



Beverly Guy-Sheftall

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CTM: So, we're talking to Beverly Guy-Sheftall on Sunday, June 7 in New York City. So, Beverly, you know we're talking to a lot of sisters who have actually been involved in feminist work for decades and you are one of our closest sisters here. Someone we do a lot of serious work with and a lot of playing with and so how about—let's start with you telling us a little bit about how you came to do the kind of feminist work that you do now, so at all levels, right. Personal—any, kind, of, stories you want to tell about personal, political, intellectual, that brings you to the scholarly, activist, institutional work that you've been doing for so many years.

BGS: Okay, hmm. So, let me see if I can have a coherent narrative about my journey to feminist-scholar activism. If I had to locate a moment to begin with, it probably would be when I left Spelman College in 1966 as an undergraduate, I was an English major. Never had had any, of course, women's studies courses. I ended up going to Wellesley College for a year, a fifth year, and I ended up taking a course from Professor Patricia Speck called Women in Drama—and while I don't think it was a feminist course, it was the first women's studies course that I had. So, I think that taking that women's studies course, even though it was located in the English Department and it was a pretty traditional English course, it marked for me the absences and silences in my own training as an undergraduate English major. So, I left Wellesley and came to Atlanta University, came back to Atlanta to do a masters degree in English and of course, I had no women's studies courses and I think I might have had one African American literature course, but I ended up—and I think it was the impact of having taken that Women in Drama course—I ended up deciding that I wanted to do a master's thesis on Faulkner's treatment of women in his major novels. Now this is 1969. There is no coursework, no mentoring, no professors, but I decided I was going to do this master's thesis. Now, by this time I'm beginning to read feminist literary criticism, on my own. So, feminist literary criticism was beginning to emerge, not within the context of women's studies programs, so I drew on the embryonic feminist literary criticism that was coming out and also the black aesthetic literary criticism, so at this point I'm a pretty focused literary scholar. Not very

interdisciplinary, I don't think at that point. But, doing the thesis on Faulkner's treatment of women in his major novels—I realize this now later—I'm beginning to do intersectional analysis by looking at race, class and gender, though I'm not using that language.

CTM: Language, right.

BGS: But I'm looking at how a major Southern canonical white male figure deals with issues of race, deals with issues of gender and deals with issues of class. So, that would be, so if I had to mark the moment it would be writing that thesis on Faulkner's treatment of women in his major novels and I reread that thesis within the year and I was surprised.

CTM: Really?

BGS: I never got it published, I never did anything with it, which I should have, but I was surprised at what I was able to do in 1969 with no—

CTM: No mentoring, no community.

BGS: No, mentoring, no formal, but just sitting with myself, reading feminist literary criticism and black literary criticism.

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: Wow, that's incredible.

CTM: But doesn't that suggest that whatever your frame was, is something that came before that?

BGS: Yeah, and I think my frame was absolutely shaped by my having grown up in the South and having been shaped by issues of race, gender and class.

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And having been, sort of, located in the Civil Rights Movement, not Women's Movement, and also, I think having already been—though I didn't realize it at the time—having already been socialized by a feminist mother. I think that that was critical, that is my own personal relationship with my mother whose messages were feminist: if you get pregnant, I'll take you to get an abortion—in the '60s.

CTM: All the advice about boys and men, which I remember.

BGS: Very explicit; men are like buses—you know.

LEC: I like that one—

BGS: *[Laughter]* There's always another one coming—*[laughter]* so you don't need to fret, they are in huge supply. And don't be one of those women who just wants a pair of pants. *[Laughter]* That was, of course, heteronormative and all of that, but it was really—

CTM: Yeah and this—but we're talking this in the '50s.

BGS: No, this is the '50s.

CTM: This is the '50s, exactly.

BGS: This is the '50s.

LEC: She was a feminist.

BGS: Also, she had left my father. This is the other thing. She had left my father when we were in the eighth grade. Only person in my family who ever disrupted a marriage. Left my father, unbeknownst to us and him, except on the day that we came home from school and our furniture's gone...and she's, we moved around the corner to my grandparents'. So, I already probably had that, but the intellectual, academic journey, I think, began with me writing that thesis. So, should I keep going?

CTM: Yeah!

LEC: Mm-hmm.

