked about an example of the Robert's rules which I think is really interesting. But can you talk about race and culture and how it might pose special difficulties in the work that you do?

Martha: Sure. It's not been easy. It's not been easy because as I told you, in the beginning was first just focus on debate. Then was focus on target some corporations. In 2000...and it's been growing and has been switching the focus that we...the work that we want to do, according with the political context that is appearing. But also is a lot of challenge in language and culture and strategies, and everything. So therefore we are trying to put altogether one integral...integral work, map, action plan, whatever you want to call. As I told you, it's not been easy. Someone's work...having experience from the top to the bottom leaderships. Now the leadership that we want to build is a collective that we have been building. We became a coalition of organizations, not just individuals...and try to be more collective - not just a corporation. And one of the challenge of cultures that we were having was when we start the meetings, for example, the people of the United State, they were saying, "Okay, so let's start the meeting, okay. So proposal, second motion, whatever, it's approve" and...and all the workers that...they are at the table but they are in the leadership²⁶³. And also the Mexican was saying, "What they are talking about? I don't know. So, okay, so let's see what's it about." Okay, second motion, approve it. They say "What is that?" Well, we are in the meeting. So we are in the Robert rules²⁶⁴ and we can teach you. Okay. Right, here is all the system, right here is all the book, this is the Robert rules that all the meetings has to be process. We say "You know, we don't know Robert, okay, and we don't want Robert. Robert can stay in home." [laughter] So right here we are three cultures so let's develop one system that will be accorder...according with all these three cultures and we can work together. So when you give up to all your process, your system, about the Robert rules, okay, "Let's do it, let's put it on the table, and let's start." And it's when you start to define, okay, do you want to do something different, then you have to start on a common ground, altogether, with a different vision. And you start from zero, taking the best things from the lesson that you have been taking, of course...

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Martha: ...no? But moving in a different vision. And that was the way that you start to construct the goals and in and short and medium and long term.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So now building and power on the workers is one of the key things, because that's the way that you are going to be building the social movement, empowering the workers. That is the long-term goal. When you can have short and medium term...certain campaigns or whatever...but really, what is the driving force for the organization? It's not just to improve day- by-day salary or to improve day-by-day standard of living. What really is the meaning going to a social movement?

²⁶³ She is saying that although they were part of the leadership, they did not feel empowered due to their unfamiliarity with American meeting protocol.

²⁶⁴ *Robert's Rules of Order* is a popular book that provides guidelines on using parliamentary procedure to facilitate meetings.

Jayati: So in effect, actually it's not only impacted the focus and...that, you know, the issues that you focus on, but also the day-to-day operations and the way in which you deal with each other and the way in which you have your meetings...

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...as well. Um, it's interesting. Um, I wanted to ask you if you could speak to what relationship if any CJM has because it's an umbrella organization that has 250 member organizations, what intersection is there with the women's movement? So, for example, are there any specifically feminist organizations that are members of CJM, and if so, could you give us some examples of these?

Martha: Well, there are women organizations in Mexico that have the maquiladora workers also in South Mexico. That is, Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas²⁶⁵ ...

Jayati: They had...um-hum.

Martha: ...women's unions network. That is great, because that's the way that we want to really move from gender, union and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...labor...all this work that we do. We are trying to make links between north, south. We are being working with a Hemispheric Social Alliance²⁶⁶ ...women of the hemispheric label. In United States, we have been in contact with women coalition that is based in San Antonio, Texas when they...and Washington, DC. When they need some research or something about the impact of women's and so and so...and more or less that's the work that we do.

Jayati: Um-hum. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that CJM has done and how you've participated in activism around the murders of women maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez? Because that's been another point, sort of a flashpoint where the issue of gender has sort of erupted in a way that it can't be ignored, right? In...among the maquiladora workers and labor groups that work on the border area.

Martha: That has been a really huge and big issue. And that is my concern. I've been having some debates and some people try to label it just femicide²⁶⁷, and these just

²⁶⁵ *Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas* (Mexican Network of Union Women) is a network of labor organizations, NGOs, and feminist groups that strive to analyze the social condition of women, specifically in times of economic crisis.

²⁶⁶ The *Hemispheric Social Alliance* is a coalition of citizen's groups opposed to the Free Trade of Americas Agreement. Claiming 50 million members, the group works primarily in North America and Latin America.

²⁶⁷ *Femicide* is female genocide

womens²⁶⁸ ...and trying to ignore what is the role of capital in the industrialization, and explain...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...here because many of them are from...from maquiladoras and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...corporations are not doing anything, and so on and so. And there have been many years, ten years that all these murders have been happening in...and we are being working in many ways with many organization. It's not...I will not say that it's one job that some organization has been doing²⁶⁹. I think that with the pass of the years, some organizations arriving, other ones who are to and forth, other one just arrived, take a picture and bye. So it's been an issue that many people have been involved. The only thing that I can tell you is that it's just through the women's work that are been doing in the local area with relatives that are...they are being really so brave, try to face this, and that was possible that we can open these to the international labor. And you can see just international labor can have all the attention. The United Nation was there; International Human Rights Committee was there. So International Amnesty was there. So everybody was there, everybody has been showing up...the impunity, the actors who have been involved²⁷⁰ ...and unfortunately at this time the government is not going to be accountable in any way, and corporations either, even if...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...many of them are being...dying like that. So we are being supported in many ways. It was one organization that is "Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa" – "Our Daughters Come Home"—that were members of CJM and we were doing a lot of work. And the last meeting that we have in Torreon Coahuila, we did a big march and we find out that many people from the community, from Torreon Coahuila, were immigrating and some of the daughters were on the list of those disappear or dead. And we are being mobilizing and we are being announcing, bringing them here, trying to raise awareness. Well, we are being doing many, many, many things. And making pressure on the government, doing all this march against violence against women. So we are being doing many...many ways.

Jayati: So you've already mentioned in this context that you have links with other international groups, and I want to talk a little bit more about your global alliances, that you forge. Obviously, CJM is sort of already internationalist in its constitution as a tri-national organization. But what about, what do you do to foster the

²⁶⁸ She is stating that the response to this issue is such that "Who care? These are just women."

²⁶⁹ She is touching upon one theory that the murders have been the work of one corporation or one group.

²⁷⁰ Martha is referring to the actors from the U.S. who have participated in raising awareness about this issue.

relationship of border women workers to workers in other parts of the world outside the Americas?

Martha: We are trying to develop links of global labor, because it's the only way that we will face this model. They talk about global economy, so we need to go beyond borders and beyond space and geography in order to be united. I think that we have been so lucky, in order to be participating, mobilizing against all these institutions all around the world. I think that the fact that workers of the maquilas have been able to be taking part in those mobilizations and try to do some contracts with them and we do the follow up. So we take two, three...for example, one maquiladora worker was in Mumbai, India right now. So for them was amazed, try to learn how the people in India is raising now, how they are fighting back, and...as well, when we were in Cancun, many of Korea, huge delegation from Korea was there, so now that we have this program...this problem with LG Electronics²⁷¹, that is a Korean company...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...so we were calling our colleagues, they were mobilizing right there, they were pressuring the headquarters over there in Korea, and immediately it was obvious that they have to make pressure on the Mexican and American management in order to try to solve the problem. So I think that this global alliance is making us more strong.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And we will be able to mobilize. If it's in Amsterdam with Philips, if it's in Korea with LG, if it's in Japón, Japan with Sony...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...if it's in all those places, all these alliance, yes, so I told you that this has been a process.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: When NAFTA was in three country, we were trying to do tri-national labor. When they were trying to extend NAFTA and the FTAA²⁷² so we have to be an hemispheric labor and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras was one of the organizations who were participating and funding this hemispheric social alliance... alliance in hemispheric labor. But also if this exploitation of the capital is moving all around the globe, we need to do it on a global level. We need to really be united in order to fight them.

²⁷¹ *Lucky Goldstar (LG) Electronics* is a Korean-based company with 76 subsidiaries in 39 countries.

²⁷² The *Free Trade Area of the Americas* (FTAA) is a proposed agreement to eliminate or reduce trade barriers among all nations in the American continents (except Cuba). The proposed agreement is modeled after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Jayati: So if you could just give me an example of how this worked in the LG case, you were able to get Samsung workers from Korea to pressure Samsung or Hansung in...

Martha: Hansung.

Jayati: ..Hansung...

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...in Korea? Or did they write letters of support for the workers in...

Martha: In Korea.

Jayati: In Mexico. How did that work?

Martha: No, in Korea. First we...we stay in contact with them, and they did research and they find out what was the union who was in Korea, with that company. So then the union start to talk with that company. That company said that it's not true, they were lying²⁷³. So, but because we were in touch, immediately we were sending the list of the workers who were fired, we were...been sending...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...everything. So then they were with the headquarters, and they were mobilizing their workers from Korea...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...from Hansung²⁷⁴, that supposed Hansung was doing all this problem here with the LG. So was true the union with NGO's in Korea in the same company, in the same...in the headquarters that they were doing demonstration and they were first meeting and threatening to go to strike supporting these workers.

Jayati: In support.

Martha: And that was...for me that's been amaze...

Jayati: Amazing.

Martha: ...because at least in United States, any workers have been able to say "We will go on strike to support that worker, or to do something, okay?" They can send letters, but

²⁷³ The union was told by the company that the grievances reported by the workers were fabricated.

²⁷⁴ Hansung is a Korean-based company that produces electronic components.

that's it. They don't want...and I understand. That is really to say, you are asking me to put in risk my job as...

Jayati: Sure.

Martha: ...the first time that I come, they say we cannot talk about solidarity because we are losing our jobs, so...But it's amazing, this other context, these other conditions, these other regions. And everybody tried to help according with their...possibilities.

Jayati: That's great. I wonder if you could sort of reflect a bit now on where you're at. And just a few questions about that. What honor, award or achievement that you've received are you most proud of? And you've got several. So I know this might be difficult, so it doesn't have to be one.

Martha: Yeah. Well, I think that probably for some people, awards or accomplishments has other meanings. But for me, I think that when the workers were willing to help me to go to the law school and to support me during all these years, not just with money, just encouragement, because many times I was ready to give up, try to really say "we are with you." And how we were together during all this time was really a big accomplishment for me. Not just to get...to be able to go to the law school or...it's also the way that we were in a collective way, without planning any strategy to do anything...how strong we were in that time. And I think that the answer for that also was the big accomplishment now is every day I give thanks to have this life...but also to have this light here and this fire here. In order to have this consciousness and this love for my people. And when I was giving...having this gift to understand that the struggle was beyond four walls or one country, or one people, that gift, it be possible in all these people that we are being working on and involved, to empower these people, to give them these tools, but now once you give them information and they get many...the knowledge, immediately they move to...transform and fight for, I think that that is the biggest accomplish that can exist.

Jayati: That's right. Okay. Is there anything you want to add to what you've said?

Martha: Well, the only thing is that I just want to say that's it not about...egos...it's not about heroes. It's not about one person. It's about people. It's about this world. Always I thought, I don't think that the world will be in this way. It should be something else outside of this world, outside of this exploitation. And that dream that I used to have, that be a world with justice, that at least we be able to work...be more complement of our life, not the meaning for our life, not that you have to live just to work without having one life. So when I been going through all this process in my life I been learning so much and thanking my fellow workers every day, because they were teaching me so much. They were giving me strength. Martha is not Martha...Martha is...million of workers in the maquilas and million of womens in the world. And just together we can change this system and make a better world for us.

Jayati: Thank you, Martha. Thank you so much for sharing all this with us today.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Loretta Ross
Interviewer: Zakiya Luna**

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Loretta Ross, born in 1953, is an activist on women's issues including reproductive justice, human rights, and opposition to hate groups and right wing organizations. In the 1970s, Ross was one of the first African American women to direct a rape crisis center. In the 1980s, she served a director Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women, organizing the first national conference on women of color and reproductive rights in 1987. She successfully organized women of color delegations for the massive pro-choice marches NOW sponsored in 1986 and 1989, and in 2004, she was national codirector of the March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, the largest protest march in U.S. history with more than one million participants. From 1990 to 1995, Loretta served as National Program Research Director for the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal. She directed projects on far right organizations in South Africa, the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi involvement and anti-abortion violence in the U.S. Following this, she founded the National Center for Human Rights Education, a training and resources center for grassroots activists. She is co-author of the book *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Ross is currently writing a book on reproductive rights entitled *Black Abortion*. A graduate of Howard University, in 2003, Ross received an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law from Arcadia University. Loretta is a founding member of and current national coordinator of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, a network of over 70 women of color allied organizations that work on reproductive health issues.

Zakiya Luna is a graduate student in the joint-Ph.D. program in Sociology and Women's Studies. She received her B.A. in Women's Studies from University of California at Davis where she also worked at the Women's Resources and Research Center providing educational programming for the campus and local community. Her research interests include women of color's activism, particularly in relation to the state and transnationally.

Transcript of Loretta Ross

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*²⁷⁵

Zakiya Luna: Hello and welcome to the Global Feminisms Project. I am Zakiya Luna, a graduate students in Sociology and Women’s Studies, and I am here with Loretta Ross. Thank you for coming today.

Loretta Ross: Thanks for having me.

Zakiya: So first we’re going to talk about your background and discuss the areas around which you’ve been active. Then we’ll talk about your vision for the future and, you know, we’ll talk for about an hour. Sound good?

Loretta: Sounds good to me.

Zakiya: Great. So, first, can you tell us a bit about your background, where you grew up, and if there was sort of any significant events that, looking back, sort of helped lead you on to this path.

Loretta: Well, I’m from a military family. I was kind of like the classic military brat²⁷⁶, moving around every 12 to 18 months. My father’s an immigrant from Jamaica, married my mother. I’m one of eight kids. There’s five boys, three girls and I was the middle girl, and the number six kid. So I was kind of squashed down in the middle in my family. But we lived all over the place and I claim Texas as my home, both because my mother was born there and that’s where I graduated high school, after all that moving around, San Antonio, to be exact. So I think coming from an immigrant family affected my background, coming from such a large family affected my background. My family was very patriarchal too, you know, with the five boys. I remember being very resentful of my mother, because she used to make me get up and cook my brothers breakfast for school. And I swear I think every man in my life has suffered since because I don’t automatically cook for anybody anymore [laughter]. And I loved to cook. It’s just, you know, resenting that patriarchy. So those were the kinds of things. My mother was a domestic worker. And I remember swearing to her when I was about 10 years old that I would never work on my hands and knees. And she said I was pretty sure back then that whatever I did it was not going to be, you know, doing domestic work. Probably had some impact on me deciding to major in chemistry and physics in college, because whatever you did with those majors, it was not going to be on your hands and knees.

²⁷⁵ These lyrics from “Ella’s Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

²⁷⁶ “Military brat” is a slang term to describe children whose parents are in the military.

Zakiya: [laughs]

Loretta: Though I must say, my first job as a chemist was sterilizing huge vats of glassware, so I was like a glorified dishwasher [laughs]. That probably didn't change that much. But my mother's family is from Texas. She's a classic Texan. They moved there in 1867 from Selma, Alabama, and they had been slaves on a peanut plantation in Selma up until the Civil War. So apparently, as legend has it they went from Selma to Mobile. My ancestor built a boat, crossed the Gulf of Mexico. We landed in Natchitoches, Texas. And we were one of those original Texas families that actually celebrates Juneteenth as our family reunion, because it was a holiday that meant a lot to us²⁷⁷. And so my mother's family spread out all over Texas. And my father's family, as I said, is from Jamaica by way of Baltimore, and so all of that made a very rich and precious childhood. I didn't know we were poor, you know. I thought we were like everybody else in the military, and dad was a sergeant with a lot of kids. Uncle Sam does provide in a way, you know. We never really suffered for food or suffered from health care, because that was provided. But I did remember being very resentful that they couldn't afford to give me braces to fix my gap. So [laughter]...But...And I turned out to have been kind of like childhood intellectual, not knowing why. I actually found out recently that I've always been allergic to the sun and to heat. And I went to my dermatologist and they told me that I was allergic to the sun. And I called my mom, I said, "Mom, do you know I'm allergic to the sun?" And my mother said, "You didn't know?" I was like, "No, ain't nobody ever told me this one." She said, "When you were a baby, I couldn't put you outside in your carriage because you got heat stroke, so why do you think you were in side reading all the time when the kids were outside playing?" I said, "I thought it was because I liked to read." She said, "Nah, you couldn't go outside." And so...those were childhood things that I remember. Very religious family. Very conservative family. My father, which is kind of special, was Elvis's drill sergeant when he was stationed I believe in Oklahoma²⁷⁸. And I didn't believe my dad when he was telling this tall tale, what I thought was a tall tale. And it wasn't till we were at his funeral and his Army buddies validated the story that I realized that I had not given my father the benefit of believing him during all of his life. So I felt kind of bad at his funeral, but I was like, "Daddy, that was true?!" you know. Anybody could have claimed to be Elvis's drill sergeant, and I thought my daddy was making it up.

Zakiya: [laughs] **Wow. So...Are there any other sorts of things whether it's the sort of family structure or any sort of major events that sort of you think, besides, you know, staying in the room and reading a lot, that sort of helped sort of get more active?**

²⁷⁷ *Juneteenth* is celebrated within African-American communities. After President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, U.S. slaves were freed. However, in Texas the slaves were not notified of the Proclamation and remained enslaved until June 19th, 1865. See <http://www.juneteenth.com/>

²⁷⁸ Loretta is referring to poplar singer/actor Elvis Presley, who was enlisted from 1958-1964. See <http://www.army.mil/CMH/faq/elvis.htm>

Loretta: Well, my sister, my youngest sister Toni, is really disabled. She was born normal, but this was in the 1950s, the days of polio epidemics, muscular dystrophy epidemics and stuff, and so Toni was apparently born with a depressed or non-functioning immune system. So she got muscular dystrophy and spinal meningitis and polio, I mean, just quickly in succession, like within the first year of her birth. And so growing up with a severely disabled sister probably made me a lot more sensitive to issues of ability and disability. We were a crowded family. So three girls slept in one bedroom, five boys slept in the other. My parents had a bedroom. And so I recall sleeping in a bed with Toni up until I was 16 years old and left home. And I have to honestly swear that that was not at all the most comfortable thing, because she was incontinent and I just thought I suffered as much as she did. I know it was just totally selfish of me. Toni had her cross to bear and we all had to participate in taking care of her and so...From an early age, mom made us feel very responsible. And as a matter of fact to escape taking care of Toni, I became a candy-striper²⁷⁹ at a local hospital during the Vietnam days. And so I had to deal with soldiers who were amputees back when I was 12, 13, 14 years old. And it gave me a life-long commitment to anti-war activism. Because I actually saw...

Zakiya: Saw, yeah.

Loretta: ...what war did. This was not some remote thing for me. And even my graduating class, I came to my 10-year class reunion, and there were all these walls of men, pictures of men on the wall. These were boys I had graduated with who had died within a couple of years of going to Vietnam. And so now that we're in the middle of protesting the war in Iraq, it...I get a sense of déjà vu. And I also get a sense of frustration because we shouldn't be having to do this again. We shouldn't be having to pull our country back from an unjust war. We didn't learn the lesson of Vietnam as a society. And I'm remarkably angry about that. And I think because I feel the cost of war. I felt it as a child, and I feel it as a grandmother.

Zakiya: Wow. So you mentioned that you had been volunteering at the hospital, but then you also mentioned that you ended up leaving home around 16 and then...then you actually were directing, you know, one of the first rape crisis centers in the 1970s. But what was sort of happening in between that sort of...leaving home was sort of...Did you just leave and directly go to the crisis center?

Loretta: Oh, no, honey. It was drama, drama, drama getting up getting there [laughs]. Um...

Zakiya: Can you shorten it a little bit...?

Loretta: Yeah, just a lot of drama. Um, I was a victim of what would be called sexual assault when I was 11. I was actually out on a Girl Scout outing, which should be a safe kind of thing to send your daughter on, but I was kidnapped from this outing and dragged into a woods and raped when I was 11, and so that was traumatizing enough.

²⁷⁹ *Candy striper* is an old term for a young woman who volunteers in a hospital. Traditionally, the women wore red and white striped uniforms, reminiscent of peppermint candy.

And then at age 14, I was being babysat by an older cousin, experienced incest, became pregnant. I mean, the story is not that unusual. I mean, it sounded pretty dramatic to me, because it was happening to me. But as I later started studying sexual assault, particularly in the African American community, I saw it was not that rare. But anyway, so I became pregnant at 14, had a baby at 15, because this was before Roe v. Wade when abortion was legal. And graduated high school at 16. But by the time I went off to Howard University on a scholarship, I'd felt that I had lived a pretty full life, because I'd had all this stuff happen to me. And I was really fortunate in that I did have strong parental support. So my family took care of my kid while I went off to college. They encouraged me to go to college. I actually had a scholarship to Radcliffe that got withdrawn when they found out that I was no longer the upright moral person that they have offered the scholarship to. And how did they find out? Because it was very common back in the 1960s, that when girls got pregnant to give the baby up for the adoption. And then go back to school and pretend that you'd been on an extended visit with an aunt or something. And because I made the decision to keep my child instead of giving him up for adoption, then I became the visible fallen angel, and my school became very punitive. I actually had to sue for my right to return to school.

Zakiya: **Wow.**

Loretta: And Radcliffe became very punitive. They withdrew the scholarship they had offered me. And so that's how I actually ended up going to Howard University²⁸⁰. At the last minute, I was sending out applications trying to figure out where I was going to go since it wasn't to Radcliffe and Howard offered me a full scholarship. So I went to Howard majoring in chemistry and physics at the time. And was pretty lucky to have been at Howard at that time, because again, this was the hotbed of student activism.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: I mean, it was the time of Kent State²⁸¹, Jackson State²⁸². We were protesting the Vietnam War, but we were also protesting racism, and it certainly was my

²⁸⁰ *Howard University* is one of approximately 80 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). See <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/whhbcu/edlite-index.html>. Established in 1867, Howard was a particularly politically active HBCU. For example, Black Panther Stokely Carmichael graduated from Howard, and *Mother Jones* magazine named it one of the Top 10 activist campuses of 2003.

²⁸¹ On May 4, 1970, four Kent State students were killed by the Ohio National Guard, and nine others were injured. For days leading up to the shooting, students across the nation had been protesting the invasion of Cambodia. It is estimated that in the days following the Kent State shooting, million of students went on strike and hundred of campuses closed temporarily.

²⁸² Late in the evening of May 14, 1970 a group of around a hundred black Jackson State students had gathered on Lynch Street following rumors of the murder of Charles Evers. By around 9:30 p.m. the students had started fires and continued general protest of current issues. Firefighters dispatched to the scene requested police support. Local police, Mississippi State Police, and National Guardsmen responded, with later FBI reports estimating that over 400 rounds of ammunition were fired in under a minute. Phillip Lafayette Gibbs, a junior and a local high school student James Earl Green were both killed. Twelve others were injured. Dispute arose over who shot the initially and while official enquires were held, no arrests were made. A monument stands on the campus as a reminder of the event along with many still-visible bullet holes.

first encounter with anything called radical politics. Because I'd come from a solidly conservative Black family. And I remember my freshman year in college, people put the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Black Woman*²⁸³, by...Cade...Toni Cade Bambara in my hand, and it was like a universe had opened up for me. And I quickly decided that I was a Black feminist, even though I probably couldn't spell the word at the time. But that was the only thing...Actually, we used to call it Black Pan-Africanist Feminism²⁸⁴. Was trying to indicate this global consciousness that I was getting. Um, we had a student riot at Howard University my freshman year. We ended up shutting down the campus. Howard was going through its own changes, because we got our first...what looked like a radical president in James Cheek. It turned out he was a closet Black Republican. But we didn't know that at the time, because he wore the dashiki²⁸⁵, so persuaded us that he was far more radical than he actually was. And compared to his successor, he was. But we protested things like mandatory ROTC for the boys²⁸⁶. Every woman, though, had to take a mandatory health and hygiene class. And we protested that, because it definitely sent the signal that Black women were both dirty and needed... and went to college to learn how to be clean, which we thought was just ridiculous. Co-ed visitation, you know, there was a lot of...And at Howard at the time, you had to send in a photograph of yourself and pass what they called a paper bag test. Your skin had to be lighter than a brown paper bag to be accepted for admissions, unless you were a legacy admission²⁸⁷. And so we felt we had a lot to protest, both within the campus and externally, we had to fight for Howard to start Black Studies on campus. We thought that a historically Black college, asking for African American Studies or Black Studies shouldn't be that deep, but in fact it was... because the administration was like, "We're a Black school, why do we need to study Black history?" Missing the irony of that question totally. So...but it was great time to be a student.

Because just by being in class, your consciousness was raised. You were challenged. Now, we had a lot of professors who were fired for engaging in Marxist thinking and Marxist teaching and stuff. And so Marxism because like the forbidden fruit for us intellectually. And so probably we got more into studying radical political economics than we normally would have simply because we were forbidden to. But taking that all in, you know, at that time, truly was consciousness raising for me. And when I got a chance to volunteer at the DC Rape Crisis Center it was kind of like all these pieces of my life kind of fell...fell together, you know, the early sexual assault, the chance to work in a women's organization. And the women who had invited me is a woman named Nkenge Toure and she had been in the Black Panther Party. And at the time I

²⁸³ *The Black Woman*, a critical anthology of Black Feminist thought was published in 1970.

²⁸⁴ *Pan-Africanism* is an ideology that supports the unity of the African Diaspora.

²⁸⁵ A *dashiki* is a African shirt often with colorful patterns. From West Africa, they became a popular symbol of unity among some African Americans during the political turmoil of the 1960s .

²⁸⁶ The *Reserve Officers' Training Corps* (ROTC) program provides funding for college in exchange for early enlistment in the military. Participants who receive scholarships continue to take courses while engaging in training. Upon graduation, they enter the military at a higher rank than if they entered without ROTC training.

²⁸⁷ Loretta is referring to the "pigmentocracy" in African American communities, in which lighter skin was preferred. The paper bag test was literally a test in which someone's skin was compared to a paper bag and if it was darker than the bag s/he would not be allowed to join an organization or participate in a particular event.

always admired the Black Panthers, because I thought they was like the hardcore radicals. I mean we were the dilettantes, they were the real hardcore people. We were in college, they were on the streets right? And so when they came, she invited me to come over the Rape Crisis Center, I was a bit skeptical because I was like, I don't know if I want to work with those White women. And she said, "Sister, trust me." And I think hearing that from a sister who had been in the Black Panthers was enough to make me take the risk to go into the Rape Crisis Center, so...more than anything, Nkenge is responsible for me knowing anything about the women's movement because I walked across her bridge of trust and haven't looked back.

Zakiya: Yeah. Well, this is a good segue. Obviously we've already started talking about some of the one of the main areas where you work in which is sort of reproductive rights and women's health. And one of the areas that you began being active in in the reproductive rights movements was around involuntary sterilization of women. And many people who will view this interview may not be familiar with the issue on...in the U.S. So could you tell us a bit about sort of how you got involved with that, and maybe how it connected with the earlier work, such as working at the Rape Crisis Center.

Loretta: Well, sterilization abuse became part of my personal narrative because when I went to Howard of course I was trying to prevent future pregnancies. I already was a teen mother. And I was not what they call a good contraceptive. In other words, I couldn't take that birth control pill every day. I kept forgetting it and ended up getting pregnant again having to have an abortion. And so I was seeking a more effective contraceptive. And available at the time was something called the Dalkon Shield manufactured by A. H. Robinson up in Richmond, Virginia. And the Dalkon Shield was an IUD²⁸⁸ that was inserted and if your body successfully accepts it, prevents contraception. I mean, prevents pregnancy indefinitely. And there was only one small problem—the Dalkon Shield was defective. And it was defective for the most banal of reasons. It was a small piece of plastic, a triangular piece of plastic with a string hanging down.

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: And the only reason that string was on that thing was so that the doctor could easily pull it out. But the string...the string served as a bacterial wick. And so it was wicking up into the uterus all kinds of dangerous bacteria. And ending up causing acute PID²⁸⁹ for 700,000 women.

Zakiya: Wow.

Loretta: It ruptured my fallopian tubes as well as causing sterilization and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of women. Ended up in a class action lawsuit against the manufacturers of the device because they had suppressed their own research showing that

²⁸⁸ IUD: Intrauterine Device, a type of contraception.

²⁸⁹ PID: Pelvic Inflammatory Disease.

it had this design flaw. And so I ended up being one of the first women to sue, because at age 23, my tubes had ruptured and I was no longer able to have kids. And my own OB/GYN found all this research data that the company had tried to suppress²⁹⁰. And so my lawsuit ended up opening up the floodgates in a way for all the other lawsuits. I know I sound like a litigious person. I don't just sue all the time. But when people piss me off, I take...try and get [laughter] back at them. And so my own reproductive career had been so brief. I mean, one full-term pregnancy, one abortion, one sterilization. And it was pretty much at that point, I decided that no matter what else I was trying to do with my life, my plumbing kept getting my attention. So, whether the sexual assault or dealing with the sterilization. And so I entered reproductive rights work fighting sterilization abuse. I mean, putting this in a broader context, it was very common for Black and Native American or Mexican American women to be sterilized in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.²⁹¹ So much so that they called it the Mississippi Appendectomy.²⁹² And there was a case of two sisters who were 12 and 14—the Relf sisters who had been illegally sterilized. They had just gone in for regular checkups and they were 12 and 14 and got sterilized. And so there was a lawsuit brought on their behalf that ended up creating the first federal regulations against sterilization abuse in the mid-1970s.²⁹³ But thousands of us had gone through the mill leading up to that. And so a lot of women of color entered the reproductive rights movement, not fighting for abortion rights but fighting for the right to have children, which is different than how middle class White women frame the issue. And the first organi—one of the first organizations that women of color put together was called the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, CESA. And then when we added White women to the mix, it became CARASA, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse. And that's where you saw the first 20 of the right to have and the right not to have a child working within the same formation. But I got into feminist work through my body. I mean, it was not an intellectual thing for me. I didn't...there were no Women's Studies courses at the time, or anything like that. There were people who were pissed off about what had happened to us and we were kind of committed to it not happening to others. I mean, I'd already had the child sexual abuse, the sterilization abuse and I didn't necessarily see myself as anybody's victim. I saw myself as a woman who was pissed off and was pretty much gonna fight to make sure

²⁹⁰ OB/GYN: Obstetrician/Gynecologist.

²⁹¹ In the 1970s, it was discovered that many poor women, in particular women of color, were being *sterilized* illegally (without their consent, when they were too young, without having an interpreter, etc.). Although there were laws against this illegal sterilization, racist ideas of individual doctors as well as government officials made the problem continue. Even today, there are reported cases of the abuse of sterilization. Because poor women and women of color have been targeted for “birth reduction” programs they are often critical of the white middle-class arguments of “choice” as choice is often a questionable term.

²⁹² Here she is noting that the life-altering procedure appeared to be so common in some states that it was as prevalent as an appendectomy, a procedure for what most agree is an unnecessary organ, unlike a uterus.

²⁹³ The Relph's, a poor African-American family, including three daughters Minnie (12), Mary(14) and Katie(16), lived in Alabama. In 1973, when the family moved into publicly funded housing, a Family Planning Services nurse began unsolicited visits, injecting the girls with Depro-Provera. She forced two of the daughters, Mary and Minnie, to come to a doctor's office for “shots”, then transferred them to a hospital. Their illiterate mother was told to sign papers, which she did not know were authorized the sterilization of her daughters. The family's lawsuit helped pave the way for legislation requiring stricter regulations for obtaining informed consent for such procedures.

that what happened to me didn't happen to other women. But I was really lucky to have found a home of...of similarly thinking...similar thinking people at the DC Rape Crisis Center. Because that became a hotbed of Black feminist activity in the '70s and '80s, and lot of stuff grew out of the Rape Crisis Center, and a lot of the relationships I developed there, you know, have endured for over 30 years, so...

Zakiya: So then, you were active, though, with the National Organization for Women²⁹⁴, right? And you had served as their director of Women of Color Programs in 1985, right?

Loretta: Yeah, you have to kind of like fast forward ten years, you know, then I was active in NOW. And it was a big challenge whether or not to take the job at NOW. I had gone to the Nairobi World Conference for Women in 1985²⁹⁵, and my roommate there is a woman named Donna Brazile who's pretty famous kind of now. Come to think of it, she was Al Gore's campaign director. Anyway, Donna and I were talking about what we were going to do when we got back from Africa, because neither of us had jobs at the time. Well, she was actually the director of the National Political Congress of Black Women that was founded by Shirley Chisholm and C. Delores Tucker, but she had a job, but she didn't have a paycheck. I didn't have a job nor a paycheck. And so Donna told me about how every time a new administration is elected at NOW, the entire staff has to hand in their resignation. And the new administration gets a chance to select who they'll keep or what have you. So she said, "Well, go to talk to Ellie Smeal²⁹⁶. Because Ellie's the newly elected...been re-re-elected president, because she had been president before. And she may have a job opening for you." And so I went and talked to Ellie Smeal, and that's whole 'nother story, but eventually I got hired to be what Ellie thought was the minority rights staff person. And I quickly told her, I'm not your minority. And so we changed the title to the Director of Women of Color Programs. And we actually shifted the paradigm, because Ellie thought my job was to bring Women of Color into NOW. I thought my job was to figure out why women of color hated NOW. So [laughs], it was...I became more like an ombudsman than a recruiter, which I thought was a really important distinction.

Zakiya: Yeah. Well, many women of color have had strained relationships with women, sort of mainstream organizations, such as NOW, sort of feeling that these organizations either ignore issues of race or don't see how race is a feminist

²⁹⁴ *National Organization for Women* (NOW) was founded 1966, with the goal of taking action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; and end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society. However, NOW has also been criticized for being focused on what is good for middle-class white heterosexual women.

²⁹⁵ The *Third World Conference on Women*, sponsored by the United Nations, was the culmination of the UN's Decade for Women campaign.

