

**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 Date: June 24, 2003**

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Acknowledgments

Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

The China site was housed at the China Women's University in Beijing, China and directed by Wang Jinling and Zhang Jian, in collaboration with UM faculty member Wang Zheng.

The India site was housed at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai, India and directed by C.S. Lakshmi, in collaboration with UM faculty members Jayati Lal and Abigail Stewart.

The Poland site was housed at Fundacja Kobiet eFKa (Women's Foundation eFKa), Krakow, Poland and directed by Slawka Walczewska, in collaboration with UM faculty member Magdalena Zaborowska.

The U.S. site was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and directed by UM faculty member Elizabeth Cole.

Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Sumiao Li, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdama Rios, and Ying Zhang.

Undergraduate student interns on the project included Alexandra Gross, Julia MacMillan, Libby Pozolo, Shana Schoem and Megan Williamson.

Translations into English, Polish and Chinese were provided by Kim Dorazio, Cheng Jizhong, Kasia Kietlinska, Justyna Pas, Alena Zemanek, and Ying Zhang.

Technical assistance was provided by R. Thomas Bray, Dustin Edwards, and Keith Rainwater. Graphic design was provided by Elisabeth Paymal.

The project was initially supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant. Additional support was provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, International Institute, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Women's Studies, Humanities Institute, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Herman Family Fund, the Center for African and Afro-American Studies and the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan.

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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*.

In the period since this interview, significant doubt has been cast on Dr. Smith's assertion of a Native American or Woman of Color identity. We have retained her interview in this collection of oral histories because her interview was part of the original archive, and because we believe that scholars can and should study what she said in the interview in the context of subsequent conversations (see the articles below, including an open letter from indigenous women, for more context).

Russell, S. (2008/2018). When does ethnic fraud matter? Indian Country Today (originally published April 4, 2008; updated Sep. 12, 2018).
<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/russell-when-does-ethnic-fraud-matter>

Barker, J. and others (2015/2018). Open Letter From Indigenous Women Scholars Regarding Discussions of Andrea Smith. Indian Country Today. (originally published July 7, 2015; updated Sept. 12, 2018).
<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/open-letter-from-indigenous-women-scholars-regarding-discussions-of-andrea-smith>

Viren, S. (2021, May 26). The native scholar who wasn't. New York Times Magazine.
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/magazine/chokeberry-native-american-andrea-smith.html?campaign_id=190&emc=edit_ufn_20210526&instance_id=31650&nl=updates-from-the-newsroom®i_id=77849961&segment_id=59119&te=1&user_id=a41227382243ef7aa71174705b181411

Maria Cotera: 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.

MC: 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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: And then even though she had...was very intelligent, they kept putting her in special needs programs.¹ So one year she went to her teacher, who was finally a nice teacher

¹ A *special needs program* is for students who have learning or developmental disabilities.

that she finally had, and said, “Miss Sellers, I want to be in the gifted program.”²

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: And I was at a AIM Conference—American Indian Movement Conference,³ 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...

MC: Um-hum.

AS: ...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 MSW.⁴ But when I was there, one of my mentors, a James Cone,⁵ who does Black Liberation Theology,⁶ 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.

MC: Um-hum. And so you...now you were born in Southern California but you grew up in Chicago? Is that right?

AS: No. No, I was in Chicago for more of my adult life.

² A *gifted program* is for students who are exceptionally intelligent.

³ 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.

⁴ MSW is an acronym for a degree program, specifically a Master’s in Social Work.

⁵ *James H. Cone* is a well-known scholar of Black Liberation Theology who teaches at UTS.

⁶ *Black Liberation Theology* uses Black experience to interpret Christian scripture, arguing that God is in solidarity with the oppressed of the earth.

MC: Oh, okay. And so as, as a young person...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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...?

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: So you weren't involved in sort of educational activism at the college...in the college spectrum,⁷ you were more involved in the community during the college experience.

AS: Right.

MC: And that was in...and then in...then you moved to Chicago after that and...

AS: Well, actually I went to London, DC, Oklahoma. And then I ended up in Chicago.

MC: So quite a circuitous path.

AS: Yeah. Um-hum.

MC: And as I understand it, you started a WARN...a WARN branch in Chicago?