BGS: So, then I'm teaching—I finally come to the English department at Spelman in 1971, get back to Atlanta. And at this point I'm not even really trying to craft a career. I mean I'm married. Butch decides to go to law school at Emory, so I end up at Spelman because I needed a job and within a few years, I began to realize that my students didn't seem to know any black women intellectuals, didn't know any black women rights. This would've been around 1971. So long back—it's 1971—

CTM: Alright, so 1971—

BGS: So '71, I'm at Spelman, I'm in the English department, I'm teaching fab English courses, ooh—

CTM: Right, ahan.

BGS: —freshman English, the British—oh—terrible stuff.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: So, anyway, after a few years it's occurring to me that our students would be normal. Don't know anything about a black female literary tradition, don't know anything about black female intellectuals. They may have heard of Harriet Tubman. They may have heard of Sojourner Truth. So, a colleague and I, Roseann Bell, decided that we're going to publish this book. Now, mind you, I haven't even been to graduate school yet. I mean I have a master's but I haven't been to a doctoral program. Nor has she. So, we are untenured, junior faculty members in a very traditional, even somewhat hostile English department to what it is we want to do. So, the two of us decided, okay let's publish a book. We know nothing about publishing. So, this is what we decided to do—that we're going to publish this book that ended up being called "Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature", which was the first—amazingly—first anthology of black women's literature. In some kind of way, we ended up finding Marie Brown, who was an early black woman editor, at "Doubleday", she was. And she shepherded this project through. One of the most important things that I did during that process was to interview Toni Cade Bambara. So we decided among many other things that in addition to having scholarly essays we would have interviews. So, I—very young, very shy, which people won't believe...a very shy, very reluctant, contacted Toni Cade and asked her if I could come and interview her. So, she said yes, so I trotted to Toni Cade's, house with my little cassette recorder, which I didn't even know how to use. I had never used a cassette recorder... I had never even done an interview.

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But I had been very much impacted by "The Black Woman" which came out in 1970. So this was four years later, 1974. So, I tried it there and we had one of the most extraordinary afternoons that I think I've experienced. And so that's, you know, when I think I really began to say to myself, okay Beverly, you're going to do black feminist studies. And it was the impact of reading Toni Cade and talking to her and that interview is really an amazing interview and it's been reprinted in a new work on Toni Cade. So, now I'm beginning to move away from literature and being much more interested in what we would now call black feminist studies...interested in essays, interested in non-fiction and interested in people like Toni, who are also activists. So, I think the impact of Toni Cade was key. So, then I decide, okay Beverly, you don't want to go and get a PhD in English. You want to go and get a doctorate in American Studies so you can do your...women's studies and African American Studies. So, I go to Emory in the ILA, the Institute for Liberal Arts, which is a very, sort of, I would say progressive graduate space. And I take my first formal

women's studies course, which is unusual for women and scholars in our cohort, to have actually taken a women's studies course as a graduate student.

LEC: As a PhD student.

BGS: As a PhD student. So I took the first women's studies graduate course that was offered at Emory and it was offered by—really, what was an adjunct. She was the wife of a professor there. And so then I really decided I'm doing women's studies, I'm doing Black Feminist Studies and so on and I end up doing that dissertation on attitudes towards black women from 1880 to 1920. And then they—Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of all people, before I finished the PhD, asked if I would teach part-time in their graduate women's studies program. So, I started teaching graduate...I'm only thinking about this now...I started teaching graduate women's studies courses before I'm teaching undergraduate women's studies courses. So, I designed two courses. African American Women's History and African American Feminist Thought, out of which "Words of Fire" emerged. So that—Elizabeth asking me to teach those graduate courses—this would have been in the '80s...had a huge impact on my...on the kind of work that I would do...the kind of anthologizing work I would do and the kind of activist work I would do. So, that's the '80s. So this is actually before I founded the Women's Center in 1981. So, by then I'm very clear about—still no PhD, no tenure, junior professor and—but I've been teaching graduate courses, because there was nobody else to teach them so it was just Bessie Fox-Genovese—and this is before she abandoned feminism—and me.

CTM: Right, right.

LEC: Well, that's quite an unusual beginning and trajectory.

BGS: It's a very...so I come to women's studies and come to feminism in very...one of the things that I say is that, I didn't come to it as a reaction to white women at all. So I came to it at Atlanta University working on a master's thesis. I didn't come to it around white people. I came to feminism, academic feminism, in a black graduate space even though I was the only one doing it. And then, even in the university space I wasn't navigating quietness. You know Betsy says, can you teach and I said okay, there was no—

CTM: Yeah, you weren't struggling to do it.