²⁹⁶ *Eleanor Smeal* was president of the National Organization for Women and later founded the Feminist Majority Foundation. FMF focuses on women's equality and reproductive rights and has among its projects Afghan Women. The FMF site credits Smeal with leading the first national abortion rights march in 1986.

issue. And so if you could speak a bit more to that, and sort of...you know, you've been sort of a pioneer in many cases in sort of mainstream organizations, for example, with NOW in this position. And so if you could talk a bit more about your experience and sort of what your strategies were in working with the organization, and sort of...you talked about sort of, you know, redefining what your position would be and things like that. And so I'm wondering if you could speak to that a bit.

Loretta: Well, most mainstream organizations, to be fair to them, are not intentionally racist. I mean, they don't have as part of their mission statement we're going to piss off Black women. I mean, that's not how it happens. What they are is intentionally focused on their own needs and who they see as their constituency. And for the most part, their constituency is middle class Black women...I mean, middle class White women who are mostly in denial about their own tenuous class positioning. I mean, within, the European American community, I see a *lot* of sensitivity and denial and class issues like they're only one generation from poverty, but you'd never know that kind of thing. And so they don't...fail to represent Black women like this is some great conspiracy, it's that they are representing a small slice of White women, and that they're hanging on by their plastic fingernails. And what you find is that they practice a form of power politics on each other that is very competitive, serious as a heart attack, very much creates a condition of brutality with which they treat each other, particularly in an organization like NOW which is, you know, by anybody's definition, the most influential feminist organization that's ever been. And so for a Black woman, you constantly have to try to figure out what's the normal treatment with which they treat White women versus how they treat me. Is it racism or is this just politics as usual? And you have to navigate that pretty carefully, because you lose all credibility if you call something racism when it wasn't. I mean, if they normally brutalize each other and it just spills over on you, that ain't racism. Okay, now, if they genu—you know, if they genuinely put you in the photo op so that they look diverse and then they ignore your voice thereafter as they're making policy decisions, that's racism. And so you have to develop some skill at distinguishing between the two. One of the criticisms I offer women of color is that we generally throw that charge of racism around pretty loosely without doing our homework. And so we lose a lot of credibility using it badly. And we sell “wolf”²⁹⁷ tickets. “Well, we're going to boycott you if you don't do this.” Well, like, yeah. Yeah, right. How can a multi-million-dollar organization care about our 35 dollars. So I mean, we tend to paint all White women with the same broad brush without understanding the conflicts and tensions within them. We don't understand the role of anti-Semitism in dividing White women, you know, old forms of European nationalism that are still being played out among White people. We don't even understand the construction of Whiteness and what goes into that. And so we're not as sharp as I'd like us to be in understanding how to use and manipulate power within the mainstream movement. Um, and as a result, you know, some of us, like my current work, is into forming our own autonomous movement because it's exhausting to try to study, I mean, getting into that. Not everybody is prepared to be a bridge. You know, not everybody is prepared to give up the right to protest personal racism when you're there to serve a larger purpose. And so that's why I'm into SisterSong now,

²⁹⁷ “To cry wolf” is to claim a factor is present that is not actually there.

because we get to deal with White women on our own terms. But that's a whole 'nother story.

Zakiya: **Yeah. And we will get to that.**

Loretta: [laughs]

Zakiya: **But I did want to, you know, sort of know the answer to this question generally, but sort of the issues, you've talked about sort of with mainstream organizations are also some of the reasons that sort of some of the other women of color that we've interviewed for this project have found this term "feminist" sort of problematic, and that that's why they don't want to use it, or they qualify using it, and so I guess it's a two-part question. Sort of first, do you consider yourself a feminist, and if so, how does this influence your ability to sort of work with mainstream organizations, or does it influence it at all?**

Loretta: Well, I'm a flaming feminist. Yes, I gladly use the F word and proclaim in pretty loud letters which tends to scare off all the men I'm attracted to, but [laughter]...Yeah. But it wasn't an accident that I started using the phrase. I started doing feminist work in like 1972, '73. But it wasn't until 1985 that I actually chose the word "feminist" for myself. Because I used to say, "I'm not a feminist, but..." yeah [laughs] "I'm not a feminist, but this is wrong, you know. Violence against Black women in the Black community is wrong. But I'm not a feminist, but I think this is wrong" kind of thing. And that was my mantra for so many years. But when I took the job at NOW, the question was called. Because a lot of people thought that I had sold out my Black credentials by taking the job at NOW. And I had actually went and leave other organizations that I'd been a part of. That were women of color organizations, or Black organizations, because I think...thought I'd sold out to the White women. And yet NOW didn't trust me because I wasn't, quote, "feminist enough." I mean, I was paying attention to the anti-Apartheid movement and to Black politics. Like I said, I was a Pan-Africanist feminist in my kind of mind. And so I wasn't totally into the gender thing as much as they thought I should be. I was, thought I was into gender, felt I was a good gender advocate. But gender at the intersection of race, class, nationalism and all those other things. Not just gender in and of itself. You know, I never had the illusion that women united will do anything. But I always...never believed in angels or devil either...any...either way, you know, so...I was a bad fit for them, in that way and yet I was in the Black Nationalist movement raising all these embarrassing gender questions. They thought I'd sold out to the White women, and the White women thought I hadn't sold out enough, so...It was a interesting time. But when it was time to mobilize for the first march, the '86 march. I had the job of going around to all these women of color organizations and talk about abortion rights. And a couple of them kept asking me, "Well, are you a feminist?" and at that point, "I'm not a feminist, but..." wasn't making sense anymore. How can I organize women to participate in a movement I'm afraid of

claiming? And at the time Alice Walker had written her first work on womanism²⁹⁸, so I a lot of Black women were using the term the womanism, but that seem...felt like cheating to me. It's like, "I want all the benefits of the feminist movement, but I don't want the baggage." But you don't have to...you know, for me you have to fight the baggage, you have to...if you're going to get the benefits, then you have the responsibility of fighting the baggage. And, now womanism has since evolved in definition. I tend to see people who are womanist now as adding a decidedly spiritual component to feminism that feminism being far more secularly oriented. But at the time, it was more like half-hearted feminism. "I'm into gender politics, but..." kind of thing. But, you know, I'm a feminist and kind of proud of it and...And I'm a feminist that likes macho men, so that's a whole 'nother contraction.

Zakiya: [laughs] Yes, we talked about that a bit last night, didn't we?

Loretta: We talked about it then...

Zakiya: [laughs] So you left NOW. But then in 2004, you were involved with the March for Women's Lives, right? Which NOW was one of those sort of majors sponsors of. And you were actually a national co-director for it. So how did you come to be involved with the March? And sort of what was that experience like?

Loretta: Therein lies a tale. I left NOW in 1989 to go work for the National Black Women's Health Project because I had worked within White feminist organizations so I wanted to go see what Black feminists were...looked like, and enjoyed that. Then I did anti-Klan work, monitoring hate groups. Trying to explain to my mother why a Black woman was going to Klan rallies. And then got into human rights work. As part of my human rights work, we founded this organization called SisterSong, which is a women of color reproductive health organization. And SisterSong was basically founded by women of color working in the reproductive health field, who were tired of trying to fix the mainstream and get them to understand what our women of color perspectives, issues, needs are. We were like sisters doing it for themselves. We were going to organize our own. And so at our 2003 national conference, the four organizations who decided to do the March—the National Organization for Women, the Feminist Majority Foundation, Planned Parenthood Federation of American²⁹⁹, and NARAL Pro-Choice America³⁰⁰ – sent representatives to SisterSong's conference asking for our endorsement. And it was

²⁹⁸ Walker's 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* popularized the term "womanist." The term had a multiple-part definition, the first of which was "a black feminist or feminist of color." The definition also included aspects of caring about one's whole community—not just women—and spirituality.

²⁹⁹ *Planned Parenthood* is a national organization of member clinics who provide a range of reproductive health services to women at low or not cost. They also provide abortions although, due to governmental regulations, these are not reduced in cost. Along with operating clinics there is also an advocacy and activist side to the organization as they work on state and federal levels to fight for "choice."

³⁰⁰ The *National Abortion Rights Advocacy League*, NARAL Pro-Choice, is an organization which advocates and organizes for abortion rights. NARAL supports abortion providers as well as campaigns for governmental recognition of abortion rights.

obvious why they came to us. We had 600 women of color together at our national conference, the biggest gathering of women of color ever on reproductive health issues. And when they first asked for our endorsement, I was the first one to say, “Hell, no.” Been there, done that 20 years ago, you know. I’ve moved on and the last thing I want to do is drop everything we’re doing yet again for White women and their agenda. And fortunately, there were other women within SisterSong that said, “Hey Loretta...” and young, it was the younger women who hadn’t been through the experiences of the ‘80s and the ‘90s that... “Well, let’s give them a chance, let’s give an audience and let’s see what they have to say.” And so I thought it was particularly telling that of the four organizations that were pulling off...what they fir—then were calling it the March for Freedom of Choice, they didn’t even all have women of color to send to represent them at our conference. And that was just so unacceptable for me. It’s like, I have worked with you all 20, 25 years ago over this same question. And here it is in 2003, you don’t even have women of color in senior management? You know, not all of them, but notably NARAL didn’t. And that kind of pissed me off, yeah. And they want to send a White woman to ask women of color. I was like you’re not even qualified to speak to these 600 women of color as far as I’m concerned. But anyway. Thank God there were other voices at the table [laughter] than mine. Um, so they came and we did a plenary session on whether women of color should participate in the March for Women’s Lives. The plenary, the audience, basically came up with some conditions. They said first of all that the name of the march had to change. The March for Freedom of Choice was not a big enough thing for what we’re talking about. Because I’d talked about “abortion or not to abort” that is not how women of color organize, because we feel that not only do we have to fight for the right to *have* a child, but we have to fight for the right to *parent* the children that we have. If you look at the foster care system the criminal justice system, the zero tolerance policies kicking our kids out of school, I mean, reproductive rights means a whole lot more than to abort or not to abort as far as we’re concerned. So, the March for Freedom of Choice wasn’t working as a title. We wanted women of color to be added to the March steering committee, which is the decision making body. And that was pretty important. Because every one of those steering committee seats required a commitment of a quarter of a million dollars to seed the march.

Zakiya: **Wow.**

Loretta: So for NARAL to sit at the table, they had to put up a quarter of a million dollars. Planned Parenthood, NOW, Feminist Majority, to put together the first million dollars to organize the March. And so when we demanded that women of color should be allowed to sit at the seat, at the table, we knew those women of color weren’t going to put up a quarter million dollars to get those seats. As a matter of fact, the cash flow was going to reverse itself. Because for women of color organizations to drop what they’re doing to participate in it, that time has to be bought. Because we’re talking about organizations with three to four staff people. So if they send somebody to sit at the steering committee, the organization’s going to suffer, and we had detailed this in our book *Undivided Rights* how when we try to work in coalition with the mainstream, the mainstream benefits and we don’t, so we were clear about that. And that was...so getting women of color onto the steering committee, was one of our demands. And then

broadening the focus of the march was the third set of demand. And much to my amazement, they called our bluff. They changed the name of the March. They added the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, and the Black Women's Health Imperative to the steering committee, which actually ended up bringing in the ACLU³⁰¹ as the seventh steering committee partner. And then they started reorganizing the March using our reproductive justice language that SisterSong had pioneered. And so then, after they called our bluff and they asked me if I would be the March co-director, I felt like, oh, shit. Okay.

Zakiya: Now [laughs].

Loretta: Which I had not intending on doing. I was like, you know, go winding back in my personal history 25 years to work with the same people, you know, Ellie and Kate and Gloria that I had left 25 years ago, to work with them again. But it really did work out very, very well, because it generated a discussion amongst the mainstream about the human rights framework which is what we wanted them to do, you know, which is the basis of the reproductive justice framework. And it brought in a lot of new voices that historically that had not supported a women's rights march. I mean, for the first in its 95-year history, the NAACP endorsed the women's rights march. It had never done so. You know, La Raza, I mean, just, you know, the immigrant rights movement, the anti-war movement, the anti-globalization movement, all coming together to support a women's rights march. And I think it was because of our insistence that they use the human rights reproductive justice framework as the organizing base. And so it paid off. I mean, it was by far the biggest march we'd ever thought we were going to pull off. I think it had one million, 150 thousand participants there. And I think...The sad part is though, despite the success of the march, the four mainstream organizations that started all of this mess, I think they saw diversifying the organizing as a great way to mobilize for the march, but I don't think they saw it as a great way to transform the movement into the future. Because immediately after the March, they went back to business as usual.

Which is, you know, something SisterSong could have predicted that they'd do. They figured it out but they didn't. And, um, you know, they somewhat lost the potential for using the women's human rights framework as a way of building the new movement. But that's what SisterSong is doing. So we went back to our business which had been delayed by a year because of the March organizing.

Zakiya: Well, that's actually a good segue into this sort of next part, which is talking about SisterSong, for which you are the national director, as you were talking about the sort of involvement, you know, started at this sort of conference, sort of the involvement with the March and that there was quite a large impact as far as this, you know, women of color being represented in this march. But it starts sort of from SisterSong and this sort of unique way of looking at reproductive rights, sort of going beyond just the issue of choice. So if you could talk a bit about sort of what SisterSong does and sort of how it developed and sort of any... you know, basically how it's been going since the March.

³⁰¹ ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union.

Loretta: Well, a bunch of us were at a AIDS conference in 1997 in Asia. And at that conference was a representative of the Ford Foundation, named Reena Marcelo. And informally Reena asked us as...had some women of color organizations that work on reproductive health issues, what would we like to see done? And a number of us and I'm saying "us" as a general term, because I was actually not at the meeting I was heading a human rights organization at the time, not a reproductive rights organization. But anyway, we asked...she asked us what we'd like to see done, and a number of us said, "Well, we need a trade association, a national network of women of color organizations. We've tried to do so four different times." And we've never had the resources to actually do so. You know, the first one was in the '80s and the '90s and going on. And so Reena heard us and when we got back to the States, she funded two symposia, on the Reproductive Health Issues of Women of Color, one in Savannah, and one in New York City, and after our second symposia in New York City, she devoted her entire portfolio, which was four million dollars to helping us found SisterSong. And when we first started, we were 16 women of color organizations: four Black, four Native American, four Asian American, four Latina. They came together, and we were kind of mechanical. You know, four, four, four, four. We were desperate to be balanced and all of that stuff. Um, and we were challenging the Ford Foundation because the way Reena wanted to give us the money, based on the requirements of the Ford Foundation is that she wanted us to engage in new programmatic work on reproductive tract infections. Which is all nice and good, but we pushed back 'cause we said, wait a moment. Every foundation in the world has a new idea for what work we should be doing.

Yeah, be we have an idea that we need to strengthen our organizations first, because most of us are...half the organizations of the 16 were all volunteer, they didn't have paid staff. They didn't have computers and fax machines. They didn't have boards of directors, financial policies...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...I mean, this...they were organic organizations that had come out in their communities, but one of the criticisms we constantly offer is that lack of sustained monetary and leadership investment into women of color organizations, so that they can actually compete with mainstream...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...organizations. I mean you see multi-year grants going to mainstream organizations...

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: ...and project grants going to Sis—to women of color organizations. So capacity building over there, work on RTIs³⁰² kind of thing. And so we push back. We

³⁰² *Reproductive Tract Infections* (RTIs) can be the result from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), overgrowth of organisms usually present in the reproductive system or infection after medical procedure.

even threatened to turn down the four million dollars if we weren't allowed to use it for capacity building. And that's what we did. We won that fight. And at the time, another kind of special story was that at the time Ford Foundation didn't believe in buying computers, because they didn't believe in *capital* acquisitions, you know. And we pushed back because they told us that as a condition of our grant we had to lease computers. I'm like, "Excuse me, lease computers for like, you know, three or four thousand dollars a year, when a thousand dollars you can buy the whole computer?" This was not making sense for us. And so the ability of a grantee to say, "Hell, no," was experience by SisterSong. So I mean, usually, I'm like, we didn't have anything to lose, you know.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: We're already not funded. What were they going to do...

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: ..pull the funding? [laughs] And that actually a real impact on the Ford Foundation. Because we found out that there actually wasn't a rule against allowing grantees to buy computers. It was a urban legend starting by some project officer or program officer, who didn't want to be bothered doing...to do depreciation on computers or whatever.

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: And so he or she had attached a no-computer-purchase clause to his grants, and it just became an urban legend throughout the foundation that grantees couldn't buy computers. And once we asked Reena to look into it for us, it turned it wasn't prohibited at all! That, you know, SisterSong felt really empowered...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...because they pushed back and said, "Hell, no." And it turns out that it benefited every foundation grantee after that, who now can buy computers...

Zakiya: [laughs]

Loretta: ...and any other equipment that they need to per—to, you know, execute a grant. And so we got the four million dollars for Sisters...from...for...to establish SisterSong, and it sounds like a whole of money, but when you split it, it was 16 organizations for three years.

Zakiya: Um-hum. Okay.

Loretta: Which actually is not a whole lot of money. Worked out like to 150,000 dollars per organization per year or something like that. But it did allow us to get established. We've seen grown to 70 organizations.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: Seventy-six as a matter of fact. We've gone beyond the mechanical four-four-four that we started out with. And we've added new populations. In 2003, we added Arab American Middle Eastern/North African women to our mix. And in 2004, we added White women, a European American allies, and male allies. So SisterSong now has evolved into that radical progressive home for anybody who has a critique of the liberal Pro-Choice Movement.

Zakiya: Um-hum. And how does SisterSong make that critique? Sort of what is the framework SisterSong uses?

Loretta: Well, the basis of our framework is the human rights framework.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: What happened is that we had a chance as individual women of color to participate in the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, as well as the Beijing Fourth World Conference for Women in '95, and it turned out that our international counterparts are much more familiar with the human rights framework...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...and they use it in their activism, where in the United States, we tend to limit ourselves to the Constitutional framework of *Roe v. Wade*. And so as women of color, we went to Beijing and Cairo and came home wanting to use that human rights framework here at home. And we first coined the term, "reproductive justice" as a way to marry reproductive rights to social justice.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: We did that in '94, and this was even before SisterSong. But once SisterSong got organized, we decided to intentionally popularize the reproductive justice framework, as a way to express the human rights framework in a U.S. context. Um, and then we started articulating a concept that we call reproductive oppression...

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: ...which is those human rights violations that not only keep a woman from deciding what happens to her body, but causes...calls attention to the fact that every time a woman is pregnant—actually every time a woman even thinks she's pregnant because misses a cycle...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...she doesn't even actually have to be pregnant to start counting the calendar. But anyway, she is trying to figure out what she's going to do with this pregnancy in the context of what's happening in her community.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: So if she's in a community that lacks access to healthcare...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...if she's in a community that's suffering from immigration raids, or if she's in a community where there's a lot of violence and there's a lot of surveillance by the state or by the police...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...she has to take all of that into account before she can talk about what's going to happen...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...to her body or whether she's going to keep or not keep the child. Does she know if she tells her partner that she's pregnant, is she going to get beaten? If she tells her employer that she's pregnant, is she going to get fired? I mean, all of these are the calculations that women—all women, make by the way.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: It's not just women of color. All women make these calculations. And so part of our criticism is that the pro-choice movement has removed all of those other complicating...

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: ...factors from the discussion, as if it's only, "Can I have an abortion?" "Can I afford it?" and "Is it legal?" I mean, they...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...just reduce that whole really complicated woman's life to that.

Zakiya: Um-hum. That's right.

Loretta: And that is an objectification very similar to what the right wing does.

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: Only they objectify the fetus and the women and we're objectifying the woman and the fetus. So I mean...

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: ...many of us offer a critique about the anti-abortion and the Pro-Choice Movement for objectifying women. So anyway, we draw attention to reproductive oppression, because reproductive oppression is economic violence. It's, you know, immigration raids, it's violence against women, it's removal of children from foster...into foster care. It's all of those things.

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: The lack of affordable housing. The lack of child care. All of these things form that...that quilt called reproductive oppression. And the only way to address reproductive oppression is through organizing people to protect their human rights.

Zakiya: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loretta: And the full panoply of human rights, not just gender rights or sexual rights, but the full...the right to have a job paying a living wage or the right to receive services in a language other than English. I mean, all of these are human rights. And the other thing that we think the stigma should...the SisterSong perspective from the Pro-choice perspective is that we offer a very strong critique of what we call the population control movement.

Zakiya: Hm. Um-hum.

Loretta: Um, necessarily because of the opposition to women's rights and birth control and abortion by the right wing and the fundamentalist is develop what we call a unholy alliance between those of us who are into women's health and women's empowerment, and those of us...and those of our movement who are into fertility management and population control. And, yeah, we both share support for abortion rights and contraception, but for different reasons.

Zakiya: Yeah, right.

Loretta: Because there are parts of our movement that think there's a population explosion, that too many of the wrong people are having children...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...and let's reduce those population by any means necessary. And they're responsible for dumping unsafe contraception...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...contraceptive around the world, and ignoring the fact that it is systemic underdevelopment of these countries that is as responsible for population growth, as the lack of access to birth control.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: You know, you could convince a woman in a developing country to have fewer children if you provided some actual economic and educational opportunity.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: That actually works much more so than forcing contraceptions down... contraceptives down people's throat and still leaving them mired in poverty. I mean, so...

Zakiya: And so SisterSong brings out the [inaudible].

Loretta: We offer a critique of the population control wing of the Pro-Choice Movement...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...which makes us feel good about yourselves, but then has a definite negative impact on our available funding, because the funders who fund the population control movement are the only available funders to fund the kind of work we do.

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: So we actually had a funder read our newsletter one day and tell us that they could fund us if we removed the phrase "population control" from our newsletter. So...

Zakiya: So then how does SisterSong...

Loretta: Life goes on.

Zakiya: Yeah [laughter]. So what are just sort of a couple of the projects that sort of SisterSong has been working on?

Loretta: Well, next week, oh [coughs] – excuse me – we have a press conference in Washington DC, [coughs] – excuse me – because we're debuting a map that we developed in partnership with Ipas³⁰³, which is...called Mapping Our Rights. It's a state-by-state analysis of what laws affecting women's reproduction exists in a state-by-state

³⁰³ "Ipas works globally to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and to reduce abortion-related deaths and injuries." See <http://www.ipas.org>

manner. So if you're in Michigan and you click on Michigan you can find out all the laws on abortion, all the laws on contraceptive use, pharmacy refusal, midwifery, lesbian and gay rights—all of those things in one source, so that you're not having to go all over the map looking for what's happening and what affects you in your state. So we're debuting the website called Mapping our Rights next week. One of the other things that Sister Song has to pay particular attention to is missing research data. It's amazing, but we live in a country that if you can't articulate it and if can't quantify it, it might as well not exist. And so for example, in the research data from the CDC³⁰⁴ or the National Institute for Health...National Institute of Health or Office of Women's Health, there's missing populations. For example, all Black, Caribbean and African immigrants are subsumed under the category, "African American," even though their actual experiences may be very different someone whose family's been in this country for 400 years. I mean, they're using skin color to just group people together without really looking at the distinctions they should be making. Similarly from the Asian Pacific Islander population, that represents somewhere between 17 and 27 subgroups. And so you can't easily compare the reproductive health outcomes of a woman from Guan from main—to mainland Japan which is by most definitions a First World country. I mean, you just can't easily compare, you know, Bangladesh to Japan. But they're all grouped together, missing populations. Another hybrid is Spanish-speaking Black women from Latin America. Again, grouped within Latin American women without...or South American women, without understanding that, you know, the English-speaking people on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua may have more in common with people from Jamaica than they have with, you know, the Spanish-speaking people of Nicaragua. And so we're having to challenge those researchers to...to disaggregate the data, to really look at the data in more specific ways, because if you're working with a Pacific Islander community, you need data actually on Pacific Islanders. Not data that just groups everybody together. And then we find that those health conditions that predominantly affect women of color are understudied by the research institutions. I mean...fibroids is something that a lot of African American women have to deal with, but it's being understudied in the Office of Women's Health, or NIH or CDC because it's not disproportionately affecting White people. So we have to call attention to missing research data. And so what we do is we publish a newspaper, a national newspaper, the only...called *Collective Voices*, which is the only one by and for women of color looking at our reproductive health issues. And then we feel that a big part of our mandate is to create spaces for women of color to come together. And so sponsored a lot of conferences and meetings and think tanks and things like that, so that women of color have a chance to put their heads together. And then we sponsor what we call our mini-communities, so that all the indigenous women can have a place to get together and talk about reproductive health issues or all the Latina women or even within a subset of the Latina...the Puerto Rican women within the Latinas, you know, those kinds of things.

Zakiya: Wow, so you're working on quite a few different projects and um

Loretta: Long as you don't call it population control...

³⁰⁴ CDC: Center for Disease COntrol

Zakiya: Um, because something interesting you said was that a lot of U.S. organizations, sort of when you went to this conference weren't thinking of things in sort of a human rights framework. But you had also...you'd founded a sort of the National Center for Human Rights Education, sort of. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about that and how sort of that sort of connected with the work with Sister Song, this sort of founding this organization and...

Loretta: Yeah. Well, it was actually at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 that this light bulb went off in my head around the human rights framework. Because it was definitely the dominant framework that the global women's movement was using. And I saw Hilary Clinton up there promising that we were going to respect the human rights of women, and then I came home and I started asking people, you know, about the human rights framework, and almost everybody thought about the tortured prisoner in a jail somewhere as the stereotype of human rights. Nobody really knew what it meant. And so I actually had a chance to ask one of my mentors, a Reverend C. T. Vivian, who was the board chair for the Center for Democratic Renewal where I'd been working, about the human rights framework, and he surprised me, because he said, "Well, you know, Martin..." and he was referring to Dr. Martin Luther King³⁰⁵, because he was his field director. I mean I would never be so rude as to call him "Martin."

Zakiya: [laughs]

Loretta: But he could because they were best friends. He said, "Well, Martin never meant to build the civil rights movement." And I was like, "What you talking about?" you know, because...you know, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King civil rights leader is like one word [laughs], you know, so what are you talking about? And he went on to say, "Martin meant to build a human rights movement." And he actually showed me copies of Dr. King's last Sunday sermon, where he called on us to build a human rights movement and then he was assassinated four days later. And so I was like, "Well, why hasn't nobody done this?" I mean, why, in 1995 nobody's done it. And then he says, "I don't know." And I said, "Well, certainly we can't fight for rights we don't know about, so I went on to, you know, to found the National Center for Human Rights Education to teach us about human rights. I just found out though a decade later...Carol Anderson has written this fabulous book called, *Eyes Off the Prize*, in which she details how the African American Movement of the 1950s, particularly the NAACP, intentionally jettisoned the human right framework for fear of being called communist. And I swear, that's the missing why-don't-we-know-about-it question that I asked ten years ago. Because it had intentionally been abandoned in this war between W.E. B. DuBois and Walter White, with, you know, male egos—ah, forgive me. But anyway—I mean, I don't mind sleeping with men, but working with them is a whole 'nother thing. But, you know, the whole movement got set back between this battle between DuBois and Walter White,

³⁰⁵ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the most recognized civil rights leaders in U.S. history and the most visible advocate for non-violence and direct action as methods for social change. King was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. On the 4th of April 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

where the NAACP said, “We will not even say the word human rights, we will only say the word civil rights.” And I was like, okay. So anyway, short answer. There are eight categories of human rights: civil rights, political rights, economic rights, social rights, cultural rights, environmental rights, developmental rights, and sexual human rights. And so my job at the National Center for Human Rights Education was to teach people what all those categories of human rights are, and how to leverage those categories in our activism for social change. And so Sister Song felt that for us to talk about what women of color need, we need to talk about the right to a living wage, the right to affordable housing, the right to healthcare, the right to be free from violence. You know, all of these affect our reproductive destinies. You just can’t talk about pregnant or not. And so we felt that the human rights framework was the appropriate framework for us, but at the same time, we weren’t sure that the American public would understand the human rights framework, because it does take that intervention to teach us about it. And so, again, we use the phrase “reproductive justice” as reproductive rights married to social justice as...as what we mean. Now we’ve since evolved our definition of reproductive justice. Because now we tend to see it as the full achievement and protection of women’s human rights. So that the labor, the reproduction, the sexuality of women and girls can no longer be exploited. Um, and the end of reproductive oppression. We’ve got a lot of discussion papers about it. And in a way, we’re like doing cutting edge analyses, because we’re looking at all the old theories of intersectionality. People like Kim Crenshaw³⁰⁶ and Audre Lorde³⁰⁷ and Tony Cade Bambara even wrote about what we’re looking at, intersectionality through a reproductive rights lens. The same way the Anita Hill case made us look at sexual harassment through an intersectional lens and stuff like that. And so that’s why Sister Song is kind of like...it’s not only exciting to us as women of color, but it’s exciting to White women who are looking for a radical home. You know, and so that’s what we’ve kind of become.

Zakiya: So I want to, you know, I have a few more questions. And I want to talk about something that might seem like a bit of a shift, but even before going to the National Center for Human Rights Education, you were actually working on the Center for Democratic Renewal, which was known as a sort of before-hand the anti-Klan network. And some would see that as a bit of a shift to go from that sort of work to human rights to reproductive rights. And I just sort of wondering if you could talk about sort of, well, how you see the connection between those areas of like reproductive rights organizing, human rights organizing, and fighting the right...

Loretta: Well, actually the biggest shift was that after 15 or 20 years working in the women’s movement, I got offered a job to work in the civil rights movement. And I...I have to honestly say I didn’t know much about the civil rights movement. I had launched my career in the women’s movement. And I was a Black person, but that don’t mean I knew about civil rights. I mean, you don’t get it through osmosis biology. You actually

³⁰⁶ *Kimberle Crenshaw* is one of the leading theorists on the concept of “intersectionality” which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

³⁰⁷ *Audre Lorde* (1934-1992) was an African-American lesbian poet and feminist theorist.

have to work. And so when they first offered me the job as program director at CDR, I was a little skeptical, because the civil rights movement is still a strongly patriarchal movement. And it is a extremely religious movement. Now, I neither believe in the patriarchy nor religion so I felt like a bad fit. But I'm glad I took the job because one of the things that frustrated me about working in the women's movement is I had to work on racism through a gendered lens. Where as when you're work...taking in the Ku Klux Klan, you get to work on racism. White supremacy, no lenses need apply. You really get to work directly on racism and White supremacy and understanding the interplay between the far right, the religious right, the ultra-conservatives like, you know, the George Bushes of the world. And then the institutional everyday bigots we have to put up with. Understanding the relationship between those four distinct but cooperative forces. And so it felt like a leap going from women's rights to civil rights. But then transitioning from civil rights to human rights didn't seem like such a big leap. Because as I say, civil rights is one of the categories of human rights. And then bringing it all together into reproductive justice where I am. It feels very smooth to me. But I have to honestly say the five years I spent monitoring hate groups gave me an understanding of White supremacy that I still use today. Because I actually do believe that a large fight...a part of the fight over reproductive rights and abortion rights is about forcing White women to have more babies. I don't think White America really wants women of color to have more babies. I mean, nothing in our history has convinced me that they suddenly find our children desirable, you know? [laughs] But I do think that they're trying to outlaw abortion and contraception as a form of population control directed towards White women. Young White people at that. I mean, when you couple sexual ignorance, abstinence education, the removal of birth control and prohibitions on abortion into one seamless narrative, the only thing you're going to end up with is a lot more White babies for very young women. That's the only thing that's going to happen with that scenario. And it's hard for me to be persuaded that it's accidental. That they don't know what they're doing. And I think people of color end up being road kill in that scenario. They don't really mean for us to have more babies. They don't really mean for us to, you know, to...to fall into that trap. And so an analysis of White supremacy is something that I think the Pro-Choice Movement does too little of. They are concerned, for example, that there's only one remaining abortion clinic in Mississippi. But they're oblivious to the way that anti-woman politics is used to usher in an anti-civil rights agenda in Mississippi. Because this is the state that vote to maintain the Confederate flag, too. And so because of their failure to look at the intersection of racial and gender politics, they only address the gender side, without addressing the racial side, and they don't see how other conservatives in Mississippi mobilize their racist vote using gender issues, and they mobilize the gender vote using racial issues, and it really works like Mississippi politics have always worked. But you have the women's movement only looking at the gender aspects, as if the racism is over. And it takes women of color to add that very special analysis to that situation.

Zakiya: Hm. So you've actually written on, you know, all the sort of topics that we've talked about thus far. And when people often sort of talk about scholar activists, they often mean people in the academy who sort of remain connected to organizations outside the academy. But you're...you've been very involved outside

the academy and you've also begun to publish though, and you've been writing consistently things that are read outside and inside the academy. So it just...sort of talking, thinking about sort of your relationship between activism and publishing, sort of how you see yourself as sort of scholar-activist/activist-scholar, sort of how that works for you.

Loretta: If anything, I am certainly an accidental writer. I did not plan on being a writer. But what I've found in organizing communities of color, particularly Black women, is that we didn't know our own history. I mean, when I had to mobilize Black women for the marches in the '80s I mean, the first thing would come out of our mouths is, "We don't care about that stuff, that's White women's issues." You know. And I was like wait a moment. You know, far as I know, Black women have always cared about our fertility. We were forced breeders under slavery. I mean, how can we not care about this stuff? It didn't make sense to me. And so I started doing research to bolster my arguments and I started talking about, you know, how slaves refused to have babies, for whole plantations, as a way of resisting slavery and, you know, what happened after slavery was that the Black birth rate was cut in half, and I started talking about what happened when the Black women's newspapers of the time were talking about motherhood at our own discretion versus forced breeding and all of that. And once I started bringing in that historical data, I found it wasn't compiled anywhere. It wasn't put together. I was having to, you know, do some very primitive historical research to find this stuff, because I didn't know anything about primary, secondary, sources. I didn't know any of that stuff. I still don't actually know. I fake it. Um, and so it eventually ended up being a manuscript called "African American women and Abortion" that I wrote in '92, you know, after about five or six years of research. And that was because of partnership with those women in the academy. I have to pay particular tribute to woman named Stanlie James who's at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, because Stanlie brought me up there to give a lecture on Black women's activism, and then she was the one that just hounded me till I wrote it down, just hounded me till I wrote it down. And eventually, I published it in her and Abena Busia's anthology— "African American Women and Abortion". So then partnership with my girlfriends in the academy that kind of forced me to keep writing more so than me feeling like I'm a writer. I mean, I always cringe when someone calls me a writer, and I'm like, I don't think so. I actually did my best writing of proposals, trying to keep my organizations afloat. But I'm slowly beginning to accept that I can, you know, at least do historical research and put it together in a narrative that convinces us that we have a history of organizing and stuff like that. I mean, I would never qualify I think as a legitimate historian, but I certainly can qualify as a, like you say, scholar-activist – emphasis on activist less on the scholar. But I am in college getting a degree in Women's Studies trying to add some theory to my 35 years of practice. So eventually when I emerge from this process with a Ph.D. in Women's Studies then I'll have more emphasis on the scholar than the activist part.