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Okay.

AS: Well, I wasn't the only person.

MC: Right. Yeah. Um, so you've talked about the Black Liberation Theologist, your professor, who insisted that you get a Ph.D.

⁷ Here Maria is referring to common campus-focused activities available to students such as student organization or athletics.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And what...as you approached your sort of decisions about what you were going to get a Ph.D. in...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...what informed those decisions and why did you choose ultimately the program that you choose, which was at UC-Santa Cruz,⁸ the History of Consciousness?

AS: 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 fundamentalist,⁹ and so the Liberation Theology, that's where I saw how I could be a person of faith but dedicated to ending global oppression.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Bring them to consciousness.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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...

AS: Probably both, because just...I don't assume our communities are inherently liberatory.

⁸ *UC-Santa Cruz* : University of California, Santa Cruz.

⁹ *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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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...

MC: Um-hum.

AS: ...rather than making these kind of blanket statements that, "All Native peoples worship the mother earth," or, you know.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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...?

AS: No. Seminary's not the place to go to get spiritual awakenings. That's where everybody becomes an atheist afterwards.

MC: (laughs)

AS: But...so I went there thinking I would get that. I mean, I was already spiritual beforehand...

MC: Oh.

AS: ...so I actually got very tested.

MC: Okay.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: But...now I forgot what the question was.

MC: Oh.

AS: I'm sorry (laughing).

MC: I...

AS: But, no, it wasn't a spiritual awakening there.

MC: Okay.

AS: 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.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...within the academy?

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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...

MC: Um-hum.

AS: ...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.

MC: Well, that's really interesting, because if there's one thing that I hear from graduate students...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...in some cases, and they...they have a lot of trouble balancing in their minds...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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.

AS: Um-hum. I think if you just don't stop being an activist, then you don't have any existential angst problems.

MC: Yeah.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum. So in other words, you see yourself as in some, in some ways as serving activist causes...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...via your research resources and through sort of your scholarly interests.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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...?

AS: Well, it's been two different things. I guess my biggest passion is around violence against Native women.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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 Right Activism.¹⁰ And that kind of came out of my personal experience of being active and...well, not really the Christian Right, but at least Evangelical Christianity¹¹ 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.

MC: 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 Feminism.¹² 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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.

¹⁰ The *Christian Right* is the conservative (Right-wing) Christian bloc in the United States.

¹¹ *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.

¹² 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...maybe that's not the right word, maybe womanism¹³ 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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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 Movement.¹⁴ Then the second wave with NOW,¹⁵ 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.

MC: And so you say you were a feminist from the time you started breathing.

AS: Um-hum. Um-hum.

MC: It reminds me, my mother said that, has always said that to me.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ *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.

child.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Um, and so has...so you say that there's more at stake for you now in claiming feminism.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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...

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: 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?

AS: I mean, of course I'm being overly general, because obviously there's many variations there. But in certain cases, for instance, the Pro-Choice¹⁶ movement, I think is 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.

MC: 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

¹⁶ *Pro-choice* is often used to refer to people who support a woman's right to make her reproductive health decisions, particularly around abortion.

nothing to do with supporting choice for women.

MC: Um-hum. So see choice, the choice, the issue of choice, for example...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...to take one feminist hot button issue...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...as in a much more broadly, or much more expansive way.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And it strikes me that the interventions that INCITE, your organization to stop the violence against women of color,...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...takes the, um, the paradigm for reading domestic violence to task in some of the same ways.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And could you share that with us, the approach that INCITE takes that sort of departs from the kind of domestic violence paradigm.

AS: 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-Life.¹⁷

MC: Um-hum.

AS: In the case of anti-violence, either you're Pro-Survivor,¹⁸ which means you support increased criminalization and increased police involvement, and hence support the prison industrial complex¹⁹ 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

¹⁷ *Pro-Life* is often used to refer to people who see a fetus as an unborn child and therefore equate abortion with murder.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.

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 pieces,²⁰ to stopping the war to pretty much everything else on the planet.

MC: Right. I mean, one of the things that really struck me at the last INCITE conference...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...the one in Chicago, in 2001...