BGS: No, I wasn't struggling.

LEC: That's really you know, like black feminist praxis. Like you came to this through a kind of activism at the beginning, your mother is an organic feminist, I mean it was like just a natural sort of progression.

BGS: In a sum— and in familiar space, that is in black spaces and even in progressive sort of, a progressive space. Not an English department but in that Institute for Liberal Arts.

LEC: And through a lived space of self-empowerment.

BGS: Yes, and also coming to it because I was wanting to have my students have an experience of black women's intellectual traditions. So that was my motivation, in terms of the publishing.

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CTM: And then you—your first job was not Spelman?

BGS: No, first job was at Alabama State for two years.

CTM: Okay and that was after the PhD?

BGS: No, that was—my first job was—and you could do that then, you could get a job, a college teaching job with a masters' degree in 1969. So two years at Alabama State and then I came to Spelman in 1971, sort of serendipitously only because—you know, people think that I cracked at a career at Spelman but I only ended up at Spelman because Butch, the person I was married to, ended up going to—

CTM: In Atlanta. At Clark, Atlanta.

BGS: No, Emory. Emory Law School. So I just went over to Spelman and said I need a job in the English department. And so they said well, we have these remedial English classes that we were teaching then and that's what I started. I started teaching remedial English, just to get a job.

CTM: Okay, right.

LEC: Yeah, with that kind of unique beginning and that kind of framing that you were laying out for us that has so much of organic feminism in it as a black woman with a feminist mother and that kind of thinking, with no one mapping this path for you, or shepherding you through it or being your mentor—you know you just forge ahead—how do you see that work having impacted young women feminists that they have come through you know, as students? Knowing your scholarship now, how do you think it has impacted young feminists, in your imaginary?

BGS: Okay yeah. So let me say that probably the best decision that I made along these lines was leaving the English department, abandoning the English department,

running away from the English department, becoming a refugee from the English department and founding the Women's Center in 1981, okay. So by now, it's very clear that I'm imagining that I want to create a radical black feminist space at Spelman that's not just tied to a women's studies major or minor, though that was part of it. And I'm very much impacted by, because I started visiting those women's research centers in New England. So by now the women's movement, the academic women's movement is kind of alive and well and so I go to one of the main ones which was at Wellesley College and I had been to Wellesley. So Wellesley was the first one I went to and I came across Pat Bell-Scott who was working at the Wellesley Women's Resource Center and was of course one of the co-editors of "But Some of Us Are Brave". So and I went and interviewed...I'm just not remembering this...and I went and interviewed Barbara Smith who was the other co-editor, teaching part time at—still I think the English Department at Emerson College I think. So my visit to New England and coming into contact with black women who were in these women's spaces said to me okay there's no HBCU that has a women's studies program, there's no HBCU that has a women's center so that's what you really want to do. And you're interested in not just a women's studies program but you're interested in research and we founded *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* two years later, Pat Bell-Scott and I. But you're also interested in sort of bridging the divide between community and Spelman because there had been very little of that. So community outreach was important and I imagine community outreach to be global, somehow. So, it was becoming clear that if you had a center, if you had an institute, you could write grants and get money, which you can't do as a regular faculty member. So, the first grant we had was from the Mai Foundation and would become to have really important grants from the Ford Foundation and this was because I became a member of the National Council for Research on Women and came in contact with those folk who were working at Ford and who were getting Ford grants. So that space, that Women's Center space I think enabled us to create not just an academic, intellectual space but an activist space.

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And I think that the things that we attached to the Center which was the Toni Cade Bambara Scholar Activist Collective and a whole range of black feminist organizations has had a tremendous impact on students, because they take the courses, you know they begin to...initially they weren't taking the courses. I mean, I might've had five students in my women's studies class.

LEC: Wow.

CTM: But when are you talking? Are you talking early 80s now.

BGS: Early 80s, so '81. So we started the center in '81 and I started teaching Intro to...we crafted the minor immediately because it was just me teaching Intro and Feminist Theory and then they could take three other courses, somewhere else and most of them were in the English department or history. So we started that minor in 1981 and then over time we added the activist component to it and hiring Bahati (Kuumba) was probably critical to the activist part. So that space has been I think has had a huge impact on the development of a sort of new generation of black scholar-activist-feminists who explicitly self-identifies that and who knows that that's what they're doing.