Zakiya: Wow. So I really just have one more question, which is kind of a big one, but maybe you can just say a couple words on it, which is sort of, what do you think will be the role of sort of young people, particularly women in like, developing

the path of like women's organizing and particularly around reproductive rights organizing?

Loretta: What will be the role of young women, and young people?

Zakiya: Particularly of color obviously, but...

Loretta: Well, one thing I've learned from a woman back when I was 21 years old and mouthy and thought that I knew everything, I met this woman named Ruth—I've forgotten her last name. But she had known Mary McCleod Bethune³⁰⁸. So that's how old she was. And she had this, you know, blue hair that older Black women, you know, favored at one time and the tight girdles and stuff. And Ruth and I were both on the Commission for Women, the DC Commission for Women. And Ruth one time gently explained to me when I was talking about their timidity. I was actually, you know, mouthy, and "Why don't we go to the mayor's office and tell him off," and, you know we were under Marion Barry, so we had a whole lot to tell him. But anyway, and she was like "Loretta, you know, chill." She didn't use this word, but basically said "Shut up," you know, but...And she said our job was to open the door so that women like you could get in. But if you think a woman like you with that hair sticking out all over your head – because these are in the baby dread days – you know [laughs], and, you know, your lack of polish, your lack of tact...I mean, she didn't say it in this many words, but this is what she was able to...would have gotten in the door, it wouldn't have happened. And so our job was to open the door, your job is to kick it open. And if you really know your job, you won't be a gatekeeper keeping other people out. You know? And so that's what I got when I was in my twenties. So I think every generation has the right to define the struggle on their own terms. And it's not our right to look back or forward, to tell people what they should or should not be doing. If you are doing your job, you're trying to figure out how to best play the hand you've been dealt. And if you preoccupy yourself with that, the rest will take care of itself. I'm not a believer in second...in third wave feminism, no. That, I get in a lot of trouble for saying that. Because frankly, I don't think the second wave is over. And I'm not hearing anything third wave feminists are saying that is that original from what women of color have said all along. Until you make a sharply revolutionary take. Now if the third wave feminists wanted to do something really original, I think it would be to build a human rights movement that hasn't happened yet in this country. But continuing to argue identity politics endlessly is scarcely not original enough for me to consider it a whole new wave [laughs]. Um...but that's, you know, Loretta's personal critique. I also don't think we're going to build successfully the women's movement if we don't spend a lot of time talking about the role of men. Because we're not going to make this revolution by ourselves. Just like Black folks could not end racism without the participation of White folks. You know, we've got to figure out how to build movement in which everybody's included and nobody's left out. And so I think we've got to go beyond identity politics and really focus on our commonality as

³⁰⁸ *Mary McCleod Bethune* (1875-1955) grew up in poverty in South Carolina but due to her scholastic ability was able to receive scholarships. She organized local voting rights campaigns, stood up against the Ku Klux Klan and became a sought-after speaker. She was appointed to various government posts, often as the first African American.

human beings. But not as a little namby-pamby, color-blind way. I like you to notice that I'm Black and I think you're crazy if you don't. But at the same time, you know, I am not defined by my oppressions so nobody should be.

Zakiya: Oh, I think that's a great place for us to stop. I'd like to thank you for joining us today for this interview.

Loretta: Well, thank you. Thanks for having me.

Zakiya: No problem. Thank you.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Sista II Sista
Interviewer: Nadine Naber**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: January 23, 2004**

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Sista II Sista is a Brooklyn-wide, community-based organization located in Bushwick, New York. It is a collective of working class young and adult Black and Latino women building together to model a society based on liberation and love. The organization is dedicated to working with young women of color to develop personal, spiritual and collective power. Sista II Sista is committed to fighting for justice and creating alternatives to the systems we live in by making social, cultural and political change. Sista II Sista's involved in a variety of projects. Three examples of their work include: The Freedom School for Young Women of Color, The Big Mouth Project which is a series of workshops and talks on violence against women, ageism, sexism, sexual harassment, peer pressure and understanding multiple expressions of oppression and privilege. Another project is Sista Liberated Ground, a community action project to fight violence against women of color in their community without relying on the police.

Nadine Naber is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Women's Studies and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Anthropology. She received her Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Davis. Her research and teaching focus on Arab American Studies; Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms; Race and Ethnicity; and Colonialism and Post-Colonial Theory. She is currently writing a book entitled, *De-Orientalizing Diaspora: Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity among Arab American Youth in San Francisco, California*. She is conducting new research on the ways that class, gender, sexuality, and religion have intersected within Arab American engagements with anti-Arab racism following September 11th. Nadine is a co-editor, with Rabab Abdulhadi and Evelyn Alsultany, of *Gender, Nation, and Belonging*, a special issue of the MIT On Line Journal of Middle East Studies on Arab American Feminisms. She is co-editing a forthcoming book with Amaney Jamal entitled *From Invisible Citizen to Visible Subject: Arab American Engagements with Race before and after September 11th*. She has published articles that situate Arab American Studies in the context of U.S. racial and ethnic studies, and women of color feminisms in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *the Journal of Ethnic Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. She is co-founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, North America (cyber AWSA); Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ) and Arab Women's Activist Network (AWAN) and a former board member of Incite! Women of Color against Violence; Racial Justice 9-11; and the Women of Color Resource Center.

Transcript of Sista II Sista

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*³⁰⁹

Nadine Naber: We're here today with Verónica Giménez and Loira Limbal. Welcome to Michigan and thanks for joining the Global Feminisms Project and coming out here today to tell us about Sista II Sista and the grassroots organizing work you do. Welcome Verónica.

Verónica Giménez: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Nadine: And welcome Loira.

Loira Limbal: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Nadine: It's great to be here with you today. Let me begin by telling you what we'll be talking about during the interview. First we're...I'll ask you some questions about your personal histories and then we'll talk about Sista II Sista as an organization, and some of the work you do with Sista II Sista. How does that sound?

Verónica : Sounds great.

Nadine: So when we were talking yesterday, it was interesting to hear about how the members of Sista II Sista come from such diverse backgrounds. So maybe we can start by hearing about your own backgrounds, your personal histories, and, you know, where you were born, where you grew up, and...and then you can take it from there.

Verónica : Okay. Um, I was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and my family actually comes from Argentina. They migrated to Caracas way before I was born, and then they migrated to New York, all in search of a better life, all in search of trying to find some economic and political stability for their life. Um, and so my experience moving to New York at the age of seven was basically I...well, I really came to politicization right away in terms of looking at...comparing the United States to Venezuela and being really let down, being really upset, being really angry at my parents for being...for having brought us, not understanding why my father would have left us to live in the United States for more than a year prior to us joining him. And, and really I just remember being really angry and watching TV and then going to my mom and crying in her lap and asking why...what are we doing here? And I think it was more about the developmental age that I was at where I

³⁰⁹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

started really looking at, people are being shot every day, I don't remember this in Venezuela, and it was just, I was younger and I didn't see that...

Loira: Yeah.

Verónica : ...on TV or whatever. Plus, also the coldness of New York in terms of the culture, and even though there's tons of different people, I just wasn't really relating to anybody except new immigrants that lived on the block who were my age or something. And then in terms of racial understanding, my racial consciousness, I think my family, it was a big difference for me when my family moved from where a community full of new immigrants, um, from all around the world to then my family's bought a like crack house³¹⁰ old home that was sold by the...by the government. That was like through this place where it was Richmond Hill, New York, a community of mostly Guyanese and Caribbean-born immigrants but for a second generation already. And where I had to be located to go to school, I had to be bused to a white area called Howard Beach. And it was about two years after they had a very dramatic episode in Howard Beach where mostly third generation Italians who were living in America who considered themselves Italian American full blood had chased down this young African-American male, down a highway and he got run over, and it was all this thing surrounding racism and getting blacks out of their neighborhood basically. And when...so my racial consciousness really became blown when I was not willing to be accepted under the Italian...

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : ...like auspice. They were willing to say, well, since my father's last name has an Italian descendency, they were like, well, you're Italian too. And I was like "No, I'm not, I'm not Italian, I'm not Italian American, and I related more to being Venezolana and bringing up my identity that way. And then when I went to high school, there was...it was just real easy. I had a lot of trouble with my parents and I had to look...I chose to go to a high school far away, so I went to a high school in Brooklyn, in Flatbush, Brooklyn where it was real clear the dichotomy—either you were down with the rich, white Jews that lived in the upper scale part of Flatbush, or you lived with...or you were down with the Latinos and Blacks who were....who lived in what's known as Flatbush—more of like the low... low community....lower class, working class community. And so that's where really I started identifying more to African American community and participating within the African American Union that they had there, and also the Latinos Unidos group that they had there.

Nadine: So what about college? Did you go to college?

Verónica : Yeah, I did go to college. Um, I didn't want...I was afraid of leaving New York. I had heard horror tales of what happens outside of New York in the United States. So I purposely looked for a school within New York City's boundaries, and I went to the New School for Social Research. It was a private school. It didn't look like I was going to get to go up until the week before class started because of financial aid problems. Um,

³¹⁰ House where crack-cocaine users do drugs.

and when I did end up going, it was a shock in terms of realizing that they were really selling and promoting diversity, and “new curriculum” like touchy-feely, race-class-gender curriculum. But when you really brought in your own hardcore experiences, there was conflict in the classroom. So it was okay to talk about it in theory but when you were talking about what really happens, just coming...the difference in terms of coming into Manhattan from living in, in Jamaica-Queens, Richmond Hill area . . .

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : . . . then you have, there was a real problem. And then there...then it was real obvious that they had a rotating door policy with all staff of color, which became my mentors, which became my models there. And then...so by the third year, I was totally disillusioned when they didn't rehire my mentor, Jackie Alexander and that was about it. And it was actually around the third year when I had...my connections to Sista II Sista came around my third year when I had a white professor tell me you should think about teaching at El Fuente, because I wanted to be a teacher, a dance teacher. And I went to a school called El Fuente Academy for Social Peace and Justice, and...and that's where I met Ajua and I met Jenny, two of like the original co-founders, or whatever. Um, but two members who were members at Sista II Sista, and started talking about Sista II Sista, and asked me to perform at one of our nat—or our annual fundraisers, and that's how I got introduced to Sista II Sista.

Nadine: All right. Thanks.

Verónica : Yeah.

Nadine: And what about for you, Loira? Can you tell us...?

Loira: I have to do all that too? [laughter] Oh, boy. Well, I was born in Puerto Rico, both of my parents are from the Dominican Republic. And I came to New York when I was about three years old with my mother and my aunt, and we moved, we first came to the South Bronx, then from the South Bronx we moved to Harlem. And from Harlem we moved to Washington Heights, back to Harlem, back to the South Bronx. I really have lived like uptown. You know, I'm like an uptown New York girl [laughter], through and through. And I think, you know, in terms of just, you know, becoming involved in community work and social justice work, I think pretty similar to Verónica, it was through the experience that I...the different experiences that I went through. My mother didn't speak English and so a lot of times I would have to translate for her in all kinds of circumstances, and I remember one time I went to the unemployment office with her, and, you know, just seeing how impatient people were with like the fact that like, you know, they had to talk to this immigrant woman who doesn't speak English, and, “oh, I really have to end up talking to like a seven-year-old, you know, eight-year-old kid” and just being really impatient with that, and I felt like, really treating her like she was just dumb, you know, like being disrespectful to her. Which for me was hard to see because, you know, I really looked up to my mom, like I was a little kid, you look up to your moms. You don't really want to see people talking down to your mother, you know. Lot

of those types of experiences, you know. First time I got called a nigger, you know, on the street, Midtown Manhattan, you know, like New York is supposed to be whatever, you know.

Verónica : The melting pot.

Loira: Yeah. There's everybody and everything and, you know, I'm walking down, it was like on 50 something street, and, um, it was raining. This, um, short, Jewish man had a big, big umbrella, and...and we were walking, and like he walked past, past me and almost hit me with his umbrella. I have to duck, but somehow, for some reason, he was upset at me or something, you know, and just like stopped and was like, "Nigger!" you know, and just kind of like was really ill about it, you know, and I was young. I remember kind of like standing there and being like, "what just...what just happened?", you know, like, it was like a normal day, I was doing normal things. I didn't...I couldn't...I didn't have a come back or anything, you know, because I was just kind of like...you know.

Verónica : Thrown for a loop.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: You know, and just like a bunch of different experiences that...And I remember seeing the *Eyes on the Prize* series³¹¹ also when I was really young and like seeing all those images, you know, all Black folk being like beat and hosed down and everything like...Just a lot of stuff made me altogether with my experience, and you just start questioning things that I saw around me. I remember my uncle had just come from the Dominican Republic and I guess somebody had done something in our neighborhood, and they were look...they were looking for a tall, Black dude, right? And my uncle fit that description. He was a tall Black dude, you know. And I was coming home from school. Mad³¹² people are around, the cops...cops have my uncle like up against the wall, you know, on this like fence. His face is like all pressed up into the...to the bars of the fence and everything and then all this commotion. And they're looking for this person and the description like when you look, when you really looked at the description, it didn't have anything to do with my uncle. My uncle had just gotten here, didn't speak English, nothing, you know. It was just like "Welcome to America," you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

³¹¹ *Eyes on the Prize* is a 14-part series chronicling the U.S. Civil Rights movement. The series first aired by on Public Broadcasting Service in the late 1980s. The series dealt with such landmark events as the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott of 1955-56, the 1963 March on Washington, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, but also documented the workings of the movement on a grassroots level, presenting events and individuals often overlooked. Produced by Blackside, Inc., one of the oldest minority-owned film and television production companies in the country, the series received over 23 awards, including two Emmys.

³¹² Used in this way "mad" means "many" or "crazy amounts of." This is not the same as the British English usage of "mad" as simply meaning "crazy" or "insane," nor does it mean "angry".

Loira: It was his like welcoming wagon³¹³ or whatever. And just all those things, seeing all those kinds of injustices, which at the time I didn't see as injustice, but I just saw it as like not good, not right. Why, why, why...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...does it have to be like this? Why are all the buildings in my neighborhood burnt down, and when you go to downtown Manhattan it's like the sidewalks are huge and really clean and there's doormen and, you know, and all these kinds of like questions started coming up. And slowly but surely, you know, you kind of... somebody comes by and tells you something that sparks your interest, you know, at a certain point in your life, and you're like, oh, you know, let me go check that out. And so I began...like began being involved in community work through that kind of wanting to understand and wanting to talk to people that were talking about why things were the way that they were...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...in our neighborhoods and stuff, so...it's a little bit of my...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...history stuff.

Nadine: Thanks. So...so in a way you answered the question about what brought you into organizing. So maybe we can shift to a discussion about Sista II Sista. It was beautiful last night when Verónica was talking about how...she talked about Sista II Sista as her heart and soul. So maybe I can ask you to go into some of what *is* Sista II Sista. Let's start there.

Verónica : Well, Sista II Sista, um...well, let's...I'm going to share a little bit about the history of Sista II Sista. Um, Sista II Sista basically came around, came together in 1996 when a circle of women really started discussing the reality that there was no real space for young women of color in particular. If you went to a community organization or a cultural organization, then youth organizing wasn't really a topic, wasn't something central, wasn't something to be discussed. If you went to a youth organization, then women's issues wasn't, wasn't central, didn't even fit in the scope of their discussion. And if you went to a woman's organization, youth was last.

Loira: Women of color, working class...

³¹³ The *Welcome Wagon* was founded in 1928 to greet new homeowners and familiarize them with their new communities. Originally, "hostesses"—women who were friendly and knowledgeable about their neighborhood—would personally deliver baskets of gifts supplied by local businesses to new homeowners and tell them about local civic and cultural activities in the community. Today, the organization welcomes families to their new homes by providing them with the names and numbers of local businesses and services via mail or the internet. Welcome Wagon serves approximately 2 million families every year.

Verónica : Yeah. Yeah.

Loira: ...women of color wasn't at the center, so...'

Verónica : Yeah. So...So that's basically where Sista II Sista came to in terms...

Loira: And things...just to add, there was...um, a bunch of people were at a...a Black student leadership conference or something like that. I mean, in the...

Verónica : Out in the West somewhere.

Loira: I'm getting the title wrong. And they were sitting there and there was all these like workshops and panels and things talking about young Black and Latino men...

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: ...like the experience of young Black and Latino men in urban centers in the inner city, really talking about young men as like this kind of endangered species...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because there's lot of stuff coming at them and, you know, police brutality and all of these things, and gangs, and blah-blah-blah. And they were kind of like, yo, but there's like a whole lot of young Black and Latina women like there's nobody talking about. Like, what about their experiences? What about the things that they go through? You know, and from there coming back and being like, yo, there really isn't a space that's focused on us, you know...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...for us to be able to share our experiences and to kind of think of, you know, of like what we would like things to look like, what we would like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, how we would like things to be different and how we could do that, you know, and...So that was kind of like the...it's part of...it was partly a reaction, you know, to the lack of spaces, but also I think envisioned as a place where, you know, women could come together to collectively do things, you know, young women of color could collectively do things.

Nadine: And when was that early period?

Loira: It was '95-'96.

Nadine: '95-'96.

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: And so...so what happened then? I mean, how...how...how was it formed?

Verónica : Well, originally the group of women of color started discussing the need to have something, a space for the holistic development of young women, for young women and by young women. And so then originally what came out of that was the idea of having a program, an annual program that came together in the summer, and it was all by volunteer...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...effort and time. And that was the beginning of the Freedom School for Young Women of Color. It originated as like a summer event that, you know, people pulled together out of any and all resources they could, you know, catching a couple extra books from the high schools where they were teaching or bringing in some material, and just...and starting to start the discussion basing on the histories of radical women of color, getting revol—like that was one of the major topics, revolutionary women in history...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...of color. And so looking at that. And then it just sort of developed. I'm not sure when it was that we started the discussion of not reproducing some of the...the power dynamics that currently exist, because that, there was a shift...

Loira: Another organization.

Verónica : ...yeah, in our own organization.

Loira: The thing too about that was like we would...every summer it was done in like a different place, you know, because we would borrow space from people, so that one summer we used like a church space, one summer we used a school space, like other organizations' spaces. And, and I think too that whole idea with the Freedom School why, you know, it got named the Freedom School was in the tradition of the freedom schools that happened down South during the Civil Rights Movement³¹⁴ and all that, you

³¹⁴ At the height of the *Civil Rights movement* in the United States, leading civil rights groups organized the Freedom Summer of 1964, where thousands of volunteers traveled to the Deep South to fight the disenfranchisement of African Americans there. The effort was concentrated in Mississippi, where in 1962 only 6.7 per cent of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, the lowest percentage in the country. As part of the Freedom Summer, 30 Freedom Schools were established in towns throughout Mississippi. Volunteers taught in the schools and the curriculum now included black history and the philosophy of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1964 over 3,000 students attended these schools.

know, that time period of equated to political education work with people and then be able to take action with people. So, you know, just to, to kind of add that.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And at one point when it started it wasn't a collective, and like Verónica was saying, it was totally, you know, people volunteer. A few people were teachers at the time. Some other people were like just doing other things...

Verónica : Artists, independent, whatever.

Loira: ...um, and so the summer times...And I think it was like this setup of like there was like a core committee and then there were other folks, you know, who were like volunteers or something like that, and through a lot of discussion and a lot of like growing pains, because I know that process is really painful. I wasn't around for it then, but I hear the story that it was a painful process to go through because it involved like checking people on like their power tripping, and, you know, why does this have to be like this, and why does this have to be like that?, and some people left, some people stayed...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know. New people came in. And that's when the decision to become a collective really happened, and to be a collective that would function on a consensus base, you know. So really like trying to create something where everyone's voice was equally important, you know...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and equally...

Verónica : Valued.

Loira: ...valued, yeah. Because we had pr—you know, we had exactly come from a space of being other places and other spaces where our voices weren't valued...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because either we were young or because we were women or because we were young women of color altogether or whatever, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: So we were like we can't, we can't just keep doing that, you know, we can't just keep reproducing it. So that's where the whole collective...which for us is something that is really important and we talk about a lot because we see that in...you know, a lot of

times people are talking about...when they're talking about community organizing, they're talking about, you know, you have an issue that you're working on, right, and so you come up with a campaign and you have a victory and you don't have a victory, and it's kind of like really product-oriented.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Like "what's the end goal" type of thing. Even though the whole time that you're working, you know, there could be like, you know, mad issues and different dynamics that are oppressive and silencing to people but it doesn't matter so long as we get like the victory over there, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Whereas...

Verónica : Which is usually aimed at reform, right? Which is usually aimed at...

Loira: Of an institution...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...or something. Whereas for us, the process of how we work is really important. You know, like for us it's not going to be meaningful, you know, to say for example get 38 new translators in a welfare center and that be our victory if the whole way through, you know, all the women that don't speak English don't have equal say in the campaign, in the work, because they don't speak English and we don't care. You know what I'm saying?

Verónica : Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: Like...So for us it's really, you know, the whole collective thing is more than even a structural thing. It's...it's like what we're about, you know, what we believe in.

Nadine: Um-hum. So the collective is kind of a non-hierarchical group of people who run the organization?

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: I mean is it people from different age groups? Could you tell us more about the collective?

Verónica : Yeah. Well, the collective is...all are Sista II Sista is intergenerational. And the collective is also intergenerational. But we noticed because the collective ends up taking on most of the administrative hardcore like...

Loira: Boring work?

Verónica : ...the...yeah, the boring work, that it wasn't really attractive to all of our young...younger Sista members. Right. And also I'd like to say something that I meant to say earlier. Which is usually we wouldn't be here two adult members, collective members representing Sista II Sista. This is not...this is also a configuration that we're not very comfortable with because it's always been important for us to make sure that young women's voice is represented through her, like by her own speaking, you know, through her presence. And because of the...the dates in which our...

Loira: It's a Thursday and a Friday

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...you know, high school students are in high school. They're in school right now.

Verónica : Yeah, there's no way that they could miss two days. And so...

Nadine: And because the interview took place on a Thursday or Friday...

Verónica : And so far away...

Nadine: ...the younger girls couldn't come?

Verónica : Yeah. Exactly. And so I think there, if...if the questions were being thrown to a younger sister...

Nadine: Um-um.

Verónica : ...I'm sure they would be saying it, you know, answering it through their eyes. And so in that way...But to bring it back to the collective, once we started realizing that even though we were inviting and trying to schedule it around their schedules, the meetings that...two three-hour meetings once a month weren't interesting and fun and people weren't coming, then we had to...we had to really hold ourselves accountable to our saying we want everyone to be part of the decision-making process.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : And so that's where we discussed the idea of creating squads, which is another like...

Loira: Body.

Verónica : Yeah, it's another body of younger sisters coming together and participating within the program of our organization, within the structure, the, you know. And so that's basically...

Loira: And we have a board too.

Nadine: The board can't come here.

Verónica : Yeah. Which is an advisory board?

Loira: Yeah. They don't have like decision...

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: ... making... I mean, they have decision-making power but it's not usually like how most boards function or whatever. Um, and the squads, they really like kind of lead most of the programmatic work of the organization. So they've gone through...it's like normally young women that have gone through the Freedom School Program.

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: Um, have finished like a cycle of the Freedom School. Then go through training and then are like stipended³¹⁵ to be able to be around, you know, Sista II Sista more, to be able to take on kind of, you know, facilitation of workshops and developing curriculum for other young women their ages, and to really be leading the community, organizing work, choosing the issues, thinking about the strategies and stuff like that. And the squads too, with the whole thing of being stipended was something that really, we had to really think about. Because one of the issues that's very real is that young women in our communities either have to work after school or have to take care of a younger sibling. So participation of young women in, you know, in something like this sometimes isn't valued by like family, you know, or just they just can't do it, you know, financially they can't do it or whatever. And so, you know, it's like a lot of things that...You know, I think in this conversation that we, I've had with...with some other folks, it's like, you know, women-only spaces and stuff for young women I think is really different than creating stuff for...just for young men, you know, young-men-only spaces. Because I feel like there's so much other...there's so much more pressure on young women to have a different kind of responsibility within their homes than there is for young men, you know, which kind of makes like, you know, that their participation that much harder, you know, and something that's outside of the home, you know. At least I feel that way in our communities, you know.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Nadine: Well, this is a perfect transition to go into some of the projects since you started talking about the programmatic. So maybe I can ask you to tell us a little bit about some of the projects that...that you're working on.

³¹⁵ A *stipend* is a set pay or compensation for services, paid daily, monthly, or annually.

Verónica : Sure. Well, I can, I can discuss a little bit about our current organizing project...

Nadine: Okay.

Verónica : ...which is “Sista’s Liberated Ground.” And much like we...like Loira was mentioning about us...about it not being goal oriented strictly. It’s very much about the process. Just like the collective and the squads. If we need to...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...we need to create another function, like now it’s important for us to find...to better incorporate youth that are passing out of the squads and into the Collective or into more of the staff, so we’ve created a new youth staff position. With, with our SLG work, it’s also about the process. Where we think...like we’ve already addressed through a video “You Have the Right to Break the Silence,” and through two seasons’ amount of work, like the reality of police harassment, um, on young women of color, in particular within our own communities, we also realize that when there is domestic abuse or familial abuse, calling the police is not really going to solve our issues. And we don’t...and we don’t think that domestic abuse is a woman’s issue. You know, we think of it more as it affects everybody. If we were to call the police or...or if a sister is to be killed like one sister was fighting with her mother by a police officer, it affects the whole family, it affects the whole community, it reverberates throughout the block, throughout the neighborhood. And it affects all of our safety. And so we look as Sistas Liberated Ground as a community effort, as a community work. So what we’re trying to do is we’re trying to change the culture of violence that currently exists within ourselves, within interpersonal relationships, within our families and throughout the community. So the ways in which SLG is trying to affect that culture is by (1), doing cultural events, doing hardcore propaganda stating that violence will no longer be tolerated within a designated zone. Um, and (2), by promoting discussion. We’re having like what we call Sista Circles, which are more like forums for us to throw out issues and discuss it and try to hold one another accountable on if we say we’re not going to, you know, we’re not...we’re not tolerating violence then...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...what’s up with somebody just yelled at you. You just yelled at somebody back. What’s going on? You know, and you hit somebody...your little sister? Why? You know. Then we also have an action line which is a way for all community members and all interested people to find out how they can be involved. And, and we also have...what am I missing? Sista Circles, Action Line, propaganda, and...

Loira: There’s something else.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Destroy police. Oh-h-h...

Verónica : I'm blanking out, the light, no. [laughter]

Loira: Sista Circles.

Verónica : Workshops and trainings.

Loira: There we go.

Nadine: Right. [laughter] I see.

Verónica : How could we forget? [laughs] Workshops and training. Which is a space for us to practice, to practice how...self defense, personal self defense, collective self defense. A variety...yeah.

Loira: Whatever, you know, folks in the community identify. Like we had had a couple of community meetings with different women from the...the immediate area where we're at and, um, you know, people brought up like, you know, "We want a workshop on this, or we would want a workshop on that," or...

Verónica : Um-hum. "We want to know how to use mace³¹⁶." "We want to..." like whatever.

Nadine: So who comes? Who comes to these workshops? Who are the people who participate?

Loira: Initially when we were doing the community meetings to even just start talking about the idea of creating a Sista's Liberated Ground, it was intergenerational. Like there was like some teenage women and then some like older women, you know.

Verónica : Mostly recent immigrants.

Loira: Mostly recent immigrants, with their children and stuff...

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: ...like what comes to...It was like a really crazy mix of people. Because like the, you know, like a 15-year-old's energy, and then you have a 45-year-old mother of three who just got off of work. And, but you know, got into the conversation, got into the dialogues. But we've decided now with SLG to focus it really first on young women and not adult women, just because we've found that with the issue of violence, adult women

³¹⁶ *Mace* is a spray that causes tearing and choking when sprayed in the eyes or inhaled. Civilian use is restricted in the U.S. although law enforcement uses train officers to use it. While technically not of the same composition, pepper spray is often referred to as "mace." Use of pepper spray is less restricted and it is sold as a self-defense product.

are much more vocal in identifying that other problem for themselves and talking about their stories, and kind of just taking over space, you know, which would mean that younger women wouldn't...

Nadine: Oh, I see.

Loira: ...wouldn't talk about, "Oh, this is going on with my boyfriend," or "Oh, this is my going on with my girlfriend," or "Oh, this is happening with my, my brother or my uncle," or whatever.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And so, you know, since this is something, you know, it's like right...different, there's not that many models for, you know, kind of community accountability stuff around violence against women, we're like, well, let's try, you know, let's try to focus first on young women and keep it sort of, you know, keep a narrower view and then, you know, see how it goes and see, you know. Just because it's like when you talk about violence...Even when you don't talk about violence. I remember one time going, you know, it was during the Freedom School, and on Saturdays after the Saturday workshops we have like a big meal with, with everyone and just kind of hang out and chill and stuff. And I had gone to like one of the local Dominican Restaurants to pick up the food that we were going to have, and this woman like, you know, like makes me...you know, she's like motions, and she's like, you know, "Come closer," and I go to her and she's like, "Oh, you know, what's that Sista II Sista place, you know? It's something for women, right? And I'm like, "Yeah, you know, we work for young women, blah-blah-blah." She's like, "Oh, because I'm having problems with my husband, you know, and...and I need some help," you know. So I hadn't even said anything about violence...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, and it's like the response is really overwhelming because unfortunately it's so common, right?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Because so many women are going through violence in our communities. So because of all of that, you know. And I think too it's, yeah, we found this like younger women are...it's a little bit harder, or, I don't really know what it is, you know. I wish like a 15-year-old young woman was here to say...

Nadine: Yeah, hm.

Loira: ...but, you know, to identify violence as an issue. People will talk about other things, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: But especially like interpersonal violence or family violence or relationship violence. Whereas an adult woman will talk about her partner being abusive, a younger woman doesn't tend to so easily talk about a partner being abusive. And so because of that we were like, okay, let's focus in over here. So that's really who we're...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, to answer your question.

Nadine: Yeah. Yeah, I know that's really reasonable...

Loira: ...like four hours later. [laughter]

Nadine: Not at all. Every...every piece that you said was really helpful and I...I learned a great deal about the work in concrete ways. So your name is Sista II Sista. The name of your organization is Sista II Sista. You work with women and young...young women, adult women. But I haven't heard you use the term "feminist." So I'm going to provoke you here and ask you to...what do you think of the term? Do you use it? Do you have a position on it?

Verónica : Well, I personally don't use the word feminist or the word activist, um, to describe my work or myself. Um, and I think it's a...it's partly the reality that in the United States what those two words conjure up for me are middle to upper class white people and, when it comes to feminists, women. Um, ah, you know, throwing off the shackles of...of patriarchy here in the United States and rising up and saying, "I want to vote." And...and so that doesn't...that's not me. And I don't relate to that history and, and so I don't use either of those terms.

Nadine: What about for you Loira?

Loira: Yeah, I'm not no feminist, you know.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: I mean, I don't even...you know, like we're talking last night and...and Veró was like "I'd rather use the word organizer than the word activist," and all these things. For me, like all this work, I don't really name it nothing. You know, it's just like, it's just what I have to do, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: It's just my responsibility, you know. Like I want things to be better and different for people in my community. That's it, point blank, you know. And...and it's not just for women, you know. It's...it's for my community, you know. I'm specifically choosing to work with women because I'm a woman and I think we all have different experiences

within our community, you know. But it's not under like any like word, you know, or...or I don't know, whatever, like those categories are...

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, it's just what I have to do, you know. I just see it as like my responsibility, you know, like...you see it and you don't like you, you can't just sit around and complain about it. You've got to try to do something to change it, point blank, you know.

Nadine: So you don't see your work as, you know, feminist work.

Loira: I would never call my work feminist work. It's just like I...I don't...I don't relate at all to that word.

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: Like feminist. Like it's just...and not even like in the, you know, making a point to not use it. It's just not even in my head...

Nadine: Yeah.

Verónica : Yeah, yeah.

Loira: ...it's not part of my vocabulary even, you know. Like...and it's...yeah, it's like, we...It's definitely not in the vocabulary of any of the young women that we work with. It's not...

Verónica : It's not part of our reality.

Loira: Right, it's just like...

Verónica : It's not like...

Verónica : And I think also like at least from what I've seen in the group, in the Collective, it's been sort of like that is more like on a theoretical...like what you might see in universities, trying to...trying to describe to other people in big fancy words what we do. And it's more like why should we even address or respond or, you know, like play within that...that little configuration. It's not necessary. And that's...I know at least for me in terms of activist, that's definitely what it conjures up, like some...somebody who has extra time on their hands, so that's why...you know, and they feel guilty or whatever, and that's what they do. And it's not...doesn't come from like a necessity. Like, no, we need to do this and...and it's just second nature like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...breathing, you know.

Loira: It's funny, that whole feminist thing. Now you got me thinking about it, like, why, you know, like why is it, because, yeah, you know, you're working with women and all of that, but, I think it's what Verónica was saying. It's like for...I don't know for whatever reasons, I don't...I've never studied the history...