AS: Um-hum. **MC:**2002. Yes.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Was precisely how broadly the issue of violence against women of color was sort of talked about.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: I mean, so I participated in panels on, you know, welfare reform...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Um...

AS: And it shifts the focus from social service delivery to political organizing, which is the

²⁰ 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.

major problem with the Anti-Violence Movement.²¹ Suzanne Pharr's²² 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 Reagan²³ 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.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

²¹ Here *Anti-Violence Movement* refers to the mainstream movement against sexual and domestic violence in the United States.

²² Suzanne Pharr 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*.

²³ *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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: So like I had one student, for instance, she was this major George Bush fan, super born-again Christian,²⁴ 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 Fellowship²⁵ 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.

MC: Um-hum. And when you say praxis and, and this sort of giving the class a kind of collective project...

AS: Um-hum.

²⁴ Christians who believe they have had a spiritual rebirth. This term is often affiliated with *Evangelical Christians*.

²⁵ 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.

MC: ...or a series of collective projects...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...do you have specific examples of, of how you did that or in a class that you've taught recently?

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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?"

MC: Um-hum.

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.

MC: (laughs)

AS: And then another time, I had a TA²⁶ 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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

²⁶ A Teaching Assistant (TA) is a graduate student(usually) who assists an instructor with teaching duties.

because...

MC: Um-hum. There was feedback.

AS: Yeah.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...I was at the Pow Wow,²⁷ I saw all of these brochures on Crazy Horse²⁸...

AS: Oh, yeah.

MC: ...and your...a bunch of your students were there passing them out.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Maybe you could share that project.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Hm.

AS: 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 blue,²⁹ but there's already an anti-Crazy Horse label campaign around Liz Claiborne,³⁰

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ *Crazy Horse* (1849-1877), also known as Tashunca-uitco, was a legendary warrior and chief of the Lakota tribe of the Northwest United States.

²⁹ *Out of the blue*: Out of nothing or without basis.

³⁰ The American Indian community is protesting the unauthorized and offensive use of the Crazy Horse name by several

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 Ojibwe³¹ 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 before, but now we're empowered, we want to do the next campaign." So it seemed to work out...

MC: Um-hum.

AS: ...pretty well. But sometimes you don't know exactly how it's all going to..

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Well, do you think that the fact that you teach in interdisciplinary programs, like Women's Studies...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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...?

AS: I'm not sure because I don't...even those classes people expect fairly traditional teaching and at...you usually get fairly traditional teaching.

MC: Um-hum.

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.

³¹ 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.

AS: 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 DeLoria,³² 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.

MC: Well, I mean, I want to come back to your approach to activism.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And sort of kind of hone in on it...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...more directly. Now you’ve already talked about the multiple fronts that you’ve worked on. And I know from reading your CV³³ and talking to you that you’ve worked on everything from Eco-Feminism³⁴ 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?

AS: Well, it’s kind of basic really. And this actually, it came out of the...the spear fishing struggles in Wisconsin³⁵ that we were involved in. This is when the Chippewa³⁶ 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 Exxon,³⁷ because the reason why we’re even having this problem is because

³² 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.

³³ *Curriculum vita* is a list of an individual’s scholarly and professional accomplishments.

³⁴ *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.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ *Chippewa* is another name for the Ojibwe.

³⁷ *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

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. 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 Bellecourt³⁸ 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 Algom³⁹ 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.

MC: Um-hum. So I also want to sort of take us to the...back into feminism.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And the sort of feminism as a philosophy that informs. And I think in particular

miles of shoreline.

³⁸ Clyde Bellecourt is a leader of AIM.

³⁹ The Canadian-based mining company Exxon was partnering with for the proposed project.

women of color forms of feminism and the interventions that have made, been made, well, continuously, since colonialism, as you pointed out...

AS: Hm. Um-hum.

MC: ...or colonization, but that have been recognized in certain academic arenas in the last, say, 20 years.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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 -- its structure, whether or not it could be described as doing feminist work or just...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...just, just let us know. Give us a case study let's say of, of an ...organization that's been really important to you.

AS: 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-Chair⁴⁰ 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 EEOC⁴¹ 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 Smith⁴² 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

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ The *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, (EEOC) is the federal agency in charge of enforcing equal opportunity employment laws.

⁴² *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.