CTM: Yeah. So there's a whole...there are two or three generations that have gone through—

BGS: Two or three generations, that's right. And this commencement we had the largest number of women's studies majors that we graduated which was twenty.

LEC: Right, in 2015.

BGS: In 2015, so yeah.

LEC: Who have been trained to understand that academic feminism is also connected to a community engagement commitment. So unique.

BGS: And ironically this year we had for the first time both the salutatorian and the valedictorian who graduated as women's studies majors.

CTM: Yeah, I saw that.

BGS: And who are also were activists. And I think that you know, were our program not the way it was; someone like Banah who came there as a—came from an activist family in Syria even as she grew up in Arkansas, she found a home in a very activist and intellectually stimulating space around feminism.

CTM: I think what's interesting also is that when you created a major at Spelman first you called it Comparative women's studies, right? And, you are one of the few people I know who actually does black feminist studies with a global reach, right? So why do you think that's the case? So it's almost like you do transnational black feminist studies. So—

BGS: Let me tell you why that was. When I was teaching graduate students at Emory, when I was teaching PhD students at Emory they asked me to teach a global feminist course and I taught a third world feminist course. So it's quite possible that had I not been teaching graduate students many of whom were South Asian...so I devised that third world feminisms course but I decided that that was too big and so

then I started teaching global black feminisms at Emory. And I think that that shaped—that is probably what shaped my thinking about global stuff. It was those students saying can you teach something in addition to African American? And then the global black feminisms, which was really broad, so I think that that's the answer.

LEC: This is truly incredible to me because you won't remember this but in 1988 I came to Spelman and I talked to you—'89—talked to you about going to teach a Third World feminism course at University of Toronto.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: I do.

LEC: When I was getting that job there and I said I'm developing this—you remember that?

BGS: Yes, I do. I don't if I—did I share the syllabus?

LEC: You shared the syllabus with me.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: And that probably was an early—

LEC: Very early.

BGS: Very early.

LEC: You said I'm trying this out.

BGS: And I was teaching myself. And I was also having to teach myself—I mean I'm a literate but I didn't know what structural adjustment was. I mean I didn't know any of that.

CTM: Right, of course.

BGS: So.

LEC: And I was so excited by it because when I saw the syllabus I said yeah, these are the things exactly that I know how to do, because here she was a literary scholar trying this out—

CTM: Trying this out—

BGS: And I was very honest with the students. I said you know this—I'm way away from my—training—

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CTM: Comfort zone, yeah.

LEC: Unbelievable.

CTM: But the other thing is—so when did we meet?

BGS: We met when you were at Oberlin before Hamilton.

CTM: Yeah so it was around exactly that time.

BGS: That's right so what year was that?

CTM: It's around the same year...when did I move—I think I moved to Oberlin in—the Audre commencement was '89!

BGS: Okay.

CTM: So I had been there two years then I think. '87 I moved to Oberlin.

BGS: So all of these things were happening.

LEC: Happening at the same time.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: It was—

CTM: Late '80s it was for sure.

BGS: It was those graduate students at Emory I'm sure that pushed—said can you do this and I said well, I can try.

CTM: But you could have done it and you could not have taken it seriously. I mean I think also what's important is sort of, the ability to make or the commitment in terms of certain decisions about what forms of knowledge really are important and why the connections are important.

BGS: The other thing I have to say that I think was connected to that: I had my first really impactful cross-cultural experience when I went to India in 1971. I mean '73. So two years after I get to Spelman, there's a study travel tour and I go to India for three months. My project is Indian women writers and so when I came back I incorporated my Indian women writers into my—so I would say that probably made me more open for the students to say can you come and teach third world feminism 'cause I have some sense of...I've had a little bit of cross-cultural experience. So that trip was—

LEC: 'Cause I remember you telling me that you're feeling this out, that I'm feeling my way through this, don't know a thing about structural adjustment and economics. And we talked about structural adjustment and the IMF and what its doing and that it has these policies that are so you know, regular everywhere it goes. And I remember thinking, she says she doesn't know anything?

BGS: No I did but you know—now I'll tell you the other thing I think. The person I was married to was an economist, so he would just, he would say you know this stuff is not that complicated. He said I could give you just enough stuff, basic stuff for you to go in there and not embarrass yourself.

CTM: Right, that's important.

BGS: So I was accustomed to talking to an economist for a long time, even though half the time I didn't know what he was talking about.