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: ...of it or anything, right, but I'm sure there's a bunch of reasons for like why a whole lot of people don't identify with feminism, or the word feminist, or any of that. It's like something has become...you know, it's kind of like how your appendix, you know, how like they...it's like an organ that you have, but you don't really need, and it can be taken out and so, you know, people don't really think about it anymore. You know how peop—things become kind of useless almost, or a non-issue after a time, you know? Like...it's like I wonder about our pinkies, what we really do with our pinkies, you know.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: But, um, I think...I think there's...

Nadine: That is helpful.

Loira: ...there must be reasons for why it's become such a non-factor for a lot of people, to the degree...to the point where it's not...because I think at one point women of color in the U.S. were really trying to respond to the idea of feminism and to mainstream like, white women's feminism...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and came up with like terms like “womanism³¹⁷” and...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...all these other things, right? And I feel like with our generation of folks, or at least the people that I'm around, we're not even trying to respond, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: We just don't even engage it, you know. Because it's just a non-issue...

³¹⁷ Alice Walker's 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* popularized the term “womanist.” The term had a multiple-part definition, the first of which was “a black feminist or feminist of color.” The definition also included aspects of caring about one's whole community—not just women—and spirituality.

Nadine: Yeah.

Loira: ...you know, for us, or something.

Nadine: Well, thanks for, you know, your feedback on that one. That was really interesting.

Loira: I don't know about the appendix, but...

Verónica : [laughter]

Loira: ...I was just trying to say like...I don't...

Nadine: Another thing I thought was interesting from last night's conversation was you had a perspective, both of you, that September 11th wasn't the dividing line of history³¹⁸, you know, in the way that it gets presented to us sometimes in the corporate media. I agree with you. But at the same time, you know, it'd be interesting to hear about whether the issues that you work on, the impact young... young...woman of color, immigrant communities have shifted after September 11th, in New York City.

Loira: I think from, from my perspective, I think we all see that kind of differently. But from my perspective, the issues themselves haven't really changed all that much, you know. At least for us in terms of the work that we're doing around women and violence, you know, against women of color. Like it was violence before, it's still violence, it's still interpersonal, still happening all over the place...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...nobody talks about it, you know. It's not seen as a community issue. It's not really dealt with within the social justice movement.

Nadine: Um- hum.

Loira: So none of that has really changed for us, right? But what has changed is the climate that we're working within, you know.

Nadine: Okay.

³¹⁸ On *September 11*, 2001 two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, New York. This spurred attacks on suspected terrorists in Afghanistan as well as spurred a war in Iraq. There were many ramifications of these attacks in the United States including increased racism and "security" as well as a burgeoning of patriotism and, some argue, a lessening of certain civil liberties through passage of the Uniting and Strengthening American by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (also known as USA PATRIOT ACT or Patriot Act).

Loira: Because I feel like so many things that got...that were kind of achieved by folks bef—prior to 9/11³¹⁹ right? Like, you know...

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: ...we were talking about, you know, New York City stuff and during the Giuliani³²⁰ period, you know, people I feel like were so aware, you know, and like had become politicized around how messed up Giuliani was, you know, because he messed with like every segment of the population, from like the average brother that's like, you know, selling drugs on a corner to like your 85-year-old, you know, grandmother on a bus complaining about how Giuliani is like cutting this and cutting that, to your City University student, to your street vendor, to your taxi driver -- like everybody got screwed over by Giuliani, and it was like everybody knew that, you know, and people were talking about it.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: It was very like out in public space -- at least in our communities. You know, I don't know about all of New York City, but people talked about Giuliani all the time. People was cursing him out on the regular, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Which is great, because people were like engaged in politics and thinking about stuff and...you know. And I think too like in New York City, the Anti-Police Brutality Movement³²¹, you know, was really strong to the point where like everybody, you know would talk about how, you know, the cops, there's so much misconduct, and, you know, blah-blah-blah. And like those things got undone by 9/11, you know. Like Giuliani went out of office as a hero.

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: He was a hero, he saved people's lives. "Wow, he was so great! He was at Ground Zero³²²". And I'm not trying to be like not sympathetic, like because a lot of people died, and that's never good, that's never like a pretty thing, you know, to see people's like sorrow. But it undid so many things, you know -- the police were heroes. You know, like God forbid that you question the police now, you know. So I think what has changed is the climate, you know, and I feel like 9/11 shut down a lot of doors that had been opened up, you know, in terms of being able to talk to people about different issues, you know. Like people kind of shut down. Like now Giuliani's a hero, now the

³¹⁹ 9/11 is another way people refer to September 11th

³²⁰ Rudy Giuliani was the mayor of New York City from 1994 to 2001. He was in office during the attacks on the World Trade Center, and was voted Person of the Year by *Time* magazine for the way he handled the disaster.

³²¹ *Anti-Police Brutality Movement* aims to end police brutality in the U.S. and around the world.

³²² *Ground Zero* is the site of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, where the World Trade Center towers once stood.

police are great, you know, they save people's lives and...So I think that really changed in New York City after 9/11, and not necessarily so much, you know, on the issues, in terms of our Sista II Sista work.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Loira: I think for other folks, you know, like immigrant rights stuff, I think has changed a lot...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, so I think other segments of the population have definitely been affected in different ways, you know. But in terms of violence against women, 9/11 is not like the...

Verónica : Um-um-um.

Loira: ...the beginning of history or anything for us, you know.

Verónica : Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, and I think also to me, what I really, really noticed is the whole...the way in which now the police can basically do whatever they want. And I do think that it's getting to the point where more people are talking about it, right? Like more people are like...now it's an offense to not stop while you're driving when you see a police officer, like right away like...Like they can give you a ticket for anything. You, you swipe, you pass and something happens on the Metro and they can arrest you for something as simple as, you know, not going back swiping again, they can arrest you for swiping somebody in for free. They can arrest for anything they want, at any time. It doesn't matter what you...you know.

Loira: You can't question them, you know, like...

Verónica : Yeah. At all. And I think that...to...in our communities that was being discussed prior to 9/11.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : Like it was being discussed that they...that...that New York City was becoming a police state prior to 9/11. But then once 9/11 happened, it was like now it has to be a police state.

Nadine: Um-um-um.

Verónica : This is a security threat.

Loira: Now it's safety.

Verónica : Now they...yeah. Now they...Now it's not racial profiling when they stop every Black man in the, in the car. Now it's security.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : Now if you're driving...now if you're riding a bus, what we got to worry about, carrying...taking young women on a retreat because they're going to stop us and they're going to want to take everything out, and they're going to want to look through everything, and...and it just gives more chance for more things to happen.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : And so that's really what I see in terms of the work that Sista II Sista does and how New York has changed.

Loira: And there's a climate too of kind of like, you know, like you know that like the Patriot Act³²³...Patriot Act's got passed or whatever, and that they really do now have so many more rights and so much more leeway to pry and to harass...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and to do all kinds of things, right? Into people's lives. And...and I think when at least people that are doing community work in New York City, there is like a level of paranoia...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because, and there's been incidences, you know, where like some of our allies' offices have been broken into and like nothing gets stolen but their like server...main server computer or something, you know, that has had information

Verónica : Well, how the instance that happened to us. Like the date of our first community meeting for SLG, we had this huge, big policeman just...

Loira: Man.

Verónica : ...chilling outside. And like that's the time...

Loira: And then a station...

³²³Passed after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the stated purpose of the *Patriot Act* (H.R. 3162) is "to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes." The Act provides for enhanced domestic security against terrorism, enhanced surveillance procedures, stricter border controls, stronger criminal laws against terrorism, and increased information-sharing among the branches of the intelligence department, among other things. The Patriot Act has been criticized for removing checks on law enforcement and threatening the civil rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike.

Verónica : ...that community members are supposed to be coming to discuss how we don't need to, you know, go to the police.

Loira: And they were stationed in front of our thing for...

Verónica : Like...

Loira: ...in front of our office for two weeks.

Verónica : ...yeah!

Loira: It was like a mobile unit, you know. So just like a lot of . . .

Verónica : Extra . . .

Loira: . . . different things have created...

Verónica : ... created hostility.

Loira: And paranoia.

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: So I think that has also really changed. Like the climate where people are doing work. Where people are much more like, "Oh, we got to be more careful," you know. Like we got to be more sort of aware...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...of, you know, what we're saying, who we're saying it to. How we're doing things, where we're going, you know.

Verónica : You got to keep track of your emails or somehow your email got to somebody else. I didn't send that, how did that happen? All that other...yeah.

Loira: You know, like we can't...got to be more careful in what we involve young women under the age of 18, because the likelihood of being arrested is higher.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: You got to be invol—really, you know, really aware of what we involve in folks in our communities that are undocumented³²⁴...

Nadine: Um-hum.

³²⁴ *Undocumented* immigrants are immigrants that do not have legal permission (or legal documents) allowing them to reside in the United States.

Loira: ...because they can't really afford to be arrested, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And so there's like all these extra kind of precautions and things that you've got to think about post-9/11...

Nadine: Yeah.

Loira: ...that I think are really real and have changed.

Nadine: So you've been talking about local issues, you know. Is there a commitment to linking local issues to global issues? Has Sista II Sista done kind of global-local kind of work?

Loira: Yeah, um, we have, um...we had at one point a Solidarity Work Team, which is really geared at...I mean, I think like again we were saying, you know, right now it's Loira and Verónica talking, and we got...like we're giving kind of our perspective on stuff. But there's a lot of different, really different women within Sista II Sista. And I think one of the things is that...that really shines through is that different folks have really strong connections to different Third World countries, either because they're from there or because of, you know, of family or a friend or...

Verónica : Work.

Loira: ...whatever, work, you know, so people have connections to like everywhere from Mexico to like Chile to Brazil...

Verónica : To Tanzania, to South Africa...

Loira: ...Tanzania. Yeah, you know, and Guyana, like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...all over the place, right. Because we are, we are from all over the place. And through that there's been...you know, prior to even it becoming an organizational thing of having a Solidarity Work Team really geared towards doing solidarity work with women in the Third World, um, even prior to that there was like informally, you know, you would go and, you know, you knew that there was a cooperative of women in Chiapas³²⁵ making, you know, *blusas*³²⁶ or whatever. You buy, you know, you buy it at their ideal price, you know, what they would ideally want, and then you come back and sell it here, a portion of which will make, stays to your organization, goes back to theirs -- economic

³²⁵ *Chiapas* is the Southernmost state in Mexico and site of the Zapatista revolution of 1994, in which the indigenous people of Chiapas rose up against centuries of state oppression.

³²⁶ *Blusas* is Spanish for blouses

solidarity, a bunch of different things. But then we did the solidarity work team, which was the young women had heard about all the stuff that was happening in Juarez, Mexico³²⁷, with the disappearances of all the young women their ages, you know. And they were like, “Oh, that’s crazy messed up, and nobody’s doing nothing about it.” And so on the International Juarez Solidarity Day in No—back in November a while ago, um, they did a...you know, they organized an action in front of the Mexican Embassy in New York City and, you know, did a bunch of stuff. Got petitions. And then right after that the whole war stuff against Iraq started...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...so they...they turned their attention to doing anti-war work.

Nadine: Hm. Um-hum.

Loira: You know, in solidarity, you know, with folks over in Iraq.

Verónica : And well, we also hosted a Palestinian sister coming in, right? And speaking with, um, the Solidarity Team.

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: Oh.

Verónica : Like any chance that we can...that we get, we...we do it.

Loira: To make the connections, right?

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: Because it’s all really connected, you know.

Nadine: All right.

Verónica : Plus also we...we feel that we, like, we take inspiration and we look at models from the Third World. That’s all we...like those are our roots, that’s what we’re working towards, that’s what, you know, we see as important. And also we can’t deny or forget to mention the fact that we’ve had Sista II Sista members go to the World

³²⁷ According to Amnesty International, since 1993 about 400 women have been murdered in this industrial border-city. Many of the women were raped and tortured before their bodies were ditched in desert areas around the city. A large portion of the victims were employed at the maquiladoras -- export-oriented, low-cost manufacturing plants concentrated on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border -- and had to travel long distances to and from work, often late at night. Human rights organizations have worked to find an explanation for the atrocities and assist the families of the victims, but critics say investigations have ground to a halt because of corruption, incompetence and witness intimidation.

Conference Against Racism in South Africa³²⁸, the last two Social Forums in Brazil Porto Alegre³²⁹. So like just...

Nadine: Oh.

Verónica : ...different places where it's very important for us to maintain and build connections and bring it back and...and share that with the rest of us.

Loira: And too, like recognizing that as people of color within the United States -- and this is me, this is like my personal tangent, you know -- but I feel like as people of color that are living in the United States, the analogy that I make is...that was made for me by, by this older dude, one time this older white dude. One time I was really young and I was...I was in some bookstore or something and I was asking him like, "Well, this stuff is so like threatening to the system and so revolutionary, like why...why can we even buy it? Like why do we even have access to it, you know?" And his analogy was like, you know, the United States, it's like...he made the analogy to slavery times, right? And he was like, you know, think of the differences between the conditions that a house slave lives in and a field slave, right? House slave you have some more kind of like amenities and, you know, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, and a little bit of more comfort, and a little bit more cushioning, right? And so you can get caught up in it, and get lost in it, you know. Well, the field slave is a lot more clear, you know, and...you know, pretty like the fact that it can't get any worse than this, you know. Which is the conditions that today, you know, exist in a lot of Third World countries, you know. So I feel like as people within the United States, you know, I think we have like a very specific role, a very particular role that we need to be playing in terms of solidarity with, you know, our brothers and sisters that are in the Third World.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: But, you know, because we are living within the nation that is like...has a huge hand in maintaining the conditions that exist in the Third World, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And like as people that...that kind of benefit from the comforts and the things, you know, that we have here. Like we have that responsibility to, you know, acknowledge

³²⁸ The *World Conference Against Racism* met in Durban, South Africa, from August 31st to September 8th, 2001 to develop programs of action against racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance throughout the world.

³²⁹ The first *World Social Forum* was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 as a response to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual meeting of the world's most powerful political and business leaders. According to its Charter of Principles, the World Social Forum is "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centered on the human person." The Forum has been held annually in Porto Alegre since 2001.

that privilege and also to, to be responsible about it, you know, to be in solidarity with, so...And then I think it's something that, you know, I'm going to venture out and say I think it's something that a lot of folks within Sista II Sista like feel that way, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: You know, so there is a lot of consciousness around international solidarity and things like that.

Verónica : But also I think specifically in terms of working class-like...like solidarity.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : Because I think that's it's, it's not a coincidence that, you know, we're mostly working class sisters of color in Sista II Sista, and we're not really showing solidarity with, with the...with the daughters of the owners of Globo Television³³⁰ or...

Nadine: Um-um. Hm.

Verónica : ...or, you know, the King of Sudan, you know. We're working more like in solidarity with working class folks, you know, or people who are even under that category, so...

Nadine: Well, we have...I know you know that we have a live audience here with us. So we have a few minutes left so maybe we can turn to them and see if they have any questions before we wrap up. How does that sound?

Loira: Sounds good. Let them talk.

Verónica : Great.

Nadine: After you dropped all this knowledge on me, give them a chance to jump in. Does anybody have any questions?

Audience1: I have a very basic question. First of all, thank you so much. It's been really interesting and I'm surprised at how fast the time went. And I have like a basic question in terms of outreach. First of all, what is your space like? And what does it sort of...if you can describe it. I'm really interested to think about what this space might be like. And also do you have a website?

Loira: Um...

Verónica : Go ahead [laughs].

³³⁰ *TV Globo* is the largest television network in Brazil and the fourth largest commercial network in the world.

Loira: We have...our space right now is three kind of small storefronts that are all connected, you know, and so we have...the first room is kind of like, it looks like a living room and it's like a chill space where we have like meals together and stuff. The middle room, um, is pretty emptied out, because that's where we do workshops, that can be like anything from like dance workshops to, you know, more like political education workshops. So for whatever we need to be able to move that around, we kind of keep it emptied out. And then the third space is our office, which is just like a open office, has like a few computers and people just get on whatever computer is open at the time and do their work. And then outreach, what we do for outreach is...we...our main way of doing outreach is going to high schools, local high schools in...in Bushwick, but now also in other parts of Brooklyn.

Nadine: Oh, okay.

Loira: Um, and what we try to do is get into like...and then we have advisory periods in the morning, and so, you know, try to like talk to the principal or whoever, you know, if they're like a cool teacher, then it's like, "Oh, yeah, I want you to come in and talk to my kids," you know. I mean, do presentations, do outreach presentations, give folks information, how they can get involved. Do a lot of cultural events, block parties and stuff. That's like a really good time to do outreach. Go to group homes. Do street outreach at local like hangout spots, at a movie theater or a pizza shop or whatever, you know, and just do a lot of it, you know, because some people will listen, some people won't. Some people will be interested, some people won't. Some...that's pretty much like our outreach strategy, really. Yeah, street, outreach and high school outreach.

Verónica : Out in the field [laughs].

Loira: Yeah. And our website is www.sistaiisista.org.

Verónica : Yeah. And the only thing I would add because you can't forget it about our office is that it's bright. It's brighter than I am [laughs].

Loira: Yes. It's really bright. Super-duper bright.

Nadine: Yeah?

Loira: It's still really bright.

Verónica : We all made our collective pink.

Loira: All the rooms seem bright. Now all the rooms...

Verónica : No, the first two...no, I mean, the last two, right?

Loira: Yeah. Like they're all like just crazy colors basically.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Some of them are bright, some of them are like earthy kind of colors, but it's like everybody got up in there with their hands and it's all over the place.

Audience2: Actually I had a couple questions. It was really wonderful to listen to you talk about Sista II Sista, and I wondered if you could tell us...you mentioned that you had won an award. What that was for, what work that was for in New York. And also what sort of specific coalitions you've been a part of that might give us a little better sense of what kind of issues you deal with outside of the types of things you've talked about. And then if I could squeeze in another one. I'm very intrigued by, and you didn't have time to talk about -- Um, you talked about how, um, I think Nadine mentioned in the beginning the...the Mission Statement. And liberation and love were sort of put together.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Audience2: And that's really evocative for me, and I wonder if you could talk about what you think...you know, what you mean by that, um, sort of as a philosophy or as a organizing principle in the work that you do.

Loira: Okay. So first question was...

Audience2: What was the award for?

Loira: Oh, it was for the Freedom School program. For the Freedom School.

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: So that was just for doing that work. It was like a recognition, the Union Square Award pretty much recognizes, you know, individual folks or group of folks that are doing I think what they call like innovative, you know, community work or something like that, or really important community work. So that's what it was for...

Audience2: Um-hum.

Loira: ...it was for doing the...the workshops. It was in...

Verónica : 2000?

Loira: '99-2000?

Verónica : '99-2000.

Loira: We have bad memories. I'm sorry [laughter].

Verónica : We can't even say we weren't around then [laughs]. It's just our memories.

Loira: We just have bad memories [laughs].

Verónica : So the second one was about, um, the coalition. And we actually have another plaque from when the coalition one, the Coalition Against Police Brutality³³¹...that's one of our major ones, which are all citywide organization... I mean city-based organizations, all people of color, right? People of color led and run organizations, working, doing a considerable amount of work surrounding police brutality and combating it. And our second coalition that we do a lot of work with is Third World Within³³². And Third World Within, again, is another coalition of organizations that are led and run by people of color throughout the city, all working on a variety of issues, everything from immigrant rights to community-specific issues, to...to workers' rights to...we have everything, in Third World Within. Um, and most of our work originally...Well, actually our work with Third World Within came, like was brought together around the World...

Loira: The World Conference Against Racism.

Verónica : Yeah, the World Conference Against Racism in South Africa and the importance of having people of color from the United States present the work that we're doing here instead of white people going over there representing the work that they do there, even if it's within our communities. And then...but it was so crazy because returning, I didn't even get to return before September 11th. So it was like three, four, five days before September 11th, 2001. And then we didn't even get a real chance to do a report back because it was so much in response to this crazy propaganda machine that started after September 11th. And then most of our work has been surrounding anti-war initiatives as a coalition.

Verónica : ...asked to do a report back because it was so much in response to this crazy propaganda machine that started after September 11th. And then most of our work has been surrounding anti-war initiatives as coalition.

Loira: Really, I mean, I think that the thing with TWW and the anti-war work that we were focused on doing was really bringing in like a justice analysis...

³³¹ Created in 1995, the *Coalition Against Police Brutality* seeks to mobilize grassroots organizations, students, and community members in a movement to stop what the coalition considers to be an ever-growing police state in New York City.

³³² *Third World Within* is a network of New York City-based people of color organizations that makes connections between people of color in the U.S. and Third World peoples who struggle against the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. According to TWW, policies of global restructuring are fundamentally based on race and gender oppression. TWW seeks to establish the presence of people of color presence in the protest against global injustice and explain the many connections between human rights violations in the Third World and in the U.S. itself.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...to the anti-war movement in New York City that was totally missing, you know, and connecting the war abroad to the war at home and making those connections that, you know, the larger...

Verónica : People were...

Loira: ...anti-war movement wasn't making. And so that's really like what we focused on. We did a few events, we did a cultural event, we did some rallies, we participated. We did a people of color mobilization during the February 15th large mobilization³³³ in New York City.

Verónica : Which in...which I just wanted to add about the February 15th, is I don't think that most of the...most of the rest of the United States or the rest of the world really knew how many people really got to the streets that day because they refused to do a panoramic, but there were tons of people there, present. And then after that, we did...

Loira: May 19th, on Malcolm X's³³⁴ birthday...

Verónica : Registration.

Loira: ...we did a...it was a campaign called Weapons of Mass Resistance, and it was just the idea of like really countering, coming up with strong like messages and getting propaganda out into our communities, and stuff just to counter like the message that they were starting to put out, that the war was over, that the war was won. Like, you know, to be like, no, it's really not over, it's really only going to get worse, like don't, you know, don't believe...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...the hype. Did anti-recruitment work locally in Bushwick, you know, um...

Verónica : We did that, but the rest of TWW did it in their own communities too, right?

³³³ On February 15th, 2004 the New York City chapter of United For Peace initiated a huge (500,000+ people by some accounts) mobilization against the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

³³⁴ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

Loira: Or like different groups did different things within that community.

Verónica : Different forms, yeah.

Loira: But the goal was really, of that campaign, was to do local commu—do anti-war work in your local community as opposed to mobilizing to bring people to Manhattan for like big...

Verónica : Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, white-led kind of marches, you know. Like really go back to your own communities and, and build with folks on the street level. And I think the overall thing about TWW that I think really good and that is interesting is that it's like us trying to be in solidarity with each other, you know. And so, you know, say for example, when DRUM, Desis Up and Rising³³⁵, was doing their series of rallies against the special registration³³⁶ at the INS³³⁷, like they kept calling us and being like, “Yo, we need, we need two more people to come do security, we need somebody else to do this, we need somebody else to do that.” And also as a way for us to educate our own communities about each other's issues, right, because there's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding and discrimination and a whole lot of things, right, that lead people of color to, to not interact in a, in a good way, right? Even though we sometimes share the same communities, there's a lot of prejudices and a lot of misinformation. A lot of times we'll all believe over each other what the mainstream media is telling us of, you know, each other one, or whatever. So it was...we also kind of see TWW as an opportunity and away for us to be learning more about each other's issues, right. And so all this backlash against Arab folks and South Asian folks, you know, this is like a moment that our sort of working in Black and Latino communities can, you know, do some education around, some political education. Like what, what is the difference between Palestine and Pakistan, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: They're not nowhere near each other. I mean, you know, we laugh, but it's, it's just real because people are watching television. That's where they're getting their information and that's what the television is telling us, you know. And I think that's one of the things that's really kind of special about the TWW thing is that it gives us a chance

³³⁵ The organization that Loira is talking about is actually called *Desis Rising Up and Moving* (DRUM). “Desi” is a term used by Indian people in the diaspora to describe themselves. DRUM is a community-based social justice organization of low-income South Asian immigrants in New York City founded in 1999

³³⁶ An additional form of government registration that immigrant men have had to undergo since 9/11. It assumes that many immigrants are dangerous criminals and are in need of registering, even after they already have to go through the INS procedures.

³³⁷ The *Immigration and Naturalization Service* of the United States, the state office that issues immigrant visas and oversees citizenship and naturalization services.

to work on inter-, intra-people-of-color stuff, which I think is really important and not always necessarily be focused on responding to a larger white something or other, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum. And then she had the question about liberation and love.

Loira: Oh, liberation and love. That was like the...

Verónica : L.L.

Loira: ...the flower children³³⁸ part of somebody...

Verónica : [laughing] Which you came up with.

Loira: No, that wasn't me. That wasn't me. It wasn't me.

Verónica : [laughing] So who was it? It was somebody.

Loira: We just...we just redid our mission last October, um, just because we...(1), thought there was a lot of language in there that wasn't direct, and you can't...you didn't really know what it meant, you know. Like, who...

Verónica : Yeah. It was long.

Loira: Like what is this mission for? Like who the hell can understand this, who can read this, you know? And also like a couple of other, you know, shifts of...instead of saying young women of color in this broad sense saying specifically Black and Latina young women. Because that's who we've always been. That's who we always work with, so why not...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...be just specific about that, you know, and... Um, and the communities that we're particularly dealing with and then...And then also because young women of color like, you know, lot of times you have to translate stuff into Spanish and the whole people of color thing is not translatable, like into a lot of languages. It doesn't make any sense if we put it into another language. And so we were like, you know...you know, for a bunch of reasons started revisiting the mission and the language of it, and everything. And the liberation and love thing was like we were just like, well, what do we want, like...We want people to treat each other with love, and we want people to feel free, you know. And like free from like oppression and stuff. So we were just like...

Verónica : We need liberation, so that's what we want [laughs], you know.

³³⁸ The term "flower child" was born with the hippie movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The term comes from the hippie habit of wearing flowers to symbolize peace and love, and is used to refer to one who advocates universal peace and love as antidotes to social or political ills.

Loira: Liberation, yeah. And we want our people to be free, you know, and so...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...I think that's where the liberation part of it came in. And I think that the love part, you know...

Verónica : Is just at the basis of all of our work, right?

Loira: ...try and like revalue that, you know. Because...

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...I think like ideas, really basic sentiments of like love and caring and things like that, we sometimes take them out so much of political stuff because they sound kind of mushy or whatever. But it's really like, you know, good values, things that you like would want. You know, you would want people to treat each other with love and to value life, you know, like at the end of the day, so...I think that's our liberation and love trip.

Verónica : [laughs]

Nadine: Well, I know I've been really inspired already to get out there [laughter] and start working after this. We are deeply, deeply grateful for you two coming out here and sharing with us all this knowledge and teaching us about everything you do and, ah, just, you know, big thanks go out to you.

Verónica : Thank you.

Loira: Thanks for having us.

Verónica : Yes.

Loira: It's cool. It wasn't that bad I was thinking at first but...

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Okay.

Verónica : And if anybody else wants to contact us, you have our website, right. So please do it.

Loira: Thank you.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Andrea Smith
Interviewer: Maria Cotera**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
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Andrea Lee Smith, born in 1966, is an activist/educator who was born in San Francisco and grew up in Southern California. She received her Ph.D. in History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She served as a delegate to the United Nations' 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, representing the Indigenous Women's Network and the American Indian Law Alliance. She is one of the founding members of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, and is the co-founder of the Chicago chapter of Women of All Red Nations (WARN). In her commitment to combine her activist and scholarly work, she has organized several conferences that bring community activists, public intellectuals, and academics into dialogue with one another. These include the Color of Violence I & II Conferences, Race, Gender and the War Community Forum, and Decolonizing Methodology and Beyond: Constructive Proposals for Indigenous Methodologies. She is the author of *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* and co-editor, with Beth Ritchie and Julia Sudbury, of *The Color of Violence: INCITE! The Anthology*. Smith is an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with a joint appointment in Women's Studies and the Program in American Culture (Native American Studies.) In 2005 Smith was one of 40 U.S. women nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Maria Eugenia Cotera, Assistant Professor of American Culture/Latino Studies and Women's Studies, holds an M.A. in English from University of Texas at Austin (1994) and a Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University (2001). From 1988 to 1992 she worked for the Chicana Research and Learning Center, a non-profit publishing house dedicated to the publication of works by and about women of color. From 1992 to 1994 Cotera worked with Dr. Jose Limon of the English Department at the University of Texas on a recovery project that uncovered a lost manuscript by Texas folklorist Jovita Gonzalez. Published in 1996 by Texas A&M Press, the manuscript--entitled *Caballero: An Historical Novel*--includes a critical epilogue written by Cotera. Cotera's dissertation, entitled "Native Speakers: Locating Early Expressions of U.S. Third World Feminist Discourse", explores the life and work of Sioux anthropologist Ella Cara Deloria and Texas folklorist Jovita Gonzalez. She has published numerous essays on Jovita Gonzalez; most recently "Engendering a 'Dialectics of Our America': Jovita Gonzalez' Pluralist Dialogue as Feminist Testimonio" in *Las Obreras: The Politics of Work and Family*, and "Refiguring the American Congo: Jovita Gonzalez, John Gregory Bourke, and the Battle over Ethno-Historical Representations of the Texas Mexican Border" published in the Spring 2000 issue of *Western American Literature*.

Transcript of Andrea Smith

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*³³⁹

Maria: So, Andy, first I'd like to thank you for joining us today and sharing some of your wisdom with us, and I'd like to run over the general plan for the afternoon. You and I will talk for about an hour and then we'll open up the discussion to our studio participants and they'll ask you questions, and then we'll wrap up.

Andrea Smith: Okay.

Maria: So I think the way we'd like to start is to get a sense of how you became a scholar-activist. And it's a really big question, but maybe some of the things to guide you would be...I think I'm interested personally in knowing if, if you had any sort of life experiences that shaped your commitments. Or if you had role models, or just sort of the trajectory of how you ended up where you are today.

Andrea: Well, for the role models, it would be my mom. She wasn't really an activist, but she was a big advocate for us in the school system. Tulie, my sister had a really rotten time. They tried to put her in the autism program.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And then even though she had...was very intelligent, they kept putting her in special needs programs³⁴⁰. So one year she went to her teacher, who was finally a nice teacher that she finally had, and said, "Miss Sellers, I want to be in the gifted program³⁴¹."

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So even though she wasn't eligible to even take the test, she took the test and she passed. But the principal got so mad that she passed that she suppressed the scores. So my mom found out later. Goes up to the school, grabs my sister out of class and says, "You are never coming back here again." So that's the kind of the role model I had for if something's not right, you should stand up for it.

Maria: Um-hum.

³³⁹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

³⁴⁰ A *special needs program* is for students who have learning or developmental disabilities.

³⁴¹ A *gifted program* is for students who are exceptionally intelligent.

Andrea: So anyway, I guess how I became a scholar-activist was...I was an activist first. After I got out of college, I swore I would never ever, ever, ever go back to school again.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And I was at a AIM³⁴² Conference—American Indian Movement Conference, and one of the leaders there was saying that for every year you’ve been in school, you need to put it back into your community. And another woman there, who worked with - Women of All Red Nations, she had had a women’s gathering and telling us all to start WARN chapters where we lived, and I was living in Chicago then, so...

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: ...me and my sister, being the enterprising youth that we were said, “Okay,” not knowing what we were getting ourselves into. And so we just started our, kind of our activist...well, we didn’t start it. We’d been activists in other things before. But that’s where we got very focused in our activism. And I kind of ended up in the academia by accident, which was after several years of feeling like, I’m not sure what I’m doing is the most effective way to end global oppression. So I kind of want to take a little break and I thought I’d just go to seminary because I liked theology and I was actually going to get an MSW³⁴³. But when I was there, one of my mentors, a James Cone³⁴⁴, who does Black Liberation Theology³⁴⁵, grabbed me to his office one day and said I couldn’t leave until I agreed to get a Ph.D., so that’s how I ended up in a Ph...getting a Ph.D. and in academia.

Maria: Um-hum. And so you...now you were born in Southern California but you grew up in Chicago? Is that right?

Andrea: No. No, I was in Chicago for more of my adult life.

Maria: Oh, okay. And so as, as a young person...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...your mother really influenced you. I mean, did you also sort of develop a consciousness of oppression or a sense that there was a sort of essential inequality in the world at that time? Or was it more of a sort of modeling after, you know, your mother’s sense of that? I mean, what...?

³⁴² The *American Indian Movement* (AIM) was formally founded in 1968. The movement was founded to turn the attention of Indian people toward a renewal of spirituality which would impact the strength of resolve needed to reverse the ruinous policies of the United States, Canada, and other colonialist governments of Central and South America.

³⁴³ MSW is an acronym for a degree program, specifically a Master’s in Social Work.

³⁴⁴ *James H. Cone* is a well-known scholar of Black Liberation Theology who teaches at UTS.

³⁴⁵ *Black Liberation Theology* uses Black experience to interpret Christian scripture, arguing that God is in solidarity with the oppressed of the earth.

Andrea: Well, I had a sense of inequality because my mom told me about it, and I could see how what was going on in my life. But I think activism isn't about just the inequality, it's about seeing the possibilities for collective action. So I think that I didn't get from my mom. That I got more from what I saw. Actually, while I was in college, but I didn't...wasn't active in college.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: Like I was involved in community-based organizations during my college years, and then as I got out of college, I became more involved in that.

Maria: So you weren't involved in sort of educational activism at the college...in the college spectrum³⁴⁶, you were more involved in the community during the college experience.

Andrea: Right.

Maria: And that was in...and then in...then you moved to Chicago after that and...

Andrea: Well, actually I went to London, DC, Oklahoma. And then I ended up in Chicago.

Maria: So quite a circuitous path.

Andrea: Yeah. Um-hum.

Maria: And as I understand it, you started a WARN...a WARN branch in Chicago?

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Okay.

Andrea: Well, I wasn't the only person.

Maria: Right. Yeah. Um, so you've talked about the Black Liberation Theologist, your professor, who insisted that you get a Ph.D.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And what...as you approached your sort of decisions about what you were going to get a Ph.D. in...

Andrea: Um-hum.

³⁴⁶ Here Maria is referring to common campus-focused activities available to students such as student organization or athletics.