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 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 not 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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 campers.⁴³ 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.

MC: Charter. Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: Yeah, because I mean what INCITE has done with the domestic violence issue...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...would be anathema...

AS: Um-hum.

⁴³ *Happy campers* is a colloquial term for a group of content, unquestioning people.

MC: ...and philosophically to the sort of mainstream domestic violence movement.

AS: 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.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...that have started in different locations? Is there other...I mean, in...say in the annual meeting...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...are there sort of structural situations that, that enable discord as a productive ...?

AS: 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.

MC: So in the two coalitional models...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...the failed one and the one that hasn't failed...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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...

MC: As allies.

AS: 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.

MC: So it seems also in terms of the distribution of power, it's less...it's more sort of linear...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...less hierarchical, again, sort of touching back on that. The question of sort of changing our epistemological system, the pyramid form...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...of both links to resources and also power distribution, even within, after this organization.

AS: Although ironically, we are modeled after the Southern Baptist Convention.⁴⁴

MC: Oh (laughs).

⁴⁴ 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.

AS: 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.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: But what happens when you have completely different organizations who are sort of after different things ideologically.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And in terms of their programs...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: Right? And I’m thinking here of the project you’ve been working on with the...combating the right, the religious right.⁴⁵

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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?

AS: I don’t know if it’s more global than the other projects. It’s another INCITE task force,

⁴⁵ Religious Right is a synonym for the Christian Right.

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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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...

MC: (laughs)

AS: ...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.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: And it seems like what you're suggesting is a much more sort of back and forth thing.

AS: Right.

MC: 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?

AS: 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 NGOs⁴⁶ 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...that time frame a little bit. So, um, if I could just get your thoughts on where you sort of locate your work...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...and in that historical trajectory...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...um...

AS: I guess I would just say I feel like we're in...coming to a different space with Native

⁴⁶ An *NGO* is a Non-Governmental Organization.

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.

MC: So, and I know we had, in the group, in the Global Feminisms...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...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...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...at the center of the question...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...of feminism and nationalism I guess, or, and I don't know, you know, the struggles of ethnic communities...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...for equality and to end global oppression.

AS: Hm.

MC: So what questions arise when you put women of color at the center of both the, all of these emancipatory discourses?

AS: Um-hum.

MC: 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.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: How does it fundamentally change the questions that we ask?

AS: Well, just on the basic level, we start to see that racial just—when we talk about racial justice, for instance, at the Durban Conference,⁴⁷ 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?"

MC: Um-hum. So what you're suggesting is actually a kind of ever-shifting...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...center that, that in some way forces us to ask new and different kinds of questions.

AS: Right.

MC: 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 was like, "Well, I have to pick one or the other," was that I, I imagined two very distinct worlds...

AS: Um-hum.

MC: ...or paths that I would go on.

AS: Um-hum.

MC: So, um, you've chosen a path that melds both of them.

AS: Um-hum.

⁴⁷ 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.

MC: 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.

AS: 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.

MC: Um-hum.

AS: 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.

MC: 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...

AS: Yeah.

Audience 1: ...what I'm saying I thoroughly enjoyed the interview.

AS: 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?

AS: 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?

AS: 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 Maori,⁴⁸ 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.

AS: Yes.

Audience 2: I would like to know that as a person you have a Ph.D. and a professor here.

AS: 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?⁴⁹ What level? Actually behind this questions is implications, the class issue.

AS: Um-hum.

Audience 2: Do you feel barrier because of your identity as a Ph.D., a professor, when you interact with grassroots people?

AS: 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-do,⁵⁰ 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

⁴⁸ *Maori* are a Native New Zealand people of Polynesian ancestry.

⁴⁹ *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.

⁵⁰ "A big to-do", a big deal, something very important.

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...

AS: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...with not just the national coalitions, but to turn the lens inward...

AS: 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 Majority.⁵¹ And not because I think that, say, it's the task of a group like INCITE to transform these organizations...

AS: 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...

AS: Um-hum.

Audience 3: ...by these "mainstream groups"?

AS: 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,⁵² "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

⁵¹ *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.

⁵² *Critical Resistance* is a national organization dedicated to opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex.

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.

MC: 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.

AS: Thank you.