[Laughter]

LEC: This is truly...this is really interesting. So what would you say, Beverly, are some of the challenges then through this kind of history and this development? What are some of the challenges you encounter having come to doing this kind of work?

BGS: Ooh, okay I would say the first challenge was hostility on the part of African American scholars to feminism and to having a very explicit, loud advocacy around LGBTQ issues. I mean, one of the things that I was recalling recently, was going to a Radical Institute of Black World gathering on which Barbara Smith, Pat Bell-Scott and me were on the panel and they stopped us halfway through and said, "Are you all lesbians?"

CTM: Uh-oh.

BGS: Oh yeah.

LEC: When you say recent—when?

BGS: No, I was talking about it recently. I had remembered it.

LEC: Yeah, yeah.

BGS: So, so huge hostility to naming yourself a feminist and being in the company of out of black lesbians. I mean it was a huge hostility.

LEC: Yeah, we did talk about that before, yeah.

BGS: Oh and then one of the worst experiences that I have ever had, that we have ever had: we wrote a little proposal to do a faculty development workshop on black feminist studies. This is Pat Bell-Scott, Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith and me. It was for black faculty at HBCUs and we invited them there for a week and they were so hostile.

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We had to—the workshop had to be disbanded. They accused us—

CTM: When was this?

BGS: This was 1980—

CTM: So it was in the '80s.

BGS: It was in the '80s. They accused us of trying to convert them to lesbianism. We passed out—this was just passing out the—we used the—

CTM: Yeah you must have had a pill to—

BGS: We had a biblio—yes, and it was on the aftermath of that that Pat and I decided we would do *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*. So, huge hostility. So initially the hostility was most from nationalist and anti-feminist African American women and men. Huge challenge. And then the students early on didn't want to take our courses. You know they would come and say, I'm not a feminist, I hate feminism but I'm going to take this course and blah, blah, blah. So initially I would say that that was the biggest challenge. Just constantly having to explain why you're doing women's studies.

CTM: Ok, others? Other challenges? Has that remained the same? Has that shifted?

BGS: No, I think it has shifted. I think in the last decade there's not as much hostility to—I mean you can say you're a black feminist without people, uh—

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: But some of it is like the new and old racism.

BGS: Yeah, that's right. That's right.

LEC: Old was du jour but now—so it's there but—

CTM: It's in a different guise.

LEC: You know better than to say it.

CTM: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BGS: I think the other challenge which I think I've managed to avoid is burn out. Just sheer—when I think about just the huge amount of things we took on. You know, activism, students, traveling. You know, going to all those international conferences, you know, Kenya, Beijing, constantly trying to be places, it's draining. So I think that's a huge challenge, is figuring out how to conserve your energy. The thirteen years that we did *SAGE*—this was on top of regular jobs, and for us regular jobs is 4-4 then 3-3—and sustain that journal for thirteen years with no—very little, institutional support even though Johnetta was there. I mean I would literally go through the mailbox everyday and process subscriptions at night at home, for thirteen years. Everyday I'm doing that. No clerical support. That was really draining, doing the journal on top of doing the women's center on top of teaching on top of teaching graduate students at Emory for over a decade, with PhD students and exams.

CTM: Right.

BGS: *[Laughter]*

LEC: You know it still amazes us, right? We know your schedule even today, even now and it still amazes us. So one thing I always wanted to ask you, how do you avoid suffering burnout? I know you love, absolutely love what you do. I know that part of it is energizing and empowering, we understand all that. How do you avoid the burnout, Beverly? Because we have seen—it's taken out sisters.

BGS: You know what I think? I think that I have lots of outlets and shopping is one of them.

CTM: Yeah, I was going to say, she shops!

LEC: We know that.

BGS: Friendship, you know. Spending time with friends, eating at restaurants.

LEC: Pleasures.

BGS: The other thing that I just have to say and I say this to my—I have a very unstressful personal life. You know, if you don't have a partner—

LEC: I can relate on it.

BGS: Children. Unfortunately, parents who—my mother died when I was in my thirties so I don't have nuclear family responsibilities. I have almost no caretaking responsibilities so that when I come home, it's just me. I think that's huge. And when I think about this, most of the stress that women of color have if you ignore your job stress, family.

CTM: Family relationships, absolutely.

BGS: And so I think that that probably is it more than—I don't think I could have crafted the life I have, if I had all these other things.