Maria: ...what informed those decisions and why did you choose ultimately the program that you choose, which was at UC-Santa Cruz³⁴⁷, the History of Consciousness?

Andrea: Well, actually I came at that through theology, because I was very influenced by Liberation Theology even as an undergraduate. That's...because I used to be a big Bible-thumping fundamentalist³⁴⁸, and so the Liberation Theology, that's where I saw how I could be a person of faith but dedicated to ending global oppression.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: But when I was at...when I did Liberation Theology, I saw some problems with it, in that it seemed to focus on not so much what does God say, but what does our community say about God. But then how do we know what our communities think, and I used to be "I think so, because I said so," you know. So, and I thought, well, I think we need more of a sociological analysis, or some tools, to really have an engagement with how the communities are thinking about God. So I wanted a program that would let me keep the theology, but also have a get more experience and tools in sociology. So the History of Consciousness, I could get a sociolog—sociology parenthetical, but they also would let me keep the theology for my dissertation.

Maria: So it seems like what you're saying, is, you know, you were trying to think of the...I mean, Liberation Theology as a philosophy, again, as a kind of top-down, in other words, you know, we...this is...this is the philosophical approach and we will make the people conscious of it.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Bring them to consciousness.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And what you're suggesting then is more of a sort of bottom-up, where it's like what are the people saying, and how are they expressing, um...

Andrea: Probably both, because just...I don't assume our communities are inherently liberatory.

Maria: Um-hum.

³⁴⁷ *UC-Santa Cruz* : University of California, Santa Cruz.

³⁴⁸ *Bible-thumper* is a derogatory term for Christian fundamentalists or devout Christians who actively push their beliefs onto other people. They might have such enthusiasm that they strike their Bible to emphasize their point.

Andrea: I mean, they've internalized sexism and homophobia and racism too. So I think there's a need to sometimes stand against your community and say these are some issues we need to take seriously. But it has to be informed by what communities are actually doing...

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: ...rather than making these kind of blanket statements that, "All Native peoples worship the mother earth," or, you know.

Maria: Um-hum. And so was your Liberation Theology what you learned, um, at the Union Theological Seminary, was that somehow sifted through your consciousness as an American Indian? Or...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...I mean, did you bring it to a sort of...I mean, was there like a spiritual awakening, I guess is what I'm asking? Or was it, um, I mean...?

Andrea: No. Seminary's not the place to go to get spiritual awakenings. That's where everybody becomes an atheist afterwards.

Maria: (laughs)

Andrea: But...so I went there thinking I would get that. I mean, I was already spiritual beforehand...

Maria: Oh.

Andrea: ...so I actually got very tested.

Maria: Okay.

Andrea: Once you go through these Bible classes you're thinking...you know, it seems, you know...So, I spent a week in bed in fact, thinking, what if there's no God! But anyway so I finally got out of bed and managed to figure out what it meant, you know, now...how to reconfigure it so I could still be a person of faith.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: But...now I forgot what the question was.

Maria: Oh.

Andrea: I'm sorry (laughing).

Maria: I...

Andrea: But, no, it wasn't a spiritual awakening there.

Maria: Okay.

Andrea: But it did, I did...so I ended up with a different faith than what I went in, but I'm still a person of faith.

Maria: Okay. I guess, you know, one of the sort of questions that was proposed early on in this process when we were trying to think of interview questions was, um, how did your sort of understanding of oppression, how was it transformed...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...within the academy?

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And once you sort of took the scholarly road? Or was it transformed? And so I guess that's what I was trying to get at.

Andrea: Well, yeah. The big thing that happened was, when I was just doing activism, I saw going back to academia as a vacation. I didn't necessarily see how you could do both.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And I thought I wouldn't be there very long. And, but my vacation lasted for about a week, and so I found that I was continuing the same activism I was doing before I went to the academy. But I actually found that the academy was actually a very easy place to do activism, because one, there was a lot more resources...

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: ...financial resources and other forms of support. And also I found it was helpful. It gives you a space to critically think about your activism, whereas when I was just doing activism, I was running from rally to rally, organizing this and that, and I didn't ever have the critical space to think, does this work? You know, I didn't...I don't think I even read a book for six years. So I found the academy was kind of helpful in giving...forcing you to have a little space to critically think about activism and what is the most effective strategies for ending world oppression.

Maria: Well, that's really interesting, because if there's one thing that I hear from graduate students...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...complain, who, graduate students who fancy themselves as social activists, it's, it's that they feel that the two, the sort of academic world or the scholarly realm and the world of the community and their community activism are irreconcilable...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...in some cases, and they...they have a lot of trouble balancing in their minds...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...you know, they can't understand how one would balance that. And it seems like what you're saying is in fact the exact opposite.

Andrea: Um-hum. I think if you just don't stop being an activist, then you don't have any existential angst problems.

Maria: Yeah.

Andrea: So I think it's more people drop it and they're wondering, what did my community think again? So then you feel this divide, but if you don't stop doing it, then there really isn't a problem, because all your act—your scholarship is very much informed by what activists say. And there's no shortage of scholarship that's needed by activists.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: It's like, you need to give us the analysis on prison industrial complex. Hence, your term paper is on the prison industrial complex. Or we need to see more perspectives on boarding schools or whatever, so I never feel divided at all, because it's very much informed by what...what activists say they need.

Maria: Um-hum. So in other words, you see yourself as in some, in some ways as serving activist causes...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...via your research resources and through sort of your scholarly interests.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And that actually brings us to one of the questions that I was, I was going to ask you about what social phenomena have you focused on in your scholarly research, and where does that sort of focus come from, which...?

Andrea: Well, it's been two different things. I guess my biggest passion is around violence against Native women.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: Particularly and actually maybe violence against women of color in general. And that had to do with when I was a rape crisis counselor, all the Native clients I ever had said that "I wish I was no longer Indian" at some point in our sessions. And I saw that the tools that I had gotten from the mainstream anti-rape movement didn't really help me figure out what was going in these cases. And so I felt the need to kind of historically examine how a sexual colonization has structured the colonization process as a whole and how the two go together. So that's been kind of an ongoing research interest that's also informed by my activism. And then the other thing that...But I didn't do a dissertation on that, because I figured if I had to put some Foucault and Derrida down, nobody'd understand it by the time I was done. So I wanted that to be a more accessible project. But then the other thing that I focused on in my dissertation was on Bible, Gender and Nationalism and American Indian and Christian Right³⁴⁹ Activism. And that kind of came out of my personal experience of being active and...well, not really the Christian Right, but at least Evangelical Christianity³⁵⁰ and also in Native activism, but seeing how we were looking at activism in this very bipolar left-versus-right, conservative-versus progressive was not really speaking to how I was seeing activism actually happening. So I wanted to kind of explore how...how activism happens in a more complex way, and also rethinking who we think potential allies are. Because in all the Native circles I've been involved in, they had been very successful. They were successful because Native people created alliances with people who are actually anti-Indian...who are overt white supremacists. And so that made me think that this is a helpful way of thinking about organizing in general and not assuming who your friends are or who your enemies are.

Maria: And it's interesting, because both of those projects involve some of the sort of I guess theoretical interventions of Third Space or US Third World Feminism³⁵¹. I mean, on the one hand, with your...the project researching the right, the coalitions built amongst the right and American Indian social activism, you have this whole issue of coalitional struggle.

Andrea: Um-hum.

³⁴⁹ The *Christian Right* is the conservative (Right-wing) Christian bloc in the United States.

³⁵⁰ *Evangelical Christians* believe that the Bible is literally true, inerrant, and the only authority for Christian faith, and that that accepting Jesus Christ as one's only Lord is the only way to salvation. Evangelicals make up both the largest and the most active group of Christians in the United States. President George W. Bush (2000-present) is a follower of evangelical Christianity.

³⁵¹ Chela Sandoval defines *US Third World Feminism* as "the political alliance made during the 1960s and 1970s between a generation of US feminists of color who were separated by culture, race, class, or gender identification but united through similar responses to the experience of race oppression." See page 275 of her article "US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World" in *Genders* 10 Spring 1991: 1-24.

Maria: And why people form coalitions, and then, in your experiences as a rape crisis counselor, when you said there's something that was sort of entering into these women's narratives that wasn't part of the sort of just the gendered narrative.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Which is something I kind of want to ask you about too. Um, when...I guess I'm trying to figure out when it was that a sort of consciousness of feminism, feminist practice...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...maybe that's not the right word, maybe womanism³⁵² is better, came into your discourse and into your thinking. And if it was something that was in, sort of entered into your thinking after your academic experience or before or...and has it changed anything, given your sort of experience in the now ...in the academic world, and I mean did it change from your sort of pre-academic to post-academic.

Andrea: I...since I could talk I was a feminist. I mean, I just, that's...I've always been a feminist and I'm more so now because I get so annoyed with how feminism gets defined in these very white terms.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And I, and I feel that women of color should claim the term and define it, and not assume kind of the usual white history of feminism that starts with the first wave of feminism with the Suffragette Movement³⁵³. Then the second wave with NOW³⁵⁴, and then third wave, women of color suddenly show up out of nowhere, and I see feminism for Native women starting in 1492. We had to resist colonization. So I very much want to claim that term for Native women.

Maria: And so you say you were a feminist from the time you started breathing.

Andrea: Um-hum. Um-hum.

³⁵² Walker's 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* popularized the term "womanist." The term had a multiple-part definition, the first of which was "a black feminist or feminist of color." The definition also included aspects of caring about one's whole community—not just women—and spirituality.

³⁵³ References the U.S. movement of the early 20th century aimed at garnering women the right to vote. It often referred to as the "first wave" of feminism but one of its main leaders—Elizabeth Cady Stanton—is critiqued for allying with conservative Southern senators instead of championing the right of African American women to vote.

³⁵⁴ *National Organization for Women* (NOW) was founded 1966, with the goal of taking action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; and end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society. However, NOW has also been criticized for being focused on what is good for middle-class white heterosexual women.

Maria: It reminds me, my mother said that, has always said that to me.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: You know. Always complaining about how Latinas were seen as sort of submissive. She said that she lived and breathed feminism from the time she was a child.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Um, and so has...so you say that there's more at stake for you now in claiming feminism.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And so I would imagine then that when you came into the academic world, you did see a kind of feminism that you didn't recognize or...

Andrea: I'd say it's actually more an activism, where a lot of reporters say "I'm not feminist," and I can under—relate to that. But then I felt it was letting white feminists off the hook, and not challenging what they were calling feminism.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And then, I mean, actually I taught a class on Native Feminism, which I did more because I knew it would get approved, if it was called Native Feminism instead of Native Women. But then because it was called Native Feminism, the white women in the class felt challenged by their own feminist politics.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And had a feeling like whereas they wouldn't have felt challenged if we said "We're not feminists," they would say, "Oh, you're doing your thing, but we get to do our thing." But I feel what gets called white feminism has to be challenged because of the many ways it often supports white supremacy.

Maria: And in what ways does it...I mean, you just said the ways in which it supports white supremacy. How does white feminism...what are the linkages there that you see?

Andrea: I mean, of course I'm being overly general, because obviously there's many variations there. But in certain cases, for instance, the Pro-Choice³⁵⁵ movement, I think is

³⁵⁵ *Pro-choice* is often used to refer to people who support a woman's right to make her reproductive health decisions, particularly around abortion.

an inherently white supremacist way of looking at reproductive rights and from a very pro-capitalist point of view that doesn't look at all the contexts that force women into making certain choices, so it limits the only important choice as being the choice when you decide to have an abortion or not to have an abortion.

Maria: Um-hum.

AS: Not all the situations that led you to that choice in the first place, then leads to a situation where people will support Bill Clinton as a Pro-Choice president when he supports these anti-terrorism bills, anti-immigrant bills, anti-welfare bills, that have nothing to do with supporting choice for women.

Maria: Um-hum. So see choice, the choice, the issue of choice, for example...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...to take one feminist hot button issue...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...as in a much more broadly, or much more expansive way.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And it strikes me that the interventions that INCITE, your organization to stop the violence against women of color,...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...takes the, um, the paradigm for reading domestic violence to task in some of the same ways.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And could you share that with us, the approach that INCITE takes that sort of departs from the kind of domestic violence paradigm.

Andrea: Um-hum. Well, one thing I notice often in mainstream politics, is that you get presented with this dilemma. So like in the case of reproductive rights, it's either you're Pro-Choice and pro-population control or you're Pro-Life³⁵⁶.

Maria: Um-hum.

³⁵⁶ *Pro-Life* is often used to refer to people who see a fetus as an unborn child and therefore equate abortion with murder.

Andrea: In the case of anti-violence, either you're Pro-Survivor³⁵⁷, which means you support increased criminalization and increased police involvement, and hence support the prison industrial complex³⁵⁸ or your anti-Survivor by being anti-prison. So I feel like whenever you get like a bogus choice, that means the choice is not...the whole situation was not defined with you in mind. So that's why with INCITE what we started to say is that we were less interested in the politics of inclusion where you include women of color, or you include other oppressed groups so that you will feel multicultural and very sensitive and instead if we...we re-center analysis through women of color as a center of analysis, how does all the problems, how, how we look at them, how does that change. And how does this change not just affect women of color, but everybody else. So when we put women of color in the center of analysis around gender violence, we start to see that women of color are just as victimized by state violence as they are by interpersonal gender violence. So if you're going to have a strategy to end violence, you need a strategy to address both at the same time. So that's where we ended up with kind of our organizing principal of stop state sexual violence, that helps us keep in mind that sexual violence is in fact a tool of the state. And so it helps us put the two together, where we tend to think of sexual violence as just on a narrow interpersonal way. So we kind of developed our campaigns that help bring this relationship into focus through addressing alternatives, to addressing violence against women that don't depend on the criminal justice system, to addressing fighting for reparations for boarding school pieces³⁵⁹, to stopping the war to pretty much everything else on the planet.

Maria: Right. I mean, one of the things that really struck me at the last INCITE conference...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...the one in Chicago, in 2001...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria:2002. Yes.

Andrea: Um-hum.

³⁵⁷ In the movement against violence against women, women who survive abuse are referred to as *survivors* rather than as "victims." Here she is referencing the fact that many in the movement believe that the only correct solution to violence against women is increased criminal penalties.

³⁵⁸ The *prison industrial complex* refers to the system of special interest groups (correctional officer unions, for example) influencing the operations of the increasingly privatized and powerful prison system that is more focused on profit using surface solutions rather than eliminating the root causes of many crimes—i.e., poverty.

³⁵⁹ These *boarding schools* were often administered by the U.S. government and were focused on assimilating Native American children into mainstream America at the expense of their cultural traditions and languages. Most operated between 1897 and 1945, although some were converted into contemporary tribal colleges.

Maria: Was precisely how broadly the issue of violence against women of color was sort of talked about.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: I mean, so I participated in panels on, you know, welfare reform...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...and the appropriation of indigenous spirituality, as well as, you know, issues of rape in specific immigrant communities and stuff like that. So it was really interesting to me that it was a kind of nodal point through which you could get at all of these other things.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Um...

Andrea: And it shifts the focus from social service delivery to political organizing, which is the major problem with the Anti-Violence Movement³⁶⁰. Suzanne Pharr's³⁶¹ articulated it well as that the Anti-Violence Movement has become the alibi of the state, because we've basically stepped in to provide the services that got cut during the Reagan³⁶² years, you know. And obviously this is not a thing we have the resources to do, and so, hence, survivors have been transformed into clients rather than a potential base for organizing.

Maria: So I want to sort of, um, talk about a little bit more the connections between your sort of life as a scholar and your life as an academic. Although I take it from your description that it's not really about connections. It's about, you know, them being pretty much intertwined pretty intimately. And I'm wondering about the politics of your pedagogy.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: How do you understand your role then, not just as an activist and, you know, helping, you know, as a scholar activist that would help, say, a community organization organize around a specific issue through your access to research tools, for example.

Andrea: Um-hum.

³⁶⁰ Here *Anti-Violence Movement* refers to the mainstream movement against sexual and domestic violence in the United States.

³⁶¹ Suzanne Pharr's is a writer and political activist who has been highly active in the fight to end racism and sexism. She is the founder of The Women's Project, an organizing and political education project in Arkansas, and the author of *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*.

³⁶² *Ronald Reagan* was the president of the United States from 1981-1989 and was a conservative Republican. He had a very hard line stance against Communist states (which he dubbed to be an "evil empire") and was embroiled in many international scandals and conflicts.

Maria: But as a...as a teacher, as a pedagogue, as someone who is sort of acting as that sort of role model as an engaged academic to other students. And, and so I was wondering how your activist work fits into your course design and maybe you could describe some of the courses you've taught and, you know, your sort of, your politics in the classroom.

Andrea: Yeah. Well, I...I try to follow the praxis method of pedagogy, because I notice that, not in just university classrooms which also have extremely horrible teaching methods, but even just "popular education," just education I used to do as a rape crisis counselor, doing the, you know, aware...rape awareness kind of education I was supposed to do for high schools. I noticed that they're all informed by very bad teaching philosophies which is, particularly when you're talking about issues that are politically contentious and are very loaded, we have this idea that we're going to tell people the right way to think and then at...you're going to reverse 30 years of the way they've been taught to think in like five minutes.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And it just isn't really effective in actually changing any kind of consciousness, and I think the major mistake in all of this is that we focus on the content -- what do we want to teach people. What is the message I want to convey to somebody, rather than focusing on what will enable that person to hear what I'm saying.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So my teaching is, is geared towards that -- what will create an environment such that people can hear and critically reflect. And it's kind of a chancy thing, because you're...there is a way you could use your authority to kind of push down a way that you want people to think on them. But the problem is then another person who is charismatic comes back later and they'll change their minds because you haven't necessarily provided the tools for them to think for themselves. So sometimes you have to sow the seeds, and you don't know where they're going to end up, you know. But, on the other hand, if they make the decision to support a certain analysis, then you know it's going to stay there because it's a very well, well-formed and well-thought out process. So, so when I teach, I just tend to focus less on me telling them this is the way things are, but more creating a collective learning experience where they learn from each other. And they often grade each other's papers. I, I try to de-center myself, which sometimes frustrates them, because they're waiting for me to give them the answer. But I try to resist that. And then I noticed that...and I noticed that when you had that method, it used to be like, a lot of people, I've had the same problems before, I tried to teach this way was, a lot of people will take these cla—ethics studies and women's studies classes as a requirement, so you get people who are these major Republicans and wanting to give you a lot of attitude and they're just pissed that they're there. But I noticed that, that I haven't had any harder time teaching them than anybody else. And I teach this way because a lot of time, reason why get resistance is because you've conveyed, either explicitly or

implicitly that they don't have a right to disagree with you. But when you create a space where they really feel that they can disagree with you and the way I do that is say that I don't really grade on content. You do the work, you get an A. So then they have no problems just saying whatever ridiculous thing they, they want to say. But by just having the freedom to do that, then they're more open to hearing what you have to say.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So like I had one student, for instance, she was this major George Bush fan, super born-again Christian³⁶³, just not really having any of it. But then after the end of the class—this was a Native Feminism class—at the end of the class she says, “Well, I went to my InterVarsity Christian Fellowship³⁶⁴ and they were saying Bush is so great because he's Pro-Life, but I told them, ‘He's a killer in Iraq’,” you know, so I...but that you don't win somebody over in one session. You have to create a space that allows them to critically think and be engaged.

Maria: Um-hum. And when you say praxis and, and this sort of giving the class a kind of collective project...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...or a series of collective projects...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...do you have specific examples of, of how you did that or in a class that you've taught recently?

Andrea: Well, for instance, I focus on discussion, so it's on them teaching each other with their own ideas. They often will grade each other's papers. So...and I, so I don't...and I don't make my, my evaluation more important than each other's evaluations. Also, I have them do collective projects. So I try not to have just individual projects so they have to learn the process of trying to get along with each other.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And then the other thing I try to do is put the responsibility for the dynamics of the class onto them rather than myself. So, for instance, we do an evaluation and people say they don't like X, Y or Z, I put it back on them and say, “What do you...what would correct X, Y or Z?”

Maria: Um-hum.

³⁶³ Christians who believe they have had a spiritual rebirth. This term is often affiliated with *Evangelical Christians*.

³⁶⁴ InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is an organization whose membership is composed of young Christians. It has over 500 chapters on college campuses across the United States.

AS: Rather than making me the person who's got to make everything work, I say, "This is your class, if it doesn't work, then, you know, we all have to be part of making the class work." And so when you do that then, people are less hostile to you. Because otherwise they're waiting to the end to give you that bad eval. because they're all pissed. But, you know, if you put it less it's about you making the class work than everybody making the class work...and I have that...Like for one time it worked really well, because I had this class. I was at UC-Santa Cruz on Violence Against Women of Color, and there was this white guy who was very nice, but he just talked like 70 percent of the time. So finally one person said, "You know, you're taking too much of the time." And he got a little bit defensive, but everybody started to chime in, so I just left, and then they worked it out.

Maria: (laughs)

Andrea: And then another time, I had a TA³⁶⁵ that people were having a bit of a problem with. So they started complaining, and I said, "Well, you know, how many of you people feel this way?" and everybody raised their hand. So I said, "Well, here's a chance to model the collective action we've been talking about. I'm going to leave and you're going to come up with an action for next week to address the situation.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So I left, they plotted their little action, made their demands, you know, we all...we listened to what they had to say. Then the TA got good evals afterwards, just because...

Maria: Um-hum. There was feedback.

Andrea: Yeah.

Maria: And I know that I've run into a number of your students who told me about the great activist projects that you have them do. And I know last time...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...I was at the Pow Wow³⁶⁶, I saw all of these brochures on Crazy Horse³⁶⁷ ...

Andrea: Oh, yeah.

³⁶⁵ A Teaching Assistant (TA) is a graduate student(usually) who assists an instructor with teaching duties.

³⁶⁶ A *Pow Wow* is a Native American gathering that includes singing, dancing, music and crafts. The University of Michigan hosts a weekend-long Pow Wow every spring.

³⁶⁷ *Crazy Horse* (1849-1877), also known as Tashunca-uitco, was a legendary warrior and chief of the Lakota tribe of the Northwest United States.

Maria: ...and your...a bunch of your students were there passing them out.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Maybe you could share that project.

Andrea: Well, I don't try to force people to do activist things if that's not their inclination. I usually leave it as an option for people who are interested.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: But that came out of the Native Religion class which is kind of a long story. But basically in that class the people realized there's a bit of a contradiction to teaching Native Religions in an academic setting, because the way you would learn things in a Native context is kind of the opposite of how we're supposed to learn things academically. So then I put it back on them as, if so, given what we've learned how would you propose teaching Native religions in the academic setting? And they said, well, they didn't think it was appropriate to teach it in a standard way, but maybe in a certain hands-on way where you'd get a sense of how things operate in a political context.

Maria: Hm.

Andrea: So based on their feedback, I said, well, why don't we do a couple campaigns, and we'll bring in people who are experts on these issues. And because you're actually working on a campaign, it's actual existent, it's like we're not making it up out of the, the blue³⁶⁸, but there's already an anti-Crazy Horse label campaign around Liz Claiborne³⁶⁹, et cetera. And people are going to be willing to talk to you because, you know, you're supporting their struggle. So they all looked very petrified. I mean, this is their idea, but then they seem to forget it was their idea, so they were like all petrified and like, "Ah!, you know, we can't do these campaigns." And also none of them were very...not...most of them were not particularly political. Like in the women's studies, you tend to get people who are more interested in them. But one guy, he was in the military, and he's like, "I'm going to lose my security for..." Anyway...So, like "Fine, you know, do whatever you feel comfortable." But then at the end he was like, "Well, I'm Ojibwe³⁷⁰ before I'm military so if they can't hang that's their problem." Anyway...So, so by...And also I tried to not tell them how to do a campaign. I provided some direction, but I feel like there's no way to learn other than learning...doing it and screwing up. And so, so they kind of muddled through, but by the end they were like, "Well, we were terrified

³⁶⁸ *Out of the blue*: Out of nothing or without basis.

³⁶⁹ The American Indian community is protesting the unauthorized and offensive use of the Crazy Horse name by several companies. For example, the Hornell Brewing Co. uses his name for a malt liquor and Liz Claiborne manufactures an exclusive line of clothing for J.C. Penney Co. under a Crazy Horse label.

³⁷⁰ The *Ojibwe* are one of the most populous and widely distributed Indian groups in North America, with 150 bands throughout the north-central United States and southern Canada.

before, but now we're empowered, we want to do the next campaign." So it seemed to work out...

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: ...pretty well. But sometimes you don't know exactly how it's all going to..

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: It's kind of a r—that's the thing about doing non-traditional pedagogy, it's a bit of a risk. Like if you just do a boring lecture, people are still used to it, so they may not get as mad if it doesn't work out as if you try something new and it flops, and they're like, "What's wrong with you, you're horrible." But, you know, if you're not willing to take the risk then you can't come up with something that might be even spectacularly effective in the future.

Maria: Well, do you think that the fact that you teach in interdisciplinary programs, like Women's Studies...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...and American Culture/Native American Studies, helps you in terms of giving you I guess a little bit more freedom within the classroom? Freedom from expectations in a sense because students, you know, sort of...it's not in a traditional department so they may be more open to kind of counter-intuitive...?

Andrea: I'm not sure because I don't...even those classes people expect fairly traditional teaching and at...you usually get fairly traditional teaching.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So usually I have to actually prep people and say, "Be warned, this will not be like your class. Try not to freak out," you know. And, and so sometimes people, if you ask people how it's going, say, the third week versus the tenth week, you'll get a much different response. Like with the Native Religion class, they had to read Vine DeLoria³⁷¹, so they were all angry because he's anti-Christian and they're Christian, you know. So I'm like just, you know, hang with it, see what happens. But by the end they were saying, "Remember how we all hated him? Well, he was right." So, you know, so sometimes it's, it's a bit of a process.

Maria: Well, I mean, I want to come back to your approach to activism.

³⁷¹ Vine DeLoria is a leading Native American scholar whose research, writings, and teaching have encompassed history, law, religious studies, and political science. He is the former executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, a retired professor of political science at the University of Arizona, and a retired professor emeritus of history at the University of Colorado.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And sort of kind of hone in on it...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...more directly. Now you've already talked about the multiple fronts that you've worked on. And I know from reading your CV³⁷² and talking to you that you've worked on everything from Eco-Feminism³⁷³ to indigenous rights and the global arena to the struggle to protect women from violence both state-sponsored and domestic abuse. In your mind, what is it that connects all of these struggles?

Andrea: Well, it's kind of basic really. And this actually, it came out of the...the spear fishing struggles in Wisconsin³⁷⁴ that we were involved in. This is when the Chippewa³⁷⁵ in Wisconsin won the right...well, they already had the right, but the courts acknowledged their treaty-protected right to hunt, fish and gather, and ceded territories and then they were getting mobbed by all these kind of white racist sports fishers saying, "Save the fish, spear pregnant squaw." And so when you're in those situations, it's very easy to think of white people as being the enemy, and so I really just kind of had a very anti-white attitude. But there were one of the leaders Walter Cosette, he had a different philosophy. He was saying, "Well, they're...these people are not the enemy. The enemy is Exxon³⁷⁶, because the reason why we're even having this problem is because the...northern Wisconsin has been...recently become economically feasible to mine for coal, uranium, you know, other sorts of minerals, and there have been a united non-Indian-Indian front against this mining. So we think Exxon is actually funding these anti-Indian hate groups to divide the opposition to mining in northern Wisconsin. So we need to intervene in this violence in a way that does not create a barrier to potentially working with these people in the future, because they're going to be just as effective if mining happens in northern Wisconsin. So they are, they are yelling at you now, but they're going to be your potential allies later.

³⁷² *Curriculum vita* is a list of an individual's scholarly and professional accomplishments.

³⁷³ *Ecofeminism* links ecological concerns with feminist concerns. Ecofeminist theory often deconstructs the binaries imposed through Western thought, which not only create categories in opposition to one another, but also values one side of the binary over the other. For example, linking men/women and culture/nature with the latter terms being subordinated to the former.

³⁷⁴ When Chippewa Indians won a 1983 court decision allowing them to fish off their reservations, thousands of angry protesters greeted them with signs that read "Spear a Pregnant Indian Squaw and Save two Walleye [a type of fish]." The protesters argued that the Chippewa would deplete the fish population. On the roads leading to and from the lakes, spearers' and other treaty supporters' tires were slashed, vehicles run into ditches, and elders nearly run down. On the landings, Chippewa were assaulted, threatened with death, harassed with whistles and mock drum chants, and pipe bombs were exploded.

³⁷⁵ *Chippewa* is another name for the Ojibwe.

³⁷⁶ *Exxon* (ExxonMobil after a 1998 merger) specializes in oils, gasoline and chemical production. The March 24, 1989 spill of 11 millions gallons of crude oil by the tanker Exxon Valdez was the largest in U.S. history and affected over 9,000 miles of shoreline.

I was really not too...I didn't...was not sold on this thing, you know. Because we had people like screaming at you, you really just want to punch, punch them out. I wasn't into non-violence, you know. So I just couldn't hang—I thought this was just too...But then I saw how effective it was. Like Clyde Bellecourt³⁷⁷ was there with AIM at one event, and, you know, people were getting into our faces, we were getting into their face. Things were starting to escalate and he just said, “Well, we’re going to have a Pow Wow now, so ignore them.” And we did and they left, because they got bored. So I started to see there was many different ways of being effective in terms of organizing. And what, what Walter said happened, was going on, was actually very true. Because right after this then it was... mine opened and an Exxon and Rio Algom³⁷⁸ start to...came in again trying to open a mine in northern Wisconsin. And so because of that ground work had been laid around this particular strategy, Native peoples are able to go do these huge speaking tours in northern Wisconsin and say, “You need to start siding with us, because this is the real problem.” And it worked. I mean, they were able to get enough support to force a pro-mining governor into supporting an anti-mining moratorium.

So once that experience made me rethink about what oppression was, it was less about here's this line into the men or women or white, people of color, or whatever it is you want to focus on, and more the problem is a pyramid structure, that there is like one percent of the world who owns 90 percent of the wealth. But everybody else there was...has a long-term interest in changing these pyramid structures. So 90 percent of the world's population is my potential ally, so therefore it's very important to think in a coalitional way and look at how these things intersect, because we need to build a mass movement that can change this pyramid structure. And I think a lot of people when you get on narrow identity politics, basically, you're not trying to change a pyramid, you're just trying to get on top. You know, but I don't think, but ultimately that pyramid structure is going to destroy the earth if nothing else, so we need to have a different politics. It's about getting rid of the pyramid structure altogether and that's why we need these coalitional politics, and that's why we need to be informed about how all these systems relate to each other.

Maria: Um-hum. So I also want to sort of take us to the...back into feminism.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And the sort of feminism as a philosophy that informs. And I think in particular women of color forms of feminism and the interventions that have made, been made, well, continuously, since colonialism, as you pointed out...

Andrea: Hm. Um-hum.

Maria: ...or colonization, but that have been recognized in certain academic arenas in the last, say, 20 years.

³⁷⁷ Clyde Bellecourt is a leader of AIM.

³⁷⁸ The Canadian-based mining company Exxon was partnering with for the proposed project.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: But I'd like to get at it actually less through the sort of scholarly realm and more through sort of real examples of the kinds of organizing, the feminist organizing that you have done. So maybe you could discuss one of the organizations in which you've been actively involved, either through founding it or working with it, and tell us a little bit about what the organization's about -- it's structure, whether or not it could be described as doing feminist work or just...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...just, just let us know. Give us a case study let's say of, of an ...organization that's been really important to you.

Andrea: I could give two case things, like a disastrous organizing effort that then helped to create more successful organizing effort. So one big wonderful organizing effort was the National Women's Studies Association, where I was the Women of Color Caucus Co-Chair³⁷⁹ and organized the Women of Color walkout that happened in 1989 in Akron, Ohio. And that had...well, it's a very long story. It had to do with how they fired the only women of color staff person, which that wasn't the big problem. The problem was the subterfuge that happened later on. Like they didn't want me to show up to the meeting, because they wanted to vote to support her being fired, so they told me there was no funding, even though there was. But then they told other people who asked why you're not funding her, saying they couldn't get ahold of me, even though they talked to me the week before. Okay, anyway. So it was all this kind of shenanigans. And then they had this EEOC³⁸⁰ report which they said found this woman they fired in fault. But somebody leaked the actual report to us, and it said the exact opposite, that everybody but her was at fault. So this did not create a good faith environment. So things started to escalate, and, so then we decided, well, we're going to walk out and we're going to start another organization. And this turned out to be a complete and utter disaster. I remember Barbara Smith³⁸¹ actually said, "This is going to be a disaster," and I didn't listen to her, because I didn't listen to anybody at that age, but she turned out to be completely right. And that's because when you organize something just in opposition to it, then you don't necessarily figure out or create the alliances between ourselves. And that was the thing it was at a point, I think, I tended to assume. And I think in that historical moment, too, there tended to be the assumption that women of color would get along. But no, these people were having fistfights, were throwing gum at each other, everybody's crying and screaming and having a fit. And then, so it just was a complete mess. So then I learned

³⁷⁹ A *caucus* is usually composed of a specific constituency of a larger organization. In this case it was for members who identify as women of color.

³⁸⁰ The *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, (EEOC) is the federal agency in charge of enforcing equal opportunity employment laws.

³⁸¹ *Barbara Smith* is an author and independent scholar who has played a groundbreaking role in opening a national cultural and political dialogue about the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender. In 1975, she established a chapter of the now-defunct National Black Feminist Organization. The chapter, the Combahee River Collective, produced a mission statement, which discussed the intersection of oppressions experienced by Black women.

from that experience, that you can't assume allies with other communities of color. But it's still very important to do that. And some people just have a bad experience and they just say screw that, I'm must going to work with my group. But I think that's a big mistake, because again, we need to have to create these alliances. But you can't assume an alliance. You have to go through the trouble of actually creating them.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: So I think with INCITE, then I think we started...we didn't assume that we would get along, so we'd been trying...So we tried to institutionalize processes by which we would create alliances, by which we would learn about each other's struggles, and not assume that we would be happy campers³⁸². I put discontent in, you know, that conflict, assume that would be part of the structure and be okay with that. So we developed the structure to accommodate these kind of things. So, so far it's worked out pretty well. And also that's part of what gave rise to...we had behind the national committee, but then we started a local chapter. And I think part of the reason why things get broken up is that there tends to be the...a party line. This is back to the pedagogy to a certain way. There's a same...the same idea that there's a party line but you need to buy into it before you can be part of things. But there's no space for political dialogue and engaging people where they're at and then...but then being able to have the basic political dialogue where people might be transformed by that experience. So that's why we decide to organize our chapters to be completely autonomous, and they didn't have to sign on to any kind of line or any kind of mission statement.

Maria: Charter. Um-hum.

Andrea: And therefore that...but because of that, and it worked real...so far it's worked really well, because then people are able to enter into the space where they feel comfortable, but they're also connected to other people and they have these conversations that change people's positions on these issues, whereas I felt if we said, "No, you can't sign unless you believe all these things," and they wouldn't engage and then nobody would be changed.

Maria: Yeah, because I mean what INCITE has done with the domestic violence issue...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...would be anathema...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...and philosophically to the sort of mainstream domestic violence movement.

³⁸² *Happy campers* is a colloquial term for a group of content, unquestioning people.

Andrea: Well, it's not just that issue. We had issues around Palestine, we had issues around transgender issues that are very contentious and whereas it could face situation where you have a split but some people not agreeing. Now there's a space to say it's okay that you don't agree with this position.

Maria: So organizationally or structurally, is it just a sort of implicit agreement that there will be conflict and discord? Or is there an actual sort of structural, besides just this sort of...the chapters...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...that have started in different locations? Is there other...I mean, in...say in the annual meeting...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...are there sort of structural situations that, that enable discord as a productive ...?

Andrea: Yeah, I think it's because we frame it in saying that we're not trying to build an organization where we'd have members and a member believes X, Y or Z, and we say we're trying to build a movement that's not going to be owned by any particular group of people. So if you get the material and then it doesn't quite fit, and you need to change this sentence and take it out, then you can do it. If you want to take the poster and change it, you know, so we don't...nothing's copyrighted. Basically, here's...here's materials, here's thoughts, make it work for you. And so I think that makes people a little bit less resistant. If they have a problem, then they say "Fine, I have a problem with this, I'm not going to use this. But I can use this," you know. And therefore people still stay engaged and connected and that, I think, enables a spot for, you know, trans—political transformation in the future.

Maria: So in the two coalitional models...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...the failed one and the one that hasn't failed...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...how would you describe then the difference in the most clear way? In other words, you've said initially that one was just identifying itself in opposition to something.

Andrea: Yeah. And like, and ours is...we're not in opposition. Like an example is...I remember also during like the 80's, we had a lot of women of color. Like I was the Women of Color Caucus Chair for the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and we

had these Women of Color institutes, and white women weren't allowed. So you had to have these guards. But one white woman would slip in and everybody would spend the next two days upset that she was there. And so, and so it was like we were creating your position from a position, and a little bit of a weakness and defensiveness, and so like with the Color of Violence Conference, we tried to make sure that there's a vast majority of women of color, but we just didn't want to be spending any time worrying about a non-woman of color shows up, we're figuring out who's a woman of color, you know, policing these boundaries. Maybe that's kind of informed the whole post-modern analysis. So it's not like that we reject identity politics, but we want to maybe have identity politics that was permeable and not rigidly bounded. And we found that that just stopped a lot of headaches.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: Because then, sure, some men of color and white women came, but they didn't create any problems because nobody paid attention to them. You know, like we had our agenda we kept for. You know, allies want to their thing, we'd say, "Go forth and organize," and then...

Maria: As allies.

Andrea: Yeah. And, but we don't make you an official ally. You do your own thing, just like any chapter can do its own thing, you can do your own thing too. And it just seems to create less of this infighting about who's the legitimate spokesperson, who's not, and whatever. And you can focus on the work.

Maria: So it seems also in terms of the distribution of power, it's less...it's more sort of linear...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...less hierarchical, again, sort of touching back on that. The question of sort of changing our epistemological system, the pyramid form...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...of both links to resources and also power distribution, even within, after this organization.

Andrea: Although ironically, we are modeled after the Southern Baptist Convention³⁸³.

Maria: Oh (laughs).

³⁸³ The term "Southern Baptist Convention" refers to both the Southern Baptist Christian denomination and its annual meeting. Southern Baptists are among the most politically conservative Christian groups in the United States. Since its organization in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, the Southern Baptist Convention has grown to over 16 million members who worship in more than 42,000 churches in the United States.

Andrea: Because what we noticed was – not, less now, because it’s gotten more hierarchical -- but it used to be the case that all the church congregations are autonomous, so they can do whatever they want. But there is this convention that will have these positions. So nobody thinks that the Southern Baptist Convention is this big rabble rousing group, there is a focal area that provides some kind of political or religious focus. But nobody leaves because they don’t have to sign onto it. And that enables it to build into this larger thing. So we thought, well, if it works for the right, let’s see if it works for us. But so far...and so people...well, at first we were like, “Oh, but don’t tell anybody that’s where we got the idea from.” But then we were like, well, why not? Like why don’t we be flexible and learn from, and, you know, anybody that has something interesting to tell us, and so far it’s worked out pretty well.

Maria: Well, that’s really interesting, and I was...one of the questions that we were sort of thinking about was precisely how you kind of work through these, these coalitional models, sometimes. Not just...well, not just say, with the example of INCITE where you have chapters that don’t necessarily share the same ideology in every case with the founding chapter.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: But what happens when you have completely different organizations who are sort of after different things ideologically.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And in terms of their programs...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...how do you build coalitions between those two different organizations? And I think maybe an entry point here would be some of the more recent work you’ve done in the global arena.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: Right? And I’m thinking here of the project you’ve been working on with the...combating the right, the religious right³⁸⁴.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And here’s an example, if you could just, you know, sort of give us a run-down about what that, that project is about. But it’s an example of a kind of coalitional model taken to the global arena. And how is that working? And are there any impediments to it at all?

³⁸⁴ Religious Right is a synonym for the Christian Right.

Andrea: I don't know if it's more global than the other projects. It's another INCITE task force, so we had the Fight the Right task force, and so far it's focused on the Christian right, the Hindu right, anti-immigrant right and white supremacy groups and anti-treaty rights groups. Which is not because those are the most important, but that just happened to be who showed up.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And we were saying, "Well, we're going to focus on this, see how that works before we expand." So, yeah, so we had...and actually the Hindu Right focus actually came from when we were actually...it funded to go to India and meet with groups there. And that's when we learned that a lot of the funding from the Hindu Right was coming from the US, so basically they said, "Go do something about this problem." So we said, "Okay," So that's basically how that kind of started. So, yes, we are...we have been expanding our transnational analysis—anyway, I'm about to go into a path that will make people think I'm totally insane. So I won't do that. But anyway...

Maria: (laughs)

Andrea: ...we're starting to see that we need to question the US borders as it's kind of the way of how we will see ourselves is just framed around US borders, because that's...for one thing also very anti-indigenous because there's many nations within these borders too. So then that makes it us rethink what the nation-state and the nation is, as a tool of analysis and organizing. So, so from that, we've been able to meet with groups of Indians also in Brazil and Latin America. And we've been trying to kind of develop our alliances, not so much in like we're going to go help them, but there's many kind of cooperative projects that like the Hindu Right was one where we can kind of cooperatively work together at both ends around a common problem. And another way it's been very helpful is around community accountability around violence. Because if we're critiquing the prison system, then we want to say but what are the strategies that might be effective in ending violence. We find that a lot of groups in other countries where there's no illusion that the State's going to do anything for you, there's actually much more developed strategies that's very informative for how we could think about ending violence.

Maria: So in other words, the coalitional model that you're sort of enacting, through INCITE, is not based on a kind of...well, one of the critiques of feminists around the world has been that white feminists in the US or Western feminists, sort of want to kind of take their models of feminism into these other spaces where they don't necessarily fit.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And it seems like what you're suggesting is a much more sort of back and forth thing.

Andrea: Right.

Maria: Is there a specific example? Like you mentioned that the Hindu Right, that, that basically you're working on this front to stop US funding of the Hindu Right. And what about...what other transnational projects?

Andrea: Probably the thing that...again, is community accountability. I think what we're noticing is that kind of the US model for ending violence is being aggressively exported through various NGOs³⁸⁵ to other countries. And so I notice so there seems like there's two mistakes that get made is either people in the US assume they have everything to share, or they have nothing to share. You know, so...and so what we're finding is kind of a mix. Like we went – when we went to India, and we...they actually held a forum for us to share kind of organizing. And actually I was surprised as to how much it actually resonated. But then on the other hand, we met some of the organizing projects that totally blew our models for how we thought violence had to be ended. And then just it was very helpful, because then we presented some of those ideas and that became the basis for people developing community accountability models here in the US. So, and then, like at first they were saying, “Well, this, actually this criminalization approach, this is now being promoted in India, so we really want to hear what happened there, so we know not to do it here.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: You know, so, so it's been, I think so far, been a very productive kind of back and forth thing about how...and how to look at state violence and interpersonal violence. Even though there's very different contexts where you have kind of hyper state involvement in one case and then complete negligence in another case. And yet the state is still a critical player in the role of violence and how...and these conversations help us rethink that and what we should do about it.

Maria: So I guess I want to sort of end up this conversation with where you locate yourself in terms of sort of broad historical trajectory that feminism has taken and, and I was going to say in the twentieth century, but you've already stated that, you know, we need to think about it, or push back...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...that time frame a little bit. So, um, if I could just get your thoughts on where you sort of locate your work...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...and in that historical trajectory...

³⁸⁵ An NGO is a Non-Governmental Organization.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...um...

Andrea: I guess I would just say I feel like we're in...coming to a different space with Native women's organizing, maybe women of color's organizing in general, that I felt sometimes we thought we had to apologize for our concerns around gender, like, "Oh, we're...but we still support our communities, and we don't forget the men," or whatever. And now it's kind of like "Cut the crap, folks." I mean, it's...I think it's like we can put ourselves in the center of analysis and if it doesn't work for us it's not working for our communities and it's not working for women either. So I feel like it's like a place to be defiant and saying, "Sexism is not acceptable in any form, racism is not acceptable in any form." You can...And also, we don't have to sit there and be "The Women of Color Caucus" for some other thing. We can instead take charge and be responsible and stop whining about what other people aren't doing for us, and do it ourselves. But...and then therefore, we can then work with others from a place of strength rather than a place of weakness.

Maria: So, and I know we had, in the group, in the Global Feminisms...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...group, had talked about a question that would involve your sort of imagining for the future of feminism. And it seems to me like you, you keep touching back on this issue of placing women of color...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...at the center of the question...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...of feminism and nationalism I guess, or, and I don't know, you know, the struggles of ethnic communities...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...for equality and to end global oppression.

Andrea: Hm.

Maria: So what questions arise when you put women of color at the center of both the, all of these emancipatory discourses?

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: You've already said that that responds in some way both to the needs of the community or the...of the ethnic national community and also to the gendered community.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: How does it fundamentally change the questions that we ask?

Andrea: Well, just on the basic level, we start to see that racial just—when we talk about racial justice, for instance, at the Durban Conference³⁸⁶, how issues of racism never took into account, say, racism and reproductive rights policies or anything that seem to pertain to women of color because that was seen as a gender issue. So if you put women of color in the center of analysis, you start to see how sexism is a tool of racism and colonialism, and vice versa, so that the two need to be addressed simultaneously and you can't say, "Well, we'll liberate ourselves first and then we'll address with the women problem because it's through the women problem that we have racism in the first place." And I just also want to say though, when we're talking about putting something in the center of analysis, that center isn't static. There may be a time when we say we put people with disabilities in the center of analysis or people who are transgendered in the center of analysis. And, but the constant that happens there is by doing this, it's not just about including them again in a program that was designed with them not in mind. But what issues do you see with this new center that you wouldn't otherwise see. So, for instance, now that we're talking about critiquing the criminal justice system, many people are saying, "Well, what about the medical model?" But when you put people with disabilities in the center of analysis, you see the medical model is just as partial as the prison system. So it's important to change the center of analysis, but it's different in terms of critiquing the politics of inclusion and more about saying, "How does this oppression fundamentally think about how our strategies to end it will change?"

Maria: Um-hum. So what you're suggesting is actually a kind of ever-shifting...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...center that, that in some way forces us to ask new and different kinds of questions.

Andrea: Right.

Maria: Um, and I'd like to end up with your sort of sage advice for young activists going into the field who are, you know, who are sort of considering, you know...I mean, they're...one of the things that sort of always struck me when I was trying to decide between activism and scholarly work, because I was one of those people, that

³⁸⁶ The *World Conference Against Racism* met in Durban, South Africa, from August 31st to September 8th, 2001 to develop programs of action against racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance throughout the world.

was like, “Well, I have to pick one or the other,” was that I, I imagined two very distinct worlds...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: ...or paths that I would go on.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: So, um, you’ve chosen a path that melds both of them.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Maria: And I’m wondering if you have any sort of advice or any, anything to share with your own particular journey for people who are considering doing this as well.

Andrea: Well, if you’re going to go in academia and you consider yourself an activist, you shouldn’t drop activism. I mean, that’s just suicide, not just in terms of any global oppression, but even being academically successful. Because I think that’s a lot of problems why particularly women of color get into trouble is that they think they have to do this narrow individualistic approach and they don’t have a collective base to protect them to deal with the racism in the institution. So wherever you are, no matter if you’re a scholar or a florist, collective action is our key. That’s what...it’s we have safety in numbers. So wherever you are, you should be thinking about how to collectively organize.

Maria: Um-hum.

Andrea: And I don’t...and I also just don’t reject the idea that...I mean, everybody has a responsibility I feel to be engaged in collective action in some regards, and why would scholars would get off and florists and garbage collectors and bakers wouldn’t doesn’t make any sense. Wherever you are you have a responsibility to engage collectively to end global oppression.

Maria: Well, thank you. And I’d like at this moment to turn the floor over to our audience and to solicit any questions that might have arisen during this interview. I guess I’ll just...if anyone has any questions or comments? Don’t be shy. Yes.

Audience 1: It was very exciting to listen to the interview. What I was going to say...

Andrea: Yeah.

Audience 1: ...what I’m saying I thoroughly enjoyed the interview.

Andrea: Yeah.

Audience 1: But I was wondering that much of your questions were around what is considered to be part of the public arena, when you discuss feminism, and we say feminism is where you have your private is also part of the political, and you don't have a kind of division of private and public, but they are together. So they're just no personal questions that you have asked at all. So is there anything that you could probe and maybe you could answer?

Andrea: Around the private-public?

Audience 1: No. About your personal life and how feminism has made a difference there. And what are you as a feminist partner, feminist spouse, feminist mom, if anything like that?

Andrea: Well, I just tend not to do that because I just know as women of color, we always just tell our personal stories and so I tend to like do the opposite because I just...it seems like...I...I can remember one, a friend of mine, she was doing her dissertation. She's Maori³⁸⁷, and she was told she couldn't proceed until she told a personal story. But they didn't ask any other white man in the program for his personal story. So part...so I...not to say that that's not important, but I tend to like have this like reaction. And, and also I've noticed in classes, that people always want to hear stories and novels from women of color, but they don't want to hear our analysis. So that's why I guess I tend to want to stay on that level. And the other thing is also I feel like there's a tendency to individualize everything. And I feel like it tends to a problem because then people will say, "Well, they're an activist because they're this kind of person and that's why they can do it," but it's something everybody can do, you know. So I try to focus more on the collective rather than my personal thing, which I'm sure is deeply flawed, but that's just kind of where I am at the present moment.

Audience 2: Um-hum. Okay.

Andrea: Yes.

Audience 2: I would like to know that as a person you have a Ph.D. and a professor here.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Audience 2: So you're talking about activist actions outside of campus. At what level your actions, your activism have been carried out? How grassroots?³⁸⁸ What level? Actually behind this questions is implications, the class issue.

Andrea: Um-hum.

³⁸⁷ *Maori* are a Native New Zealand people of Polynesian ancestry.

³⁸⁸ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

Audience 2: Do you feel barrier because of your identity as a Ph.D., a professor, when you interact with grassroots people?

Andrea: Not really, because I think that, I don't know. Sometimes I feel like people get this major complex about having a Ph.D., either like they can't wait to tell everybody on the planet they have one, or they won't tell anybody at all. And I just...I feel like you just have to kind of demystify it, you know. It is a piece of paper, it's not a big to-do³⁸⁹, you know like, you know what I'm saying? Like I still like to go dancing. And so then once you just kind of like are a normal person, then it doesn't seem to be that big to-do. And so the way I look at it is wherever you are that's your base by which you need to organize, you know. And sometimes people have this idea that there's this more romantic base that you could go organize. But you should be where you...you need to org—you need to be in coalition with others. But you can't ignore where you are personally situated. So if you're in academia, there's a huge base of students and professors to be working with, you know. And there's so much potential I think there, because students are in one place, but they also go back to their homes where they can spread the information they've gotten, you know, on a wide geographic basis. So I think that there's so much potential we haven't thought about in terms of organizing the student base, because we're all preoccupied with the community base as the only way to do organizing, and everything we come up with there doesn't even work with students because of the different constraints that they're in.

So I...anyway. Yeah, so I remember, I remember my sister was telling me this too. She was saying like...I was saying, "Oh, I guess I should go to [inaudible] and organize there," and she's like, "Well, why?" I mean why is it assumed that that's the only place you should do it? Maybe you should think about where you would be most effective and hook in with people in other places, rather than have this romanticized notion of where the true organizing is happening.

Audience 3: A little further on, some of the issues that Maria asked you, and it's about the coalitions that you have...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...with not just the national coalitions, but to turn the lens inward...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...and to ask that sort of differently in terms of what sort of relationships do you have with mainstream US feminist groups. Say, for example, NOW or The Feminist Majority³⁹⁰. And not because I think that, say, it's the task of a group like INCITE to transform these organizations...

³⁸⁹ "A big to-do", a big deal, something very important.

³⁹⁰ *Feminist Majority Foundation* was founded by Ellie Smeal, former president of NOW. FMF focuses on women's equality and reproductive rights and has among its projects Afghan Women. The FMF site credits Smeal with leading the first national abortion rights march in 1986.

Andrea: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...so much as to just try and find out, you know, has there been any effort at a dialogue? Has that been initiated...

Andrea: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...by these “mainstream groups”?

Andrea: Um-hum. Yeah. The biggest impact has been around the mainstream Anti-Violence Movement. What we did is INCITE developed a statement with Critical Resistance,³⁹¹ “Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex,” on gender violence in the prison industrial complex, which is a statement basically critiquing the reliance of the Anti-Violence Movement on the criminal justice system, but also critiquing the Anti-Prison Movement for not addressing accountability and safety for survivors in its prison abolition rhetoric. And so we use that as a tool to start conversations with mainstream Anti-Violence activist organizations. And I’m happy to say that it actually has been very successful. Actually the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence actually signed on to the statement. So, yeah, I think it’s very important to have these conversations. But I think...I...yes, but I kind of tend to think...a lot of people think if you still have a separate organization that means you don’t want to talk to other people. And some people, that may be the case. But from my point of view, it’s more you need an independent power base to have that conversation be effective. And I feel like the conversation tends not to be effective when you’re just a woman of color Caucus appendage, they have no reason to listen to you. You know, but when you have an independent power base, then you have, you have a place of strength to be able to force a conversation where somebody may not have been interested previously.

Like just one example, when I was working at this rape crisis center, we had this white woman who was a boss but all the other staff was a woman of color, so we called it the plantation. And she hated my guts. But the thing was, I was very well connected in the city of Chicago with a lot of different groups, and she one time explicitly said to me, “I want to fire you but I’m afraid to, because I’m afraid of what will happen.” And she was right, actually, if she had fired me, there would have been problems.” You know, so because I had a power base, I was able to negotiate that space more effectively. So I don’t feel it’s about letting go of those spaces. I feel like it’s about negotiating those spaces from a more...a position of strength.

Maria: Any other questions? Well, I think that probably will wrap it up. It was a wonderful interview. Thanks for sharing your wisdom with us, Andy. It was a real pleasure to talk to you about these things.

Andrea: Thank you.

The End

³⁹¹ *Critical Resistance* is a national organization dedicated to opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer
Interviewer: Jennifer Lyle**

**Location: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Date: March 5, 2004**

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Maureen Taylor is a social worker and dedicated community activist who fights for food, clothing, shelter, light, heat and water for those in need. She has served as chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights organization since 1993, and was elected treasurer of the National Welfare Rights Union in 1994. Taylor defends recipients of public aid at the Michigan Family Independence Agency in case disputes, and serves as the program director for the Detroit NFI Community Self Sufficiency Center, a program that works to assist chronically unemployed persons in the Detroit Central Empowerment Zone. Graduating first in her class, Taylor received her Bachelors Degree in Social Work from Marygrove College in 1983. In 1994, she earned her Masters Degree in Social Work from Wayne State University. Taylor has received many awards for her community organizing and leadership, including the National Community Leader Award from the National Black Caucus in Washington, DC.

Marian Kramer has been in the front lines of the Welfare and Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s. She has retained her commitment to end poverty in America by empowering the poor, especially women, as leaders. She has fought government programs, such as Workfare, defended poor women against unjust persecution for welfare fraud and led campaigns to elect the victims of poverty to political office. She has organized poor people's movements, housing takeovers by people without homes, and led efforts to unionize in the South. Kramer is the recipient of numerous awards for community service, and is known as a mentor to college students fighting poverty. In 2004, she was awarded an Alston/Bannerman Fellowship, a fellowship for long-time community activists of color. Currently, she is Co-chair of the National Welfare Rights Union.

Jennifer B. Lyle is Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University's School of Social Work. She recently received her Ph.D. in Social Work and Sociology from the University of Michigan. She has 18 years experience working with local and national community organizations around issues related to welfare rights, women's economic security, LGBT rights and visibility, and most recently, reproductive health and safety of women and girls of color.

Transcript of Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest*
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
*We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*³⁹²

Jennifer Lyle: Hi. My name is Jennifer Lyle, and I'm here talking to Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer as part of the Global Feminisms Project. And we'll be talking today about your social activism and the work that you've done for many, many years. The first question that I have for you both is, what led you to the work that you do now? How did it develop? What inspired you to do what you're doing?

Marian Kramer: I'll let you go first.

Maureen Taylor: Yes, Ma'am. I was...I'm born and raised in Detroit, the lower east side of the city of Detroit in a community called the Black Bottom. And in that particular community, the concept there was we shared information and resources and support for each other, and I thought that's the way the world worked, because that's what I understood. As I grew older and went to high school and eventually went to college, I learned that the world didn't work that way, that there were some other things that were happening, and that if you wanted to have a community that was prosperous or at least safe you needed to do something. So at an early age, I became involved in...at least an interest, at first a passing interest, in politics, because I couldn't understand why there seemed to be inequities in terms of how some people lived, others struggled. So as I got older, entered into the workforce, things happened, lost jobs, things just changed and I became clearer and clearer that I needed to be involved in a movement of sorts that would deal with this question of racism. I worked on that for a very long time until I realized there came a time that I found out that it was something else happening. It wasn't just all white people were bad, all Black people were good. Was something wrong with that, because I started to meet folks that were in the gray area. And so as I became more involved, it became clear to me that there is a class component to all of these fights that are going on, and in an effort to try to adjust these inequities, I've been involved since then, and all of my activities are based in my community where I live. That's how I got to be where I am now.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Kind of short for Maureen, huh?

Jennifer: Yeah.

³⁹² These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

Marian: Well, my activities started in Port Allen, Louisiana, which is West Baton Rouge. And at the old age of four years old, my grandfather was slapped three times by his little young [clears throat]—excuse me—boss at the time, who was white at the time. And the young man was young enough to be his grandson. And they had always loved baseball. He said, “Three strikes, you out.” And he kept telling that young man, “You’re going to have to respect me.” The young man’s orientation was that we were nothing, you know, as...as Black, nothing but their property. He hit Dad for the last time in this tavern. It was located across the street from where we lived, on Achafalie Street. And Dad retaliated, and as a Black male—man—in Louisiana, you didn’t do that. And I remember the family coming together late one night that night to try to get my grandfather out of Louisiana, because...

Jennifer: **Um-hum.**

Marian: ...we knew what the end...I mean, *they* knew, my family knew, my father’s side as well as my mother’s side, what the end results could be.

Jennifer: **Hm.**

Marian: That Dad would be dead. So Dad was taken to Dallas, Texas, where his sister, out of fourteen, fif—fourteen children lived. But that, you know, that kind of stayed within me, you know, as a young child, seeing the family come together, my grandmother crying, you know, and folks trying to get it together and make sure that my grandfather was safe.

Jennifer: **Hm.**

Marian: But I saw a connection there. I didn’t understand the collectivity then. But I understand it more. So that was the groundwork for me to kind of stay together within my community and do something good there. But, you know, being born in Louisiana laid the groundwork for me to get involved period, because I knew for one thing there was this whole attitude you had to be light, bright, and damn-near white—that was the tone—in order to...to try to fit in...to a upper level among the Blacks there. But, you know, our family was not like that. For one thing we were all different complexions. Number two, my family was carpenters, cooks and that type of stuff, you know, or maids or what have you. So therefore we didn’t make the grade, you know, as being that light, bright, damn-near white type of attitude. You could be like that, but you had to likewise have some of the economic basis. So my mother was the inspiration for us. So we moved to Dallas, like a year and a half later...

Jennifer: **Um-hum.**

Marian: ...the family, the immediate family, like my mother and four children and my grandmother, because my mother and my father during that period of time separated. My mother got us involved in the NAACP.³⁹³

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: I didn't understand all that. But I know we were involved. Because the whole church was involved. So, you know, from...from that foundation, you know, I got involved in the civil rights movement. From the civil rights movement in Dallas, Texas, during the hanging and lynching and, you know, all that stuff going on, into at Southern University, becoming very active. Don't try to think back what year that is because I might not tell you.

Jennifer: I was going to ask you.

Marian: Yeah, yeah. That was back in the early 60's.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Because I graduated from high school in 1962. I'm looking at Maureen, 1962. But, um...

Maureen: Just a spring chicken.³⁹⁴

Marian: A chicken, that's all I am. Yeah, you know that.

Maureen: Yes. Um-hum.

Marian: But, you know, my...one of the things my mother told me in going to Southern, because I went back to Louisiana...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...to stay with my father during that period of time to attend Southern University, don't get involved. She had become...you know. Although we were *involved*...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...her thing was don't get involved and get kicked out of school.

Jennifer: Okay.

³⁹³ The *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) is an organization that works to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of all persons, and to eliminate racial discrimination.

³⁹⁴ A *spring chicken* is young person.

Marian: Because all my cousins and all the rest of them were kicked out of Southern University for participating in the rising civil rights movement at the time.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Well, you know, when you say don't, what do you do? You get involved. Not only did I get involved, but I became a task force worker for the Congress of Racial Equality³⁹⁵ at the time. I worked on campus. I really wasn't interested in school.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: I was just interested in...and it wasn't nothing else for me to do, you know.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So not only did I get involved in CORE, but I became one of their active members and staff to try to help involve the community, my family more involved. As the thing intensified, two years later I was sent out on one of the task force in the summer, on summer projects and that type of stuff.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So, you know, it's been a continuous thing from the civil rights movement, then in...in...in Detroit to being active once I got married. And one of those Alinsky projects and that type learning, organizing, more in depth in the community and that type of stuff, and then to welfare rights.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: In the beginning stages of welfare rights, because some of the people in the original organizing around welfare rights, a lot of us came from the civil rights movement to help get that on...on the road and what have you. And I've continued. As the objective situation changed, then so do our strategy and tactics on what we had to do. But I've maintained my membership, since the 60's, in the welfare rights organization. Because I've felt that's where I needed to be and that is, among the poorest of folks and struggling for them to be able to organize the fight back that needs to take place to free all of us out here.

Jennifer: Okay. It sounds like your organizing, your work comes from this understanding that you want to give back to a community that you came from.

Marian: Yes. But I want to...we want to get the community to fight in their interest.

³⁹⁵ *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)* is a national civil rights organization, founded in 1942. CORE currently focuses on technology training for youth of color.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And the fighting in their interest, we're talking about just like Maureen has talked about earlier, about a class question, we're talking about fighting in the interest of the class, and that is, right now what we're facing in Detroit and around the country, particularly in Detroit and Highland Park and places where we live, you see all this killing taking place. Because people are fighting one another...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...not understanding concretely who they should be focusing their attention around. We've been involved...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...in struggles around the utilities and all that type of stuff, and people are afraid to even come out and ashamed to say, "My water is off, my utilities are cut off," because they feel that people are going to look down on them for not being able to take care of their bare nece—you know, the necessities, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: They...because we live under a government that make you feel that that's your fault. So, yes, we want to give back to our community, but in the main, we want our community to get...get so to the point that they're engaged...

Maureen: That's right.
[together]

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...to fighting back and making sure that we have a quality of life that everybody can enjoy.

Jennifer: Okay. Can you...I want to go back, because you started talking about the welfare rights...

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: ...movement, and can you talk a little bit about what...what that is, what that has...what that is, what it's become, and how you...You talked a little bit about how you became involved with it, but can you talk a little bit more about that, how each of you came to it?

Marian: How did you come?

Maureen: Well, you should start, because it's because of you that I became there. You got me there. Tell her what happened in the beginning when you were in with George Wylie³⁹⁶ and them.

Marian: Thank you, Mo.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: But anyway, you know, back in Syracuse, New York in the early...back in the 60's, there was a poor people's conference in Syracuse. I just come out of the civil rights movement. I was at the West Central Organization.³⁹⁷ There was Alinsky-style organization in Detroit. And the community decided that they wanted to attend this poor people's conference.

Maureen: And don't forget to explain Alinsky, what does that mean.

Marian: I will get to Alinsky.

Maureen: Thank you very much.

Marian: Thank you. And, um...once we got to this conference, we ran into some of the people that had been in CORE with us. And that was George Wiley.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: That was some of the people that was from Louisiana, that was on the project with me, and as well as with my ex-husband. And they pulled us together to meet Frances Piven and Richard Cloward,³⁹⁸ who had a concept that they wanted to develop at the time. And they figured that if they talked to us as civil rights workers that had just left, you know, the civil rights movement in the South at that time...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...that we would probably come on board and help organize around this concept. We listened, diligently. Now mind you, we had just come out of the battlefield -- I mean real battlefield -- and we listened, and we...I told them at that time, I could not become a

³⁹⁶ *George Wylie* was the founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization. A nationally recognized chemist, he taught at Syracuse University before founding the NWRO.

³⁹⁷ *West Central Organization* is a community-based organization in Detroit that works to protect low-income community members from suffering under city, state, and federal urban renewal projects.

³⁹⁸ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward are award-winning, New York City-based scholars who have collaborated on issues of poverty, welfare reform and economic inequalities. Their classic book is *Regulating the Poor*.

full-fledged worker for welfare rights because I was committed in Detroit to helping out at this community organization as well as my husband at the time. But we would work diligently to help set this organization up within the community.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: And that was my commitment at that particular time, my first time being around Frances and Richard, first time meeting Beulah Sanders, who was at one time one of...the second National President of the National Welfare Rights organization. And there must have been about three to four hundred people at this conference, poor people's conference at the time. But that was like the launching, the beginning launching of welfare rights. Because all of us agreed that we would make sure that we organized people in the community to come to the first national meeting.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And that was held at—I'm trying to get it—in Chicag—no, in Washington DC, one of them at the time. And I got kind of committed at that time to be involved. Although I was committed to this organization, West Central Organization, that was this Alinsky side on this...Let me back up. Saul Alinsky was a person out of Chicago that at one time was an organizer around Back of the Yards. And Back of the Yards back in early--I might have forgotten my period of time—early 30s...ah, early 40s and stuff, wanted to keep Blacks from being able to move in. And Alinsky, being an organizer, if they would...they wanted to organize around, he would do it. Then he...further on, it was the question of the nuns who wanted to organize against being able to, you know, not having to wear the habits and all that...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...that stuff, I remember him being in some of those demonstrations to support the nuns, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And so, you know, it was that type of thing. But then too he...further expand, you know, as far as organizing with different communities. In Chicago, it was around the University of Chicago who wanted to expand and push out the community. That was...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...TWO³⁹⁹ organization, The Woodlawn Organization. And, you know, on the...on, um...way I became aware was Northwest Community Organization, where we met Alinsky and likewise he came to Detroit. And that's what we had in Detroit. But it

³⁹⁹ *The Woodlawn Organization* is a Chicago organization that works to provide quality housing in the city's Woodlawn neighborhood.

start changing for him in Detroit. Because the situation start changing also in Detroit. We had a little visitor...

Jennifer: Wants to get on camera.

Marian: Ah, yeah, he wants to get on camera too. Do you blame him? And, um, so, you know, this is where I came in contact with Alinsky more so in Detroit.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And, ah, it was around urban renewal and trying to push the community out and that type of stuff. And eventually we parted our ways. But likewise, we made sure that welfare rights was a part of this org—organization, the West Central Organization at the time.

Jennifer: Okay. So can you just briefly describe what's the...the Alinsky model? What does it entail?

Marian: Wow. You're taking me back to something...

Jennifer: Just briefly, just...

Marian: Ah, well, Alinsky had a concept...

Jennifer: And how you used it for welfare rights. Um-hum.