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If I had lived in a city where I had relatives, you know, if I had a stressful personal relationship, marriage partnership or whatever, I think it would've been very, very hard. So I am very free to—

CTM: To shop, go out, to have vacations with friends.

BGS: To not go to the grocery store for a week. You know, just imagine. People come to my house and say you don't have any groceries. I say no, but I can get some!

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: Yeah, but it's true. Not having to be a caregiver is a major...

BGS: Probably the most caregiving I do is long-distance with my sister and students.

CTM: I think you do a lot of that stuff with students actually.

BGS: Yeah.

CTM: Yeah, you do a lot of that stuff with students.

BGS: I think otherwise I would really be burnt out.

CTM: Don't you think some of that also has to do with having a real conviction in the work that you are doing?

BGS: But I don't know that I'm conscious of that.

LEC: But that's there and people who know you can see it and feel it.

BGS: I don't—but you know what I don't—it must be there but it's not—

CTM: It's not on the surface for you.

LEC: You see it's seamless because it is so integrated into your life.

BGS: Okay like when we said we're going to do this journal okay? I had no idea what that meant.

LEC: What or how.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: And so you know you say okay I've got this journal to do and you just sorta do it. Or like the anthology. I mean, if we had known...if we had known—

CTM: Yeah, I know...how difficult it's going to be. All of the things many of us have done at certain moments, which were risky, but we didn't have any clue what that meant so you did it, because you weren't cautious and also no-one else was doing it.

BGS: That's true.

CTM: I mean some of this is also groundbreaking stuff because...and if no one else has done it no one is saying to you don't do this also, because this is—

BGS: And also—I won't call a name but—also just having to sort of ignore people's little cruelties, like the first issue—which was really a strong one—the first issue of SAGE, a very well known black woman literary critic, there was one page that had a typo on it. She Xeroxed those pages and passed them around.

CTM: Ai yai yai yai yai, this is the academy for you.

BGS: And you just have to park that somewhere. Because, otherwise you'll be...you'll just be, you know, sad all the time.

[Laughter]

CTM: But also, I think, but that's also part of how you create solidarities with people is, that there are certain things you park.

BGS: That's right, that you just park.

CTM: If you don't park them, forget it.

BGS: Oh yeah. And I think we've parked a lot. You know, when I think about the complexity of—'cause you know, even when I think of the women that we...because of our work regularly have to interact with, a lot of that's complicated.

CTM: Yeah, absolutely.

LEC: Gotta do a lot of parking.

CTM: Yeah, yeah.

BGS: Hmm..mmm

CTM: So what about—okay, so given this history of sort of collaborations, that you've had actually constantly, right? And collaborations with you know lots of different sets of women and feminists. In not just places, but walks of life, what do you see as the best way forward sort of for feminists working across all of our racial, class, etc. differences?

BGS: I do think we have to really make an effort to do more cross-class collaborations, okay. And I had sort of lost that actually. My most cross-class collaboration was with the Black Women's Health Project for years. I mean those were grassroots, women not mostly academics. It was difficult. I do less of that now. So I think that we, that it's quite possible to lose that if you don't make an effort. You can just mostly be around academic feminists. So, it's not hard to do it.

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I think you have to connect to certain kinds of organizations, like Project South. What I'm finding over time, with priorities, certain things just fall away and that has sort of fallen away. You know, when the Black Women's Health Project sort of left Atlanta

and Billy Avery left Atlanta, I wasn't as motivated because those were also about relationships.

CTM: Right. But say in general... so this is particularly what emerges for you in your narrative and location, but if you were to be asked in general, what are the kinds of things feminists need to be paying attention to, or working on, or strategizing about, to build solidarity right now, at this completely neoliberal time where there are divisions that are even being put in place but which are not visible to us sometimes? And a commodification of particular groups of people, the celebrity culture, I mean there's a whole bunch of stuff that is so much a part of our everyday lives.

BGS: Let me tell you what I also think. I don't know if you all have read the New York Times article about the fissures between trans* feminists, trans and— that's a huge one.

LEC: Big thing, big thing.

BGS: Big one. I'm not convinced anymore that it's possible to do effective healthy collaborations across all kinds of difference.

CTM: Okay, interesting.

BGS: I mean when I go to spaces and trans* feminists are saying I can't use the word "woman", I just, I'm not likely to go there. And I'm not likely to spend a lot of my time trying to figure out how to bridge that.

[Laughter]

CTM: No, but in any case I think—so, so I guess the question then becomes how are we defining radical feminist praxis and what our vision is that then allows us to cross certain kinds of borders and build solidarity.

LEC: And build solidarity and still challenge neoliberalism. Some of these fads are not challenging them.

BGS: And I also think, the other thing that I really think—I think that we've got further and further away from grassroots women. And I think that you're not going to form very many solidarities with them if you're just constantly talking about trans* issues, or you can't use the word woman or...you know, at one of the sessions yesterday, the Black Arts Initiative session, a young man did a wonderful talk on trans* or queer readings of whatever. I mean it was brilliant, but a black woman raised her hand—she's an academic—and she said I don't understand anything you just got through saying. I'm not even sure that she even realized he was trans* and when he said top surgery, I mean you know, it was clear that she was, it was like—

LEC: It was foreign to her.

BGS: It was totally foreign. And so, I think that these disconnects are actually huge between even young folk who are trained in academic spaces, academic, highly theoretical, feminist spaces. I don't know that they have the language to talk to those women in the Black Women's Health Project. And I think that that's really critical. I don't see that happening very much. I would say that it is possible to even be a radical feminist of color and have very little contact with the grassroots women. And I think that that's really bothersome. And I also remember how difficult it was I mean, when we were trying to do this work with the Black Women's Health Project. They did not want to come to Spelman's campus, even though we were all black women.

CTM: Right.

LEC: I knew a bit about that, yeah.

BGS: So I'm not sure that we totally figured out they didn't—

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They felt alienated from the Spelman campus. They felt like sometimes they didn't know who we were talking about. So, I think that we need to look for some examples of the way that works across class. I don't see a lot of it happening.

CTM: Between academics and women who are non-academic, but who are doing various forms of organizing or agitation for justice.

BGS: That's right. I mean I look at the Black Lives Matter movement, I mean the Black Lives Matter mobilization, and you know they are very impatient and frustrated with the older civil rights establishment. It's been very hard for them to create solidarities, and of course they have the gender split up in there, you know with the younger men basically—so, you know—I don't know. But I will also have to say like right now, one of my biggest frustration is with younger black feminists who keep wanting me to bleed to Beyoncé as a feminist. [Laughs] I mean this is huge. And it's the question that I get the most when I go around on college campuses among young black feminists. What do you think about Beyoncé? Do you think she's a feminist? And I want to say, "What!" I mean I've spent a lot of—I don't want to talk about Beyoncé!

LEC: I get that in class. I get that in classes. I go straight to the material conditions of people's lives and force them to answer the questions.

CTM: Mm-hmm,

LEC: And they can't answer the questions.

BGS: So even those solidarities—that is a huge generational split. And I'm not talking about now college students, but I'm talking about the generation split in terms of the Janelles and that—'cause they are in their forties—the pleasure feminists, I don't see them having any interest in grassroots women of color issues. They are very focused on popular culture, image you know all of that. So I don't even know how, I don't even know how—I'm challenged by appearing to my own students around feminism because they've been socialized to believe that it can mean whatever it is that you want it to mean.

CTM: Yeah, absolutely.

LEC: Do you think that that—you know, I think we're all experiencing something similar, yeah? And as I'm listening I'm thinking, it takes me right back to where you started with, the grassroots, the connection to grassroots women. And so many of us are working within and in grassroots organizations still and so you just find like little isolated pockets. You're doing this kind of work and you're trying to teach this kind of work but you feel the exact same thing that it's not happening across the borders in terms of feminism and where we want to see it going, no? Do you think that has something to do with feminism in the academy having lost its way around class?

BGS: I do. I really do think it's lost its way around class.

LEC: Not dealing with class.

CTM: But more than that, too, it may be that feminism in the academy no longer believes or most interdisciplinary feminist scholarship does not pay attention to political economy anymore. I think that that is—which is not true in the global South, but it is true here.

BGS: I think so, I think so, I think so!

LEC: Yeah, political economy is completely missing so class is something so—

CTM: Is out.

LEC: And class is the core, you know, so—

BGS: So there is an ability to deal to some extent with race but class is very hard.

CTM: Right. So if you were to be asked—if you were dreaming about what it is you want to see happen in the future to transform women’s lives, what are the things that come to mind to you?

BGS: Yeah, so the poverty issue is huge. I mean, the lack of access to resources, inability to just make certain kinds of choices and I’m not now talking about necessarily even women in let’s say even public housing. I mean I even think about women who have huge amount of debt from