Marian: Well, he had a concept that, you know, whatever the people wanted to organize around, you know. And the people that we wanted to...that we were working with were interested in maintaining their community. And the people in welfare rights that was based in Jeffrey public housing at the time. And then the West Central Organization, there was, um...Westside Mothers⁴⁰⁰ that was formed at that time, were basically organizing around being treated with respect and being able to get the necessary programs that...to support them to be able to go to work or to get an education. Well, in the community I was living it's around housing also, that you don't take our housing. So that was the main...and the Alinsky thing was, if that's what people want to organize around, then we organize around it. If they want to organize around a party in the street we would organize around it.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: That was basically his thing, and that you organize the people to have a piece of the pie. But our concept was, we wanted to have them not only have a piece of that pie, but make the general decisions concerning our lives, okay? And eventually, you know,

⁴⁰⁰*Westside Mothers* is a Michigan welfare rights organization that advocates for low-income persons and an improved welfare system.

Alinsky was a very patriotic type of person, really supported the government and stuff, so we split on a lot of things eventually, you know. He was not...Eventually, I remember the last time I saw that man, I told him that, you know, your concept is to organize to have a piece of the pie, we want the whole pie. And you organize and retr—ah, you know, usually pull out your organizers, but I believe that the organizers should come from the community, you know. And that the community in the final analysis should be the ones that make the decision about their lives, and not some high paid organizer that comes in here. So, you know, a lot of his tactics and stuff, we...philosophies we...we split on. But we used a lot of his tactics, because it would work -- door to door, you know, organizing the—what is it?—the block clubs⁴⁰¹ ...

Maureen: [inaudible] block clubs, [inaudible]...

Marian: ...and all that stuff into a motive force, taking them down to City Council. They had never been to City Council before. Taking a skunk to a meeting at...at Wayne State Board of Trustees meeting who we felt that that's how they felt about the community, that we stink, and they were going to urban renew us out. So he took us beyond what we could imagine at that time, at that particular time.

Jennifer: Okay. What...what time was that?

Marian: Why you keep insisting what time?

Jennifer: This is for...it's going to ___...

Marian: But that's all right. I understand. That would...and I'm proud of it. It was during the 60s and early...

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...early 70s.

Jennifer: Okay. So it's still around the 60's.

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: And, Maureen, so I guess I would...I guess the question can be, I would like to know how you got into the welfare rights organizing. But also can you talk about how you all...how you all met each other. How...?

Maureen: Marian is considerably older than I am. So by the time I arrived, a number of these struggles were already in full bloom.

⁴⁰¹ *Block clubs* are neighborhood groups who take on a variety of roles, such as neighborhood watch, collective yard maintenance, or a social club—all intended to improve the quality of life on their block.

Jennifer: Okay.

Maureen: I had...I was in college and...at Highland Park Community College, as a matter of fact, and was involved in a very vigorous, sometimes violent confrontation with administration at Highland Park Community College. And the issue was there were 99 percent African American students at this facility and no Black faculty. And it was an outrage, and, you know, students were...were complaining about the cultural problems and not being able to identify and all of those kinds of things. And at that time, you know, my hair was...I was best nationalist in town. I'd go outside and the wind would grab my...you know, all of that. So while I was in school and these issues were coming up and I was part of raising these issues, because it was an educational component that I was focused on -- how can we get a better, deeper education if we can't get an education because the folks that are teaching us and training and what not always have a bad attitude and they live someplace else? None of them even were local folks. I was still living in Detroit. Highland Park is a small community enclave inside of Detroit that's surrounded by...but none of the teachers lived there. There were all suburbanites. So they had a...a perspective. And, again, at that time, I was looking at this Black and white issue. I was off into this fight. Many of our students had begun to get expelled because we were picketing, and the police were called. You know, this was something that was lasting over a period of months, and this was intense organizing. Then there came a time where the faculty came forward, the administration came forward, and they said, "Well, what we're going to do is we're going to hire African Americans, and your point is right and, you know, we're going to start, and next semester you'll have some untenured⁴⁰² Blacks working here, some untenured women working here." So this is fine, it's a start. So six months later, the students are still failing. They still can't read. Their grades are no better. And, you know, now we're into a argument where we're saying, "Well, what is wrong here? Maybe it's not the individual teacher." Now at the time, I'm going through a metamorphosis myself. It's the 70's. And, and I'm in Chicago at a meeting. It's a Democratic National Convention⁴⁰³ and I'm there. And there's fighting going on in the streets. I'm trying to hit somebody, I don't know who to hit, but, you know, I'm there with whoever's in the...in the audience and in the streets and what not. And what happened was, I'll never forget this, it was, you know, police officers at those time, at those days in Chicago, they had three-foot nightsticks that looked like they were yardsticks, and this cop was about to hit me upside my head, and a white guy who I did not know, a student just like me, jumped on me and took the blow. Well, that told me -- you know, I have never been a stupid person -- that told me clearly, wait a minute, it's something wrong with what I'm thinking because, see, this guy didn't know me, but he didn't want the police to hit me upside my head and he took a serious knock to the head, blood and everything. So by the time I got back up to Detroit and begin to...you know, I thought I need to sit down and review a lot of issues, there's something wrong here. And

⁴⁰² An *untenured* employee, is usually at an academic institution, but has not yet received a life-long job security guarantee.

⁴⁰³ *Democratic National Convention* is held prior to each presidential election, in which delegates of the Democratic Party formally announce their candidates for president and vice-president.

I began to change some attitudes about some things because it became clear that it's not a Black and White fight. So I started getting involved in looking for changes. Found some flyers that talked about, we're having some classes, some politics classes, some classes that have to do with politics and the study of economic systems around the world. And, and, and it was a class that was set up, and I looked at it, I didn't know what it was, and, you know, made some telephone calls, and it was about then that I found Marian Kramer, and she answered one of those calls—you know, I need to find out about these classes, get some information and try to find out what they were. Well, let me fast forward. Went to some classes, some other things happened, few years went by, learned some things. I went to work at General Motors.⁴⁰⁴ I got called in at GM and I was a test driver for a very long time. I was cute, didn't smoke, paid you all the money in the world, I'm going there. So I went to General Motors and I worked as a test driver on the second shift and I was there for a number of years. There came a time when all of our shift got a pink slip.⁴⁰⁵ We were all laid off at the same time. And I thought, like everybody was told, this is just a temporary activity. Months went by, we're still getting our little money. Unemployment lasted a long time in those days. You had a first extension, the second extension, a triple extension. So, you know, still...still doing fairly well. Came a time some of my...my colleagues said "Let's go out to the proving grounds in Milan, Michigan." And somebody we knew who was still working there had a birthday. We went out to visit this girl and it was only her and another person. All the other shifts had been laid off. We were really surprised. I still had my badge. I went on the grounds...

Jennifer: The proving ground was where you did test driving, isn't it?

Maureen: Proving grounds is the testing gr—the testing facility at Milan, Michigan. It's a farming community about 40 miles outside, maybe about 25 miles outside of Detroit. So when I get there, there's a warehouse, where my track used to be. Now my job was to drive an experimental car 100 times around the track at 100 miles an hour. At the end of the 100th rotation, I had to crash that car into a wall and these...it was a wall that had mattresses, so you crash into it, you know, the first 50 times you do it, you know, you lose...you know, your stomach is gone.⁴⁰⁶ But after a while you learn what this job is. And I was a brake and emissions tester. So I did this job. Now when I go back out and I visit my plant where I used to work, the proving grounds, there's now a warehouse. Wasn't there before, so I went and took a look in the windows and there was a robot driving my car. So it took me about three seconds—hmm—cold outside, dark in there. Robot didn't need any heat, robot didn't need any lights, didn't have to go to the bathroom...

Marian: Just air conditioning.

⁴⁰⁴ Founded in 1908, *General Motors* is the world's largest autoworker and has its headquarters in Detroit, Michigan.

⁴⁰⁵ "To get the pink slip" is slang meaning a notice of dismissal from a job.

⁴⁰⁶ Maureen is using this expression to mean that this experience made her feel very sick.

Maureen: ...no time off. Didn't need anything. Air conditioning inside the car to make certain that the engines didn't overheat. About five seconds I realize, you know, we're not going back to work here. Not going back to work here. So I came out, long time went by, all my benefits were exhausted, it's time for me to go to the welfare office because my lights and my gas were about to be cut off. I go to the welfare office, they say you have to come back when your thing's already cut off. "No, that doesn't make any sense." "No, that's the rules." Remember that crazy girl I met a couple years ago. Let me call that crazy woman. Call Marian. Said, "Listen I need some help." I told her what was happening, what's going on. She says, "Okay. So Schoolcraft office." She said, "Meet me there." "That's fine. They're not going to talk to you." She said, "Meet me at the office." So I go there. I'm standing right next to her at the counter, she told the lady, "This young lady came in to get some assistance and you didn't talk right to her, you didn't help her, what's the problem?" "Rules, regulations." Marian picked up a manual and threw it and hit her. I said, "Whew, I got to join this. This...[laughter] this...I got to go here." The woman came back, everybody scattered, they came back and I got money for rent, I got money for gas and lights, food stamps -- I didn't ask for those -- I got all kinds of things. So I thought, now it can't be the fear of this little woman. She was...

Marian: Much thinner then.

Maureen: Yeah, it can't be that.

Marian: It won't say that.

Maureen: This is a big woman she threw this manual that. It can't be that. It must be something else. So I was very intrigued and began to go back to some studies and to try to understand what is the...what is the reason why so many people lose jobs. Wasn't my fault. Wasn't my colleagues' fault that we all got laid off. Then we go to this state agency who is mandated to help us, and when we get there, they have a bad attitude and act as if it's something we've done wrong. What is the basis of this? I couldn't understand it. I knew I couldn't understand, but I *knew* she knew, so I hooked up with her. And that was 25 years ago. "Teach me this, because I need to find out what's wrong here." Been there every since. Welfare rights.

Marian: And she drove me up a wall ever since then.

Jennifer: I'm sure.

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: So what...what has it been to work as colleagues and friends? Or be friends as colleagues in this...in this work?

Marian: For one thing, we truthful with one another. Because we...all the work that we have to do. You know, some people some time think that Maureen and I about to fight each other physically. But it's...but we be battling out tactically how we need to move on

something. So as...as the more and more we stay in the trenches and more and more people that we bring, and the more and more love that we have for each other as well as...cut -- you got to stop, that bug is on you [laughs].

Jennifer: Is it?

Maureen: Right to...on your collar and...

Marian: I'm sorry.

Maureen: ...almost next to your face.

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: Now it's gone.

Marian: Okay. You better get him now before he comes back in.

Maureen: Um-hum. Well, let's keep going.

Jennifer: Okay. We'll just keep going and we'll cut it later.

Marian: Yeah, I don't...

Maureen: Okay. I don't know about bugs and...

Jennifer: Sure.

Marian: Yeah, I just didn't...I just didn't want it to bite you, you know.

Maureen: But...and...And we've had many victories over the years . . .

Marian: Yeah, yeah.

Maureen: . . . because we work together. The tandem team of Malone and, and the other guy, whatever his name was. And Pippin and...and Jordan. You know, it...it really works well with the concept that says, because we work together...

Marian: She don't know who they are.

Maureen:as a team. Oh, these are basketball players. I forgot.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Maureen: I forgot. But, you know, if you work together in a collective and work together in terms of management by consensus it really works.

Jennifer: Right.

Maureen: So we have had tremendous victories because we play good cop/bad cop.⁴⁰⁷

Jennifer: Yeah.

Maureen: And we used to do it for a long time, but now as we get older, we just bad cop all the time now. We don't want to do good cop anymore. Just go in there and just start smacking folks.

Jennifer: You mean you go in where and play good cop/bad cop?

Marian: Yeah, we go into, you know, um, into the welfare office if necessary to represent probably one or two of our members, because Welfare Rights is a membership organization. But once we arrive there, it might be the whole, ah...

Maureen: Yes.

Marian: ...ah, waiting room of people that we end up staying all day with, to make sure that they get quality services. And we represent all the people there. And not only that, we make the workers as well as the district manager work...

Maureen: [Inaudible] policy, that's right.

Marian: ...I mean, actually work, you know, because they're supposed to be giving people not only service but service with respect, and that type of stuff. So, you know, if necessary we have kept some welfare office open for three straight nights, 24...24 hours, you know. And at the end, quite naturally, they arrested us, but it was not just Maureen and I, but, you know, I...some of our past members who have passed away—Diane Bernard⁴⁰⁸ I know I have done it in Louisiana with Annie Smart⁴⁰⁹ and that type of...

Maureen: Office takeovers.

Marian: ...you know, that was...that has always been one of the battlegrounds of welfare rights. And that is at that office level. And then we have to turn around and represent some of those same workers.

Jennifer: The workers who are in the office.

⁴⁰⁷ *Good cop/bad cop* is a technique of police interrogation in which one officer (the bad cop) is mean and abusive towards the subject and the other officer (the good cop) defends the subject from the bad cop, thus winning the subject's trust and obtaining information from them.

⁴⁰⁸ *Diane Bernard* is former president of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

⁴⁰⁹ *Annie Smart* is a welfare rights activist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Marian: Um-hum.

[together]

Maureen: Um-hum.

Maureen: See there's some...some history, that we went to, ah, at one of the offices, and it's good history because we were line workers. You know, and don't forget, we were in Inkster, and we kept that office open for 72, 78 hours—don't forget—and we...we'll...we'll barbecue and bring a hibachi in this place, whatever, take a office. So at five o'clock when everybody else is going here, you'll be here. But the point is...and it was...it was—oh, it took me a long time to learn, and I had...I know I worried Marian and...and Freddy Nixon, and May Payne,⁴¹⁰ some of our earlier members there. You know, these are war veterans. I mean, women who had been on welfare, bad diets, they were all overweight. These were some of the fighters, the backbone of whatever democracy is, were these women here. Courage, you know, rebuke you in the name of the devil, they're very religious, and roll their sleeves up and will punch a policeman before you could blink your eye. You know, you weren't prepared to fight, and they just go. But some of them....

Marian: Some of them were on the kidney machine three days a week.

Maureen: ...courage. Hm!

Marian: Thelma Eccles⁴¹¹, Beulah Sanders,⁴¹² all of them. But they were always ready. They would come off that kidney machine and be sick.

Maureen: You know, Johnnie Tillmon⁴¹³.

Marian: And ready to go...yeah, ready to take over.

Maureen: Lost both of her legs, Johnnie Tillmon, and that's when I came in after Marian was giving that explanation about the Saul Alinsky, model...

Marian: Oh, yeah.

Maureen: By the time I came along, the Johnnie Tillman model, which is the victims of this fight need to be in the management, need to be in control of what happens.

Jennifer: Hm.

⁴¹⁰ *May Payne* is a welfare rights activists in Detroit.

⁴¹¹ *Thelma Eccles* is a welfare rights activist.

⁴¹² *Beulah Sanders* is a former president of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

⁴¹³ *Johnnie Tillmon* founded the California Welfare Rights Organization and also served as the first Chair of the National Welfare Rights Organization. In 1972, she published the essay "Welfare is a Woman's Issue" *Ms.* magazine, challenging mainstream white feminism's conceptions of welfare.

Maureen: And, and I was recruited and trained under that model, which is the correct model. Let's move ahead with the victims of this fight who don't bargain, who don't sell out, who don't get scared. The only thing they do is die before we get to where we're going. But they never give up. So I came in under that particular brand and Johnnie Tillman who I never met, but, you know, read many of her writings, she was already in a wheelchair with both legs amputated by the time I was involved in this organization. But it was her and Fannie Lou Hamer⁴¹⁴ and whatnot that said, you know, "We gonna go down this street, and we gonna be in charge," and that was...

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: ...so very incredibly important, because the victims of this fight, unless they're in charge of this, you know, that we go into other kinds of waters.⁴¹⁵

Marian: And these are the kind of women that you generally...that's why I'm glad you're doing this project.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: Because those women are the type of women that people never really...you know, you don't read too much about them. But they are some of the women that were in the forefront of protecting human services. But at the same time, laying the groundwork that they made it better, you know. Situation has changed now. When we started out in welfare rights, ah, I remember I had to go on aid, because I ended up with a...my first child. And my husband and I sure enough was separated, and I ended up at the welfare office, and I knew organization and I was a part of welfare rights.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know. I sit up there for 15 minutes before I decided I was going to start something on my own, pregnant and all, you know. I wanted to make sure my child has some...some healthcare and all that type of stuff. And I walked up to the counter and said, I...I need to talk with the super—your supervisor. She said, "Who gave you the right?" I said, "I tell you who gives me the right to ask for that. I'm from Welfare Rights."

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And within a matter of 15 minutes, which shocked everybody in the other...in the office, had been sitting there all day long. I was being served.

⁴¹⁴ Fannie Lou Hamer was a civil rights activist and member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Fannie Lou Hamer founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

⁴¹⁵ The speaker is using this expression to mean "different kinds of places," or areas in which they were not used to organizing in.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Not only be—being served, they were trying to get me out of there. You know, so organization...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...and, and the question of having some type of vision that this does not have to operate like this...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...has kept us going, you know. So, ah, you know, I'm staying here in welfare rights until there is no need for it again. And, ah, you know, like I quote, ah, Guida West⁴¹⁶ who wrote our book...

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: ...you know, the National Welfare Rights Organization, Guida said, "Bury me with my boots on."

Maureen: That's right.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Because I'm going down fighting. And, you know, and I'm...I...and I'm proud for the fact that we have the opportunity to be among those women and be a part of that. But at the same time, you know, you get very angry at a situation that, here we are...

Jennifer: Yeah.

Marian: ...I'm 59 years old. I'll be 60 in a couple of months. My problem is, why in the hell am I still having to fight like this for our children to have a decent life for the future.

Marian: Even harder.

Marian: And much harder, because we're now facing the situation where I live in a community where, say, 50 percent of the people were without water.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: You know, it's getting worse. It's not getting any better. So, yes, I must stay in the struggle.

⁴¹⁶ Guida West is the author of *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women*, (1981) and a long-time activist in the Welfare Rights Movement.

Jennifer: I wanted...you've answered a lot of the questions that I have, but I want to ask, I would...when you talked about Johnnie Tilman, I think about what she said. We...we go from being beholden to a man, and then it becomes "The Man".

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: Or something like that. But one of the things that, ah...there's this discussion about working for race and class and gender and understanding all those things. But where I really learned it was under you all, about how you showed me that there's a fight and it's about humanity, it's about...

Maureen: That's right.

Jennifer: ...people. So can you talk a little bit more about how that became part of your vision? You talked about this man protecting you, but, you know, I've seen...you...you've worked with disability, you worked with women, you work around race, you work around water -- all of those things. And that...I think that's strengthened your work, and I'll let you tell me about it.

Marian: Well, you know, originally, when welfare rights started, we started out as organizing AFDC recipient, Aid to Families with Dependent Children.⁴¹⁷ Um, mainly people on the rolls,⁴¹⁸ you know. And that was the objective situation at the time, coming out of the civil rights movement, you know, trying to get these head of the households organized. Situation changed, you know. A lot of the women, not only that we were able to...to expand the services through the struggle, it wasn't nothing that the government gave us. You know, it took struggle for this.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: Ah, you know, being in the trenches, going in and out of jail, you know, that type of stuff, making sure that, you know, protecting our children, making sure that they're not snatching our children and that. What happened was, the situation changed that a lot of the women ended up in the workfor—you know, getting better jobs. They were already in the workforce. You know, getting better jobs. And, ah, with them getting better jobs, and eventually technology began to expand, so, you know, an organization like Welfare rights, which is people don't tend to think of it as a part...as a part of the labor force...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

⁴¹⁷ *Aid to Families with Dependent Children* (AFDC) is a program in the Office of Family Assistance that provides federal and state funds to families in need of financial assistance.

⁴¹⁸ "On the rolls" refers to people that are receiving government assistance.

Marian: ...begin to have to change too. So back in 19...um...well, back in the 70's, you know, we just...the National Office ceased, but we maintained a lot of the local organizations. Michigan Welfare Rights was one of the strongest, and that organization continue even today. But in 1987, we formed the National Welfare Rights Union.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And the purpose of that was based on, ah, a program that was being implemented in Washington, DC. We began to organize on a national level against slave labor, you know, forcing folks to work off their welfare grant.

Maureen: Workfare.

Marian: Using wel...welfare recipients to bring down the whole of the working class at that time. And we...

Jennifer: And you're saying that's Workfare. That was Workfare.

Marian: That was Workfare. That was...here it was called in Michigan the MOST⁴¹⁹ program.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Marian: You know?

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: Michigan Opportunity Skill Trade...Training program. Big farce, you know. Because people generally didn't end up with some good quality jobs. But we decided that we had to change. If we were going to form this national organization, we had been approached by some younger women. It was Annie Smart and I...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...and Arenia Edwards⁴²⁰, and some more of the old welfare righters had been approached on a national level, "Could we have a national organization again?" Because of the program that was being pushed out of Washington at the time.

Maureen: Economics change.

Marian: Uh-huh.

Maureen: And you know...

⁴¹⁹ *Michigan Opportunity and Skills Training*, is the name for the state of Michigan's Workfare program.

⁴²⁰ *Arenia Edwards* is a welfare rights activist from Houston, Texas.

Marian: Situation change.

Maureen: Things were changing.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: You saw it but didn't know what it was yet.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So we called a meeting. Michelle came in at that time. We called a meeting.

Jennifer: Tingling Clemens?⁴²¹

Marian: Tingling Clemens.

Maureen: Tingling Clemens. That's right.

Marian: And we fundraised and we had the first founding convention at Georgetown University.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: And we complained. We complained there too about the hills and all the stuff we had to go up and down. But we formed the National Welfare Rights Union. And we wanted it to be a union because it could not be just people on public assistance, like in the past. It had to be a unified type of thing between the employed, unemployed, organized, unorganized, folks that were facing the type of problems that poor people faced.

Maureen: Oh, yeah.

Marian: And we had to solidify. We had to make sure that we fought for unity there. And this union was that type of thing that we wanted to form. And we began to notice too that we wasn't needed for work, like we once were needed in the factories and places like that.

Maureen: Just started to catch on to that. Yeah...

Marian: Catch on to that.

Maureen: ...what's going on here?

Jennifer: And the downsizing of labor...

⁴²¹ *Michelle Tingling-Clemens* is a civil rights activist in Washington, DC.

Marian: Oh, it was coming.

Maureen: Yeah.

Jennifer: ...that's what you're talking...

Maureen: It was coming.

Jennifer: ...okay.

Marian: Because even under the Carter Administration,⁴²² we began to notice what his welfare reform was all about. It was not about what we were talking about. It was beginning the stages of, ah, this whole Workfare type of thing. And each administration, it start implementing that type...trying to bring it in, so...

Maureen: We going help you get off of welfare by getting them trained to this job over here.

Marian: Working off your welfare check.

Maureen: And you can work next to somebody else who's got benefits and...and...and vacations and whatever else, and, you know, this is going to make you better. I can't do...We saw it before anybody else but didn't know what we were looking at. There was something changing.

Marian: And not only that, ah...

Maureen: Yeah.

Marian: We constantly was struggling for quality child care, and that people need to get paid to do that. So we began to see this stuff, and at the same time in the 70's...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ...a lot of people were getting laid off from the factories at the time.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Here in Michigan, which was our base. So we had to even help the workers...I remember, being approached at Westside Mothers by the UAW,⁴²³ because a lot of their workers had to go on and file for food stamps⁴²⁴.

⁴²² The administration of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, from 1977-1981.

⁴²³ Founded in 1935, The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) claims to be one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America.

Maureen: Food Stamps.
[together]

Marian: And it was Westside Mothers through Selma Good and all the rest of them, [Inaudible]and Ella Brags and stuff had to go over there and help those workers to apply for food stamps.

Jennifer: Who had never had any experience with the welfare system.

Marian: Had never had Food Stamp. They might have...
[together]

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...but, you know, and some of them not, you know.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: But they had...they didn't know nothing about the Food Stamp program.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: But it was welfare rights that was out there helping them to be able to go through the necessary process and get eligible for Food Stamp. You know, and then we began to see as we began to organize the National Welfare Rights Union, that under the National Welfare Rights Organization, there was a reserve army of unemployed that people could play with in and out of the factory, and, you know, and that type of stuff. But what we began to notice is the advancement of technology, and as robots, just like Maureen had described in the beginning, begin to take over these jobs, there have become a permanent army of unemployment...

Maureen: That's not ever going back to work for you where they used to go.

Marian: Never will be able to work.

Maureen: So we didn't catch it. But knew something was going on. And I'm still fresh in the organization. I knew I was off. In two, three, four years, my whole shift was gone. The second shift was gone. The midnight shift had two people that were maintenance, and the day shift had one person that was maintenance. So there was three people that replaced about 700 individuals, and all robots. Still didn't get it. You know, never saw a condition where productivity all of a sudden began to overtake everything. And here we

⁴²⁴ Food stamps refers to the federal food assistance program where low-income families use coupons (now electronic debit cards) to purchase groceries. Certain foods such as fresh fruit or dairy products are eligible under the program whereas items such as vitamins are not.

are living in Michigan and all these factory workers are off and they're calling, talking about food stamps. Hm. What's this about?

Marian: Even the...

Maureen: Don't get it.

Marian: ...sheriff deputies...

Jennifer: They were getting laid off?

Maureen: Getting laid off.

Marian: Well, they were gonna...they were facing layoff, but...

Maureen: There were picket lines.

Marian: ...they refused to be laid off, and they continued to work out of protest.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: They were facing child support. They were facing the possibility of losing their homes and all that type of stuff.

Maureen: Called welfare rights.

Marian: They called...well, yeah, they called Legal Services and Welfare Rights.

Maureen: So...

Marian: And we had to help them to, how to impact those services and stuff. So suddenly I'm where at the point in Wayne County, Sheriff Department are saying, "Look Marian, I'll go in there with my pistols on." I say, "Hey, that's not going to get you nowhere. We been fighting this for years. But, you know, maybe I want you in there when I go in there," you know. [laughter] That type of stuff.

Maureen: So this is the time when the...the massive exploitation and removal of factory jobs. We're off into this now. So we're talking about something that started 25 years ago. And, and all of the factory workers that lived in the...in and around the Detroit area, throughout Michigan, the factories are starting to cut down. And, and we're looking at it and it's not like it used to be where factory workers get, you know, off for change over for two or three days for a week, then they come back. Wasn't that. Factories were closing down and moving to other parts of the country, and things begin to happen. And, again, you know, when you in the midst of the whirlwind, you can't, you know, you don't know...you know you're in the whirlwind, but you don't understand what's going on. And, and it came a time where, you know, again because we're talking, we're

studying, and Marian is in contact with the welfare rights members across, you know. We've got these affiliate members at states, had welfare rights in...in New Orleans, welfare rights in California, welfare rights in Arizona. Washington DC, Seattle, Washington. And she's calling folks and we're getting information. Wait a minute, there's a trend going on here. What's happening? People being laid off all over the place, *all* of our members across the country are doing food stamps for factory workers, for mill workers and people are being off work and got all these Workfare programs where they want you to work off your grant, and, you know, as it became clearer and clear, this productivity issue, where now they don't need us to work anymore, so you don't have...what do you need healthcare for? You can't produce anything for them, so let's remove that. What do you need education for? You can never serve this master anymore. Why should we care if you can read and write? Let's take that away. You don't need housing and cloth—it's all right to stand on a corner with a sign that says, "Will work for food." Twenty years ago you never saw anything like that. And now we got all...we have *families* standing on street corners. The woman and the child, veterans signed, babies standing right there—"Will work for food." Now it's becoming clearer that this is a national...this is an international move to make a change. Welfare was always an employment program, state-ordered for a period of time until you found a job, you got off, you went to that job, and you continued your life. Now things change. It was a time that you could live on welfare, you could stay on it and live on it where you could eat -- benefits, housing, get some clothes, get some things for your children, some shoes and you could work. Bit by bit, they start breaking those things down, and I...I would...you know, I didn't see it, it was Marian, it was [Inaudible]Linebarger, it was some of our members or whatnot that had much more experience in learning what these things were to tell us, look at the facts, don't take our work for it, here's what's going on. There is a dismantling of this social service system. We get to August 22nd, 1996, and Bill made...

Marian: Playboy Clinton.⁴²⁵

Maureen: Yeah, I won't even say it. Bill Clinton...

Jennifer: President.

Maureen: Bill Clinton.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: Passes this or signs into existence forever Welfare Reform Bill.⁴²⁶ What's the name of it? Marian is the only one in the whole world that knows the whole name of this bill. What's it called?

⁴²⁵ A sarcastic remark referencing the sexual behavior of former President Bill Clinton. The 42nd President of the United States, from 1993-2001.

⁴²⁶ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was introduced in 1996 by President Clinton. It tore apart the 60 year old welfare program and completely altered its administration.

Marian: No, not if...if I can remember, Personal Responsibility and Reconciliation Act...

Jennifer: Work Opportunity...

Marian: Something like that.

Maureen: Yeah. No, she's the only one that knows that.

Marian: I don't remember that mess no more.

Maureen: And he signed this bill into effect, and because he was a Democrat, well-liked, he could play the saxophone, he put on Foster Grant glasses, and whatever else it is that was going on, people liked him. If a Republican had a tried...and many did, to...to submit such a law, the whole country would have been up in arms. But because this was a, you know, a good-looking Democrat, nobody said anything and it laid the ground work for whatever else that needed to fall apart, this crushed it. You know...

Jennifer: Let me ask you about 1999. I'm talking about when you took a dele—delegation...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Jennifer: ...of folks to the United Nations...

Maureen: Hm.

Jennifer: And specifically, the Declaration of the Poor People's Economic...

Marian: Human Rights?

Jennifer: ...Human Rights. So what is that...

Maureen: Three years into it

Jennifer: ...And what were you doing at the UN?

Marian: Okay. We got to back up. And we just didn't go to the UN.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: See, let's back up. See 1987 was the beginning of the National Welfare Rights Union. 1987 too, we realized that what had happened in our hands, we had the National Welfare Rights Union that represented one const—you know, of different constituents of people that was in the National Welfare Rights, I mean, the National Union of the Homeless that came about too.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And some of us ended up on the same board, which was the National Anti-Hunger Coalition.

Maureen: It's a third group. Um-hum.

Marian: That's a third group, which dealt with providers and the people that they served, you know. And I was sitting around and I told Annie that one night, I said, "Guess what? We have at our hands all three organizations, and we can call the summit to deal with just what, um, Dottie Stevenson⁴²⁷ and them have been dealing with, the campaign that we had adopted on a national level, Up and Out of Poverty...

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...Now. Because not...our sisters and brothers...our sisters in Massachusetts had designed and, and nurtured this campaign then we made it a national campaign. So we called a summit back in 1989. You remember that?

Jennifer: I remember that.

Marian: In Philadelphia. We wanted it in Philadelphia because this is supposed to be the foot of liberty, right?

Maureen: City of Brotherly Love.

Marian: Love! You know. But we knew the home...the National Union of the Homeless we wanted to bring to the forefront, how homelessness was increasing in this country. And so we called this National Survival Summit.⁴²⁸ At the same time, Miss Schneider had called in about, prior to that, earlier that year, about the march on Washington. They came from the homeless themselves, you know, about the need to have this. And which...

Maureen: Which [Inaduable] of the Homeless [Inaduable}.

Marian: Yes. Ah...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: We told them, yeah, we would participate, but, ah, we knew...I didn't even go the meeting. We said we would follow whatever the homeless said. We followed the Homeless Union. We designed and began to carry out this campaign -- We had a summit, in Philadelphia, where 500 people made it their way to that summit. We didn't...the only

⁴²⁷ Dottie Stevenson member of the National Welfare Rights Union from Mattapan, Massachusetts.

⁴²⁸This *Summit*, part of the Up And Out of Poverty Movement, was held in Philadelphia in 1989.

grant we received to help us with this summit was from Reverend Yvonne Dell, who was a minister in UCC United Church of Christ.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: Ah, and she gave us ten thousand dollars which we used to help poor people to get to that summit. But basically a lot of people had to fundraise themselves to get to the summit. We came out of that summit and decided certain campaigns needed to take...take...begin to be organized. We wanted everybody up and out of poverty in the United States -- in the world really.

Maureen: That was the slogan. Um-hum. Up and Out of Poverty Now.

Marian: Ah, we were going to participate in the Homeless March.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: But our demand was going to be that the homeless had to speak for themselves and lead that march.

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: We had people from the peace movement. This is when we expanded. We had people from the homeless struggles. We had providers, we had...

Maureen: Welfare rights.

Marian: I'm getting us... welfare, all the welfare rights were there. We had people from unions they were there.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: We had...what was so interesting, see some of these people had never attended no kind of conference before in their lives, you know. And they were at this, at this summit. And then we united...eventually we were called in by the National Organization for Women. They joined. Ah, some of the other organizations joined into the campaign. But that began to help us to see that we wasn't going to win here in the United States, the whole question of coming up and out of poverty. Here come little old Dottie again, out of Boston, say, "Look, we have to look at this whole question." Because remember, one thing I love is we...we can get in a room, we can fuss, we can party, we can do everything. We gonna come out of that room with a plan. And that plan was that we had to look at the question of poverty and looking at our human rights being violated.

Maureen: That's right. And link those too.

Marian: And link them. So in New Orleans at a National Board meeting, we decided that we were going to start organ—around, organizing around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that under that, that we wanted that implemented in the United States, to be the basis for to begin to eliminate poverty. Out of that, Kensington Welfare Rights, which is a part of the national, began to design...take...began to organize around it, and we began to advance this whole campaign around economic human rights. And that became the first fight around going to...to the UN, the March. And that's how we ended up at the UN. We began to take from Boston...our Boston campaign, who started this whole Universal...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...Declaration of Human Rights struggle, these complaints that we began to interview members about their human rights being violated. And through that we took it to the UN and...and...and filed those complaints with the UN for them to take some action on this. Have they taken any action? We've gone to the UN three times...

[together]

Maureen: Three times.

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: ...with different individual complaints. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pieces of paper and complaints written out from all across the nation, internationally, just hundreds and hundreds -- this is what happened, this is how it happened, this is why it happened, document everything three times. Took them all thousands of pieces of paper.

Marian: And it's still going on. Because...

Maureen: They're still investigating.

Marian: ...and, you know, this thing about Kensington, and Kensington is still spearheading that. You know, poor people's campaign and that type of stuff. And we had a inter—we had a international poor people's cam—conference, summit, in New York, where we again took, you know, was focusing on human rights violation. A lot of our people have gone to different conferences around the world, you know, to bring up the question of poverty in the United States.

Maureen: Same issue.

Marian: I know when we were invited to participate in Uganda at one time, we brought up the question at the Seventh PAC, Pan-African Conference,⁴²⁹ one of the things we brought up was the question of homelessness in the United States. We made sure that Leona Smith who was the president of the National Union of the Homeless became our

⁴²⁹ The *Seventh Pan-African Conference* was held from April 3 through April 8, 1994, in Kampala, Uganda.

spokesperson on...on the governing body at that. Because they could not conceive homelessness...

Maureen: Yeah, right.

Marian: ...in the United States, you know. The...all they remember was the...what's the thing, Bill Cosby's Show?⁴³⁰

Jennifer: *The Cosby Show?*

Marian: *The Cosby Show*. They thought we all live like that, you know.

Maureen: Land of the free, home of the brave...

Marian: Ah...

Maureen: ...money, jobs, golden streets.

Marian: So it was a shock to them to see what we were facing.

Maureen: Sound like heaven...

Marian: ...you know...

Maureen: ...more than America, so...

Marian: ...yeah, facing here in the United States. So, um, you know, we...we still have a long way to go. But we have made these connections. We even went to the Continental Front for Community Organization. We are part of that effort, where you have all the...all the...all the countries, ah, and what have you...

Maureen: And islands, Caribbeans.

Marian: ...from, from the Caribbean islands and, um, you name it -- South America, North America and all this, we all come together and try to look and it's the United Community and all that st—you know, trying to work with each other, and get some strategy and tactics from each other. We became a part of it, because I think it's to bring up this question of poverty. Bring up the question of homelessness, and how we have to begin to organize and fight back on this. You know, we been instrumental continuously in the 90's. We came out of that. Not only did we talk about the whole question of...of

⁴³⁰ *The Cosby Show* was a popular TV comedy that aired from 1984 to 1992, focusing on an upper-middle-class Black family, the Huxtables. This family was unlike other Black families previously seen on television because they were solidly upper-middle-class, the father was a respected doctor, and the mother a successful attorney.

coming up and out of poverty, but our people became some of the best people in trying...in taking over housing. You got all these public housing sitting out here...

Maureen: Empty.

Marian: ...empty that the utilities were on, and you have homelessness on the increase, but they can't go into public housing. But yet and still...

Maureen: Too many people.

Marian: ...we paying for those public housing.

Maureen: Too many people living in shelters. And it's just, it's madness. You know, shelters are full, people living on grates, boxes over the their head, and you stand up and look in the middle of the night and all the pop...all the public housing lightments...

Marian: apartments

Maureen: ...the lights are on. And they're empty and there's heat, and there's electricity and the water's running. It's absurd. So, you know, it...it was, it was more than an issue to raise all these points but at every venue, and you talk about the United Nations, everything, and you can...you know, you've been to so many of these. You know we move this fight around everywhere. And...and it's always the same fight, you know, poverty -- people not being able to go to work, you can't make fifty thousand dollars a year at a job, then you get laid off from that job, and you find another one that pays twelve thousand dollars a year, something's going to happen. Can't make it with twelve thousand if you're used to making fifty. If you have a job, and it pays forty thousand dollars a year, then you get a job later on that pays twelve dollars a month, because that's about what your income is used to...

Marian: Hm.

Maureen: ...then why is that your fault? Why should you lose your house? Why should your children be taken away. And now we have this kind of circumstance which pretty much, that's the case. Highland Park used to have sixty thousand residents in it, sixteen thousand residents live there now. They charge people in Highland Park for water based on a figure that says sixty thousand, and they don't find it wrong! We've got in Detroit between June of 2001, June of 2002, 40,752 addresses had water turned off -- forty thousand, seven hundred and fifty-two registered addresses. And of those, about 39,000 were homeowners, some...beyond that, oh, 36,000, there were two or three thousand that were businesses and some are community organizations that lost water, about 36,000. Now, it's 365 days in a year. 36,000 addresses, homes, being turned off meant that the water trucks were moving down the street, flatbed trucks -- that's the only thing we could figure -- they jumped off, turned the water off, the truck kept moving. Then you had to jump back on again. Because that's the only way you could disconnect that...that kind of water. When we challenge, through a period of information gathering, whatnot, friends

had to help us, we challenged the water department, and we...we found out who was in charge and went to these people and said, "What is the problem here?", they said, "That's right, what about it? They couldn't pay the bills. If you can't pay for water in Detroit, can't have it." That's the circumstance we living under now -- human rights violations that nobody cares about because it represents low income people. Nobody cares that women are having babies in front of the hospital. Can't get in there, because they don't have healthcare, because these are poor women. Now, you know, we started this conversation off about...Marian raised this issues about killings.

Marian: Hm.

Maureen: You've got 51...I guess it's 64...

Marian: Sixty. It's 60.

Maureen: Sixty killings over...well, in the beginning, the first figure they gave us was 51 deaths over 50 days -- 51 killings...

Jennifer: In Detroit.

Maureen: ...over 50 days in Detroit. But that only represented, like the sheriff told us, only represented those that died. There were two or three times as many people shot. But the tension in not just Detroit, all of these places where people had jobs and had incomes and had families and had hope and had po—possibilities and opportunities and visions, across the nation were falling apart. And we continue to try to hold these no good backstabbing no-good dogs, may the die and burn in hell, Democrats and Republicans responsible for fixing this mess and they all have healthcare. We pay for it.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: They have utilities, we pay for it.

Marian: And their children have...

Maureen: They got, you know, children...

Marian: Quality education.

Maureen: ...they got wives, girlfriends, sweethearts, mistresses sometime that live in the same house, we pay for all of that. That's what this fight is about.

Jennifer: So we are...the generations, coming, like you're saying, are becoming accustomed to a way of looking at people that it's...it's okay to see a family on the street or...

Maureen: Absolutely all right.

Jennifer: ...or that it's...it's okay to have water turned off. So the work that you're doing, how is the work that you're doing affecting and impacting this generation to have a different vision of how people should be...

Maureen: Well, Marian talks about how the women are that raised up, were the banner carriers, the May Paines, and the Johnnie Tilmans and the Beulah Sanders, and Freddy, especially Freddy. Man, that Freddy Nixon was my hero. And Diane Bernard and, you know, tearing up now just thinking about them. We're these women now. And...and because we're these women now, we have an obligation to make certain that these folks that are coming up behind us, and we're don't go a good job at it because it...the struggle is so humongous. This thing is just all consuming. But we have a responsibility of letting folks know that we remember what service look like. We remember what humanity looks like. We remember what love and compassion and caring looks like. We remember what opportunity looks like. And it's not what they showing you out here. This is not the way we're supposed to live and we don't have to live this way. And to be able to convince people, I don't care how many times you go and watch somebody get shot on television, that actor gets up. That is not what is common. That is not what happens. If you shoot somebody for real, they're going to lay there for a while. We don't have to live this way. Electricity, gas and water are rights and should be made available to everybody here. It doesn't have to be a question of DTE⁴³¹ owns all the electricity. It happens because we blinked. That's what our fight is on a regular basis. This is not a replica of what life is, what we see out here. This is not what it is. We can live fine. We can go to the movies for a dollar. We can have popcorn for 15 cents, because these people have, and that would be us, have developed the ability to be able to manufacture everything we want. They can build a house in 15 minutes, prefabricated, they can build a car, we can all drive. What is this that we're living under? It's because of this horrible corporate greed. And that's what this fight is. And it's a difficult fight, because the enemy's very good. Enemy's got all manners of...of money and resources to try to convince people that all you see on television is what actually the reality is. The final analysis here, we fighting, demanding that people in Iraq have democ—democracy. They don't want it. We going to force it. You going to take this democracy along with Bechtel⁴³² and Halliburton⁴³³ and we going to set up these oils and rigs and you going to deal with it or else. Now the folks in Haiti demanded democracy—we can't go there.

Marian: Um-um.

⁴³¹ *DTE Energy* is a large corporation that owns much of the gas and electricity services in the United States. They service both residential areas and commercial businesses.

⁴³² *Bechtel* is one of the world's largest engineering and construction corporations. They are involved in the mining industry, the oil industry, and the telecommunications industry, including holding several U.S. government contracts.

⁴³³ *Halliburton* is of the world's largest corporations in the field of oil and gas. They hold numerous lucrative contracts with the U.S. government, and have been hired to implement many facets of “reconstruction” in occupied Iraq.

Maureen: Guess not. No oil. No nothing we don't want. And that is the fight. How do we clearly delineate and explain this is the wrong information. It's yellow, it quacks, it waddles—if you conclude that it's a horse, it's something wrong with you. It's not that. They got all the signs of being a duck, then it might be that duck it is. That's what the fight is.

Jennifer: So how do you do that? How do you...how are you fighting that?

Maureen: Very carefully.

Marian: Okay. Just back up. You know, when they moved to eliminate General Assistance in...in Michigan, we had to change our whole tactics of what we were doing at the time. We were trying to lobby and get the legislative not to support what Engler was doing at the time. And I got a call at one o'clock at night from, at that time, Representative Hollister's⁴³⁴ office saying, in the wee hours of the night, they had the legislative...this legislative came together, and passed the elimination of General Assistance. We say, "uh-oh, the plan's changing now." We called a meeting the ne—I got on the phone at two...and I was good for waking people up...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: ...at two and three o'clock in the morning, said, "Look...

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: ...we got to have a meeting in the morning. Because our plans must change. We're not going to Lansing. And we came out, with, look it's tent time.

Jennifer: Hm?

Marian: That we knew, borrowing from our sister organizations in Philadelphia, the National Union of the Homeless, they had pitched a tent for a long time out in front of city hall. We said we was going to pitch a tent, right down and across from public housing. Because if you're going to cut General Assistance...

Maureen: And what was General Assistance?

Marian: And General Assistance was individuals and, ah, childless couples that were eligible for a mere—it was really small—two hundred and some dollars a month to take care of their needs.

Maureen: Everything.

⁴³⁴ *David Hollister* is a Michigan Democrat who served in the House of Representatives from 1974 until 1993. Hollister was Mayor of Lansing, Michigan from 1993-2003. Starting in 2003 he became Michigan's Director of Labor and Economic Growth

Marian: And I know that don't happen in a lot of other countries. But this was some of the, um, ah...this was based on...on some of the wealth that labor had created, you know. So General Assistance was started here by...in the 1930s to help workers when they were on change-overs.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know, in the factories and stuff like...

Maureen: Give them some income.

Marian: Changing the models and stuff. So, you know, when they looked at it, people say, "Oh, yeah, those...young, lazy young men need to be cut off." That was crap. Because, you know, when there was plenty of jobs, people worked, you know. So it was the beginning move up, along with what Clinton was doing, to eliminate some of these vitally needed programs. We not only pitched a tent, we...we organized, we had various organiza—The hunger...we always started with that first. Because welfare rights theory is all...I mean, tactics have always been the streets, the legislative and the courts. We had people coming as far as Lansing bringing tents, bringing different stuff that we were going to have for our D-Day.⁴³⁵ Our D-Day for pitching this tent, beginning to take over houses, was Veterans Day, November the 11th.

Maureen: My birthday.

Marian: November the 11th. We took a busload of folks to Washington to hook up with some of our other Up-and-Out-Of-Poverty people and we took Washington with a storm. No permits. They said what we going...I had lost my voice, remember? No permits, no nothing. We...we say, we marching down Washington DC and we gonna go straight to the, ah, to the State Capital. We don't give a hook about permits. Because if they put us in jail...

Maureen: You can't do that? You can't do that, you can't march without a permit. Watch this.

Marian: Hey, that's a free place for a lot of our people. Watch this. And they kept coming to us talking about...

Maureen: In the middle of the street.

Marian: ...who...who is the spokesperson? We always said, "They in the back. They in the back." And we kept marching in the most busiest time in Washington. We stopped all the time.

⁴³⁵ *D-Day* is the day on which Allied forces invaded Normandy during World War II. The term "D-Day" is often used to denote the initiation of a struggle or attack.

Maureen: Middle of the street. Stop everything.

Marian: And you know what I was so proud about? That was women in the forefront of that.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: Not only did the women take over...

Maureen: Annie Chambers, all of them.

Marian: ...the homeless march in the early period of time where we locked our arms and took it to the front and demanded that the homeless had to speak for themselves.

Jennifer: All right.

Marian: But it was women that were in the forefront of this. And it was diversified, that made sure, okay...

Marian: Ron Casanova⁴³⁶, Cubans, everybody.

Maureen: ...if they come, we had...we had...if they come to you, tell them to go to the back, and. And the police just gave up, say "I don't care." I remember the district police saying to, ah, the federal officer saying, "You got 'em now..."

Maureen: Um-hum. You do something.

Marian: ...*you* do something with them."

Maureen: People joining the march, we just.

Marian: And everything. But this was all in one week. And we were fighting back to keep people from Michigan from being arrested. Because they...we had D-day here.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: Our people got so angry when they got to the State Capitol. You know, we had one member named Annie Chambers.⁴³⁷

Jennifer: Uh-huh.

⁴³⁶ *Ron Casanova* is a Philadelphia organizer committed to ending poverty and homelessness. He is the founder of Artists for a Better America, vice president of the National Union of the Homeless and editor of the *Union of the Homeless National News*.

⁴³⁷ *Annie Chambers* is a member of the National Welfare Rights Union from Baltimore, Maryland.

Marian: Annie's a warrior. Annie's not only a warrior, Annie's the mother of 24 children. And Annie got more energy than all of us. Annie is 55 now. I mean, 65...

Maureen: 65.

Marian: ...now. But Annie got...just got out the hospital, she was so angry because they kept telling us, "You can't be on that...on those stairs, because those are the Senators' stairs."

Maureen: That's where they walk.

Marian: That's...that's for them. Annie say, "Bull, I paid for those stairs and I'm still paying for those stairs..."

Maureen: Yeah, sit down on them steps.

Marian: ...I have a son that was killed in the Vietnam War and don't even know where he's buried" and stuff like... "I paid for those, and I'm a sit my butt down on these stairs." And I knew, I said, "Oh, Lord! Here we go." Annie sit down, when Annie sit down, Sister, one of the nuns sit down from Philadelphia...

Maureen: She going to sit down and everybody...

Marian: ...I looked around and everybody was sitting down. I said to Maureen and to Diane...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ... "Get the Detroit and Michigan people back, because I know what's going to happen."

Maureen: We trying to get arrested too in Washington, DC.

Marian: I say "We can't do this." So the people, you know, our people were arrested, our...you know, from Philadelphia, from Washington and stuff like that. And we got the people from Michigan back here, because . . .

Maureen: It was tight.

Marian: ... on D-Day. Not only did we pitch a tent -- I mean, this was one of those tents that they have those revival tents...

Maureen: See, you don't know how tents are.

Jennifer: Right, right.

Maureen: So you take a tent, it's a regular tent.

Marian: A big tent.

Maureen: But you get an L-shaped tent...

Marian: One of them tents was about as big as this studio.

Maureen: ...you can get two-bedroom tents, you know. No...

Marian: No, no, no. We got two of them.

Maureen: donated stuff (laughing).

Marian: And, and that...and people said, "Where you got the money from?" People were bringing money, because they were a part of the Up-And-Out-of-Poverty, Michigan Up-And-Out-Of-Poverty Coalition.⁴³⁸ And they were helping out, to help. But if you couldn't be there, you at least was donating some. And I...remember, I had been fired from Michigan Legal Services, and they had to pay me back all my money. So I was helping...we were putting everything we could in it. The day...

Maureen: Yeah, homeless people in the tent.

Marian: ...of D-Day, the man pitched the tent for us, and we knew that a lot of people were off in Detroit because it was...

Maureen: Veterans Day.

Marian: ...Veterans Day.

Maureen: It was a federal holiday.

Marian: Look up, here come the Chief of Police.

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: "You can't do that." We say, why? "This is private property." We say, "We know it."

Maureen: Say you got to have a permit.

Marian: We say, "How do you know we don't have the permit?"

⁴³⁸ *Up-And-Out-of-Poverty* was an ad hoc coalition of local organizations that work with those directly affected by the cuts in the state of Michigan's social services budget.

Maureen: It's a holiday. You can't tell if we have one or not.

Marian: You can't tell us nothing.

Maureen: Everything is closed. You don't know.

Marian: We pitched that tent, we had those tents. They were great. Everything you can imagine in those tents. They were...the homeless had got together, that these tents were locked together and everything. And there was a conference that day, remember?

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: A union conference, AFSCME.⁴³⁹ And we had a press conference. We had our fatigues on.

Jennifer: Ah.

Marian: Because like Diane said, we were in war.

Maureen: We're in war. It looked like we were in war.

Marian: We were in war.

Maureen: Cute little hats.

Marian: Yeah, and we marched. Everybody that came to the press conference, some of the officials from Detroit, and we marched all the people over to public housing. And we took over public housing again. This was our third time doing it. We took over public housing and began to stay there all...We made the police stay up there all day long. They didn't know if it the rest of us, if it's not the rest...what to do. What do we do? Here's some nuns here and everything. What do we do with these people? Not only did we move people in, every day people were being arrested. We kept Tent City -- this is key. Like Maureen said, we stay out here. This is a protractive struggle.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: We started on November the 11th of 1991 in that struggle, because they had eliminated General Assistance, and at our first demonstration, we took over the media, because they refused to cover what was happening at the time. But we started with Tent City that day.

⁴³⁹ The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is the nation's largest public service employees union, whose members who serve the public in all areas of government, health, education and other services, both public and private.

Maureen: November.

Marian: It took on a housing struggle in Detroit, and every night we were attacked by the police, but we began to even win them over. And then Flint, it became...

Maureen: Homeless.

Marian: A homeless, just, struggle, and...and the workers from the factory constantly kept coming. And Ann Arbor...

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: Students.

Marian: ...the students helped out with it.

Maureen: Put tents up.

Marian: And we had the Tent City here. And in Lansing it became a constitutional struggle...

Maureen: Right on the grounds of...

Marian: ...right on the grounds of the State Capitol.

Maureen: State Capitol

Marian: On...on December the 5th of that year...

Maureen: Engler had to pass it every day.

Marian: ...we pitched that day. Every day. And that's why we...we ended up with the Embassy for poor people. And if you want to know what poor people want, come to Tent City. And we kept those tents up until Good Friday.

Maureen: April.

Marian: We kept them in court, we...we made sure that the tent company were paid. We sued Coleman Young,⁴⁴⁰ and got monies back for that, and we paid the tent...The tent people say, "Look, whatever."

Maureen: See, the police had already come in and destroyed the tent.

⁴⁴⁰ Coleman Young was the Mayor of Detroit for five terms, from 1974-1994. he was the first African American Mayor for the city.

Marian: They arrested the tents.

Maureen: And...and arrested the tents. That's what they did. And one of the first charges was the tent wasn't properly ventilated. And, you know, when they were making the charges we were standing in there and the top of the tent and it was flapping, you know, the winds coming through. Not ventilated, you know. It was madness. So they tore the tents up. And...and so many of our...our colleagues made a decision, you know. If the tent is going to be arrested, I'm going to go with the tent.

Marian: I'm going with the tent.

Maureen: I mean, it was something. So we go get another tent, come back and set this up, and the next time it was next to a church with the pastor's permission. So here police come, fighting and arguing to keep this tent up. And what's the charge? Well, you have this tent on the grounds of the church with the owner's permission.

Marian: Who was arrested? Diane. And as well as the minister's wife.

Maureen: This went on. This went on. The other thing that happened, homeless were coming in to get serviced and we fill out applications and food stamps, applications and giving people information about where you can go to get a house and all this kind of thing.

Marian: Turning on their...

Maureen: And...and it was a food issue. You know, how we going to feed this? And we went back to the, you know, loaves and fishes.⁴⁴¹ You know somebody going to have to help, get on TV. So I tell the people, we got this tent open and the homeless are coming here for shelter. We can't feed them. Oh, Lord!

Marian: What do we do...?

Maureen: Every hospital, the homeless were getting fed Duck a l'Orange. A lobster bisque. Pancakes show up in the morning.

Marian: Pizzas. I got so sick of seeing pizzas.

Maureen: Food. I mean, food, I mean, you know, you had to make a reservation to get in the homeless tent, because the food was magnificent. It was truly great. And it was breakfast, lunch and dinner. We had a floor model TV...

Marian: Yeah!

⁴⁴¹ Reference to a Biblical story in which Jesus feeds the hungry with fishes and loaves of bread.

Maureen: ...somebody donated a 27-inch floor model television. Had a generator, somebody donated that. Turned the television on...

Marian: Some of the counsel persons donated they...

Maureen: ...we had TV Guides, be newspapers...

Marian: ...generators

Maureen: ...delivered to the tent. This was an event. CNN⁴⁴² said during that year that that was the third most important story of the nation, that tent going up from November to April, that's what this fight is.

Marian: And we could not understand...we could not get coverage from the media...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...in Detroit and in Michigan.

Maureen: Every place else.

Marian: We got covered from Ja—from Japan, Canada, it was CNN in . . .

Maureen: Australia. Oh, yeah.

Marian: Australia, all over the place, and they finally brought . . .

Maureen: But not in Detroit.

Marian: ...when we, you know...they knew that we was not going to take them not covering this more. We had some conscious reporters to begin to unite with this struggle. We had people driving all the way from upper Michigan, ending up with just fourteen dollars—I remember this couple. They just wanted to touch the tent and be a part of the tent.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Because they began to see and embrace the struggle. It's their struggle. Because they knew if we didn't fight for housing and for homeless people to be able to have jobs and housing that they were next.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: You know. We had people donating mink coats. Now what do we need with mink coats, you know.

⁴⁴² CNN is U.S.-based large corporate news service.

Marian: Some suburban mink coats.

Marian: Mink coats...

Maureen: Remember Ted Nugent,⁴⁴³ ...

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: Ted Nugent the rock star...

Jennifer: Yeah.

Maureen: He went out and shot deer and whatever else he did.

Marian: Brought all that.

Maureen: ...and he showed up with venison,⁴⁴⁴ and the first time I...I didn't know you could make chili out of deer.

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: And he showed up. He showed up with boxes of food and all this kind of stuff, but I mean, you know, it was...it was gratifying because you could see that the message was being heard, you know what I mean? Suburbanite women would show up – “I was so upset,” and every—“I heard about this and I was just outraged, and I have these things, it's not much.” And bringing mink coat.

Marian: So what we did...

Maureen: “What is this?”

Marian: You know, we were getting over...

Maureen: Just, ooh!

Marian: ...we was getting too much and we became the suppliers for the shelters.

Maureen: Had to go get another tent. Put the things in there, to give it away to other shelters.

Jennifer: Oh

⁴⁴³ *Ted Nugent* is a rock musician from Detroit, known for his outrageous behavior and being a gun enthusiast.

⁴⁴⁴ *Venison*: Deer meat.

Marian: Say, take, don't...

Jennifer: Okay.

R1: ...don't bring it here. Take it to these shelters.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: We ended up with sleeping bags. Everything. It showed us the warmth.

Maureen: They gave us those jackets.

Marian: Yeah, the warmth of the work—of the people out here.

Maureen: Didn't want to see it.

Marian: They did not support homelessness.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: And you said it right. They forced, you know, in essence, people done got used to this. And that's criminal. That's immoral for that type of stuff to happen, and we're fighting that. Because to us, not only have we experienced what life could be like, but we want life even better.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: You know. And you...we do have that type of vision, that we can have life better. And that's what we all about, you know. And like I said, bury us with our boots on. I always tell my daughters, don't use no money to put me in no grave. I don't believe supporting funeral homes and stuff like that. Y'all use that money to live, you know.

Maureen: We're not going to give up, we just going to give out.

Marian: The best thing you can do for me as a daughter, and you know, now I'm a new mother, um [clears throat] because of Clinton's welfare reform and all these young women out here—I'm losing my voice—that ends up with their children snatched because of water, because of the fact they might need some kind of medical attention. I ended up being a new mother four years ago, my husband and I, with some babies. You know, and I needed babies like I needed a hole in the head. I was rejoicing that my last of the five was gone, you know. But I have new ba—you know, my what?, one is three.

Maureen: Three, five and...Justin's...

Marian: Nine. I've had them four years.

Maureen: ...three, five and nine.

Jennifer: So

Marian: Four years. And we're just a part of what is beginning to grow out here.

Jennifer: You've said a lot of times, many, many...you've mentioned many, many women who've been...

Marian: A whole lot of...

Jennifer: ...out of this...this movement. Um, you're talking about how women are affected overwhelmingly by this movement. And I wanted to know, do you feel that the work that you do can be understood as feminist?

Maureen: Well, probably there would be a...a perspective that folks would...might want to view and interpret the work that we do with a feminist bent to it. And that...that's only because the way history has now mandated that women are poor. It didn't have to turn out this way, but because the majority of the folks that we work with, particularly in welfare, are women who are out there, women who have these children. So, you know, eight out of ten of our customers, of our...of our clients, are...are women. And to the degree that, you know, people want to look at it in that kind of box, it could be looked at as a feminist kind of activity. But I think that our position would be that we...we...feminism is a narrow point of view. We're much bigger than that. We're internationalist. Not interested in men being poor either. Ain't trying to find out how to figure out how to just free women, we want to try to figure out how everybody who is struggling to eat, eat, housing, all these kinds of issues, that they all have a way out. So to the degree that our fight and our movement and our activities are based in a destruction of this economic system. I mean, you know, I know that this...you explained to us earlier that some...Poland and some of the other countries and what not that might be participating in this activity and we're so proud and humbled to be involved. But let us make no mistake -- we hate capitalism. Hate it. It's no good.

Marian: With a passion.

Maureen: Hate it. This concept, that free market, let it decide. The free market don't decide nothing but how to keep you poor. We're for a system that says everybody, if you live through the birthing process, you have a right to have healthcare, housing, take a trip to Bermuda if that's where you want to go to, you know, all of these kinds of things. If you lived. And that needs to be the key. So to the degree that we're women, and...and sometimes we feminine women, you know, we wear little cute stuff every now and then, but that is *not* the focus. The focus primarily is to talk about the international relief of this question of poverty. And we can't do that if we section off a part of the group.

Marian: But you know, even when you look at our organization, majority of them are women. But it's a lot of men in there. But, again, you know, like even in the Continental Front for Community Organization,⁴⁴⁵ I have always told those men, you know, a slave that get a weapon and don't know how to use it, deserve to be a slave.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: If you think from one minute that you gonna be free as a man and not...and that I'm going still be your slave, you got another think coming, brother. Because I'm going to be right there with you on equal terms, you know. And if you want to classify it as feminine, I don't care what you classified it. But if you began to move just like the enemy, you become my enemy, you know. A lot of people are afraid of that word, the "f" word, feminism. You know, ah, why? Because, it...you know, they don't figure that women should be a part and have the rights and...and that type of stuff that men have enjoyed, not so much Black men, you know, and they too have enjoyed at our expense.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know, we're fighting for our society.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: And for that we do not embrace...no exploitation and oppression.

Maureen: Anywhere.

Marian: Anywhere.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: And therefore, you know, ah, that's why we participate in all these struggles. The women that we...you know, a lot of time when we on what now, and we fighting for the free...you know, the right to choice⁴⁴⁶ and stuff like that, we make people understand, in order for the women that we represent to even have choice, they got to have some economic freedom too, you know. You can't have a choice unless you have the basis economically...

Maureen: To make a choice. Um-hum.

⁴⁴⁵ *Continental Front for Community Organization* is an international, grassroots organization founded in 1987 that fights to end poverty and exploitation in Latin America. Representatives from most Latin American countries meet every two years to share experiences, analyze recent trends and define platforms for struggle.

⁴⁴⁶ *Pro-choice* is often used to refer to people who support a woman's right to make her reproductive health decisions, particularly around abortion.

Marian: ...under this country to be able to have that choice. They don't even have health care, less more than anything else. So, yes. We are feminists. But at the same time, we will turn around and kick some of those feminists' butts too, because they just as reactionary to what we are about, because they don't even touch poor people.

Maureen: Uh-uh.

Marian: Our thing is that we want a world where we can thrive and not barely survive.

Maureen: Yeah, see we don't want to take up...

Marian: That's what we're about.

Maureen: ...Oftentimes, we're...we're...we're approached about what...you know, the feminism has a connotation of...of lesbian women. Comes up all the time. I love it. Favorite, favorite discussion.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: Especially now since we have marriages going on all over the...all over the country.

Marian: And I, I applaud those folks for doing that, I think its great.

Maureen: And I think it's outstanding, you know, because see...

Jennifer: The marriages that are happening in San Francisco?⁴⁴⁷

Maureen: San Francisco, New York.

Marian: San Francisco, New York, I hope they do some here.

Maureen: That's right. You know, and...and people raise that issue, "Well, you know, what is your feeling about homosexuality?" Well, let me tell you my feeling about poverty. See, 'cause, see, that's the issue I have. What adults do in the...in the quiet and in their own homes, why is...

Marian: It ain't your business.

Marian: ...it your business unless you trying to date one of them, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

⁴⁴⁷ Same-sex marriages granted in the city of San Francisco during February and March of 2004.

Maureen: And I'm...you know, the issue here for us is only one. And people come up, well, you know, I have a problem. You know, feminism, you know, we have women do...do you have the same passion about same-sex relationships as you have about a woman who has lost her ability to live or keep her children or whatnot, because those things were taken away. If you didn't have to have that fight then, don't come to welfare rights door and try to raise this issue about feminism or gay or any of those kinds of things. Because we embrace everything that's got to do with fighting for equal rights. If there was a way for me to jump out here and to get to San Francisco, I'd been throwing rice.⁴⁴⁸ . I support all of it..

Marian: Oh, yeah.

Maureen: ...because we are for equal rights for everybody. And who is to stand up and say, well, you know, I like...this is my girlfriend, this is my...my boyfriend, this is my significant other for 20 or 30 years or 5 years or whatever case may be, and they want to get married, well, I got a particular position against that? How dare you. How dare you! You *got* no right to make those kinds of discri—those kind of discriminatory remarks. People have the right to do what they need to do. And if you didn't have this fight about these other issues, don't bring that here. We get ugly on these kinds of issues. So usually, after we slap a two or three of them down...that's why I say, we used to do good cop/bad cop. They don't come to us anymore. Just one time they spread the message "Don't talk to them about that. They'll get mad."

Marian: We had a member, and I, you know, I hope that she will come back out. She's been really...Frances Taylor.⁴⁴⁹ And we just love her...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ...that helped form the National Welfare Rights Union. She is out of Queens, New York. And Frances, I had to stay...you know, I had the opportunity to stay with her when I had to go to some activities in New York. And Frances said, "Marian, what is your position on gay and...gay people and lesbians, stuff like...?" I said, "What's the economic base? What are problems they're having with economic?" She said, "That's the organization I want to be in." I say, "But I don't give a hoot..."

Maureen: I don't care about that.

Marian: ...who's making love and all that stuff, that's not my problem." My problem is, how can we get this economic plight off of our backs. And that's what we got to be about.

⁴⁴⁸ Guests throw rice at the bride and groom as they leave the church in traditional Christian wedding ceremonies. The rice is meant to represent prosperity.

⁴⁴⁹ *Frances Taylor* is a welfare rights activist in New York.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: And so on the one hand, we really applaud...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...what is happening around the country.

Maureen: Go get 'em, that's right.

Marian: As far as what Bush⁴⁵⁰ has moved to say that he wants to make this a constitutional amendment and stuff like that, people don't have the...

Maureen: It's an outrage.

Marian: ...right to, ah, marry, that is as far as same...same sex and stuff like...same...

Maureen: It's an outrage.

Marian: It's outrage. It's a attack on all of us. And we have to remember, when they went...when Hitler went after, ah, certain people, you know, other people stood back.

Marian: Didn't say nothing.

Marian: And didn't say nothing. We have to remember our history, or we gonna die with it.

Jennifer: This has been very educational. I thought I knew you all. But I learned a lot from you. And I...I want to ask you one more quick question.

Marian: A quickie?

Jennifer: Quick.

Maureen: She's talking to you.

Marian: She's talking to you.

Jennifer: I'm talking to both of you. You mentioned Guida West, Frances Piven. You've had some links with university women and some people who have

⁴⁵⁰ A Republican, *George W. Bush* was the Governor of Texas before he was elected U.S. President in the controversial election of 2000. The 43rd U.S. President, he is the son of 41st president George H.W. Bush. During his term, he primarily focused on the "War on Terror", including an invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq war. He was re-elected in 2004.

proclaimed feminist...What is...what's the good and bad of your relationship with the university? Academics?

Maureen: And she said quick now. Quick.

Marian: Well, Guida, when you look at Guida West, Guida...Guida is a jewel among academic women. When you look at some of the...some...some of our experience at...have been very good and some bad, be it on a international level or local level. Sometime...and let me tell you, a lot of people in welfare rights have a lot of degrees now too, you know. But some have the notion of thinking that I've obtained this education, you listen to me, because I'm the professor, the professional person, when it comes to your particular situation.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And they get a rude awakening, you know. And some have stayed. And some...and when I look at people like yourself, or look at Servio Dunyo, you know, thank God Servio's...

Maureen: Doctoral student.

Marian: ...there with us because a lot of days Maureen and I would not make it, you know. Because she's organized when we're not, you know. I mean, I know, we...you know, so on the one hand, I think they should take they talents and they skills that they have had the opportunity to obtain and go and work with poor people. Not trying to dictate to them -- listen and learn from them. And come out of there with what their...what their skills are and what the skills are of the poor people to make all of them some better people. But, you know, they don't come in there looking at us from the mountain top.

Jennifer: Okay. Well, we have to wrap up and I just want to...let you leave. I just want to thank you very much for being here and...

Maureen: Thank you for the invitation.

Jennifer: ...being a part of this.

Marian: Thank you.

Jennifer: It's wonderful to hear you speak.

Marian: Given us an opportunity to be with you again.

Jennifer: Thank you.

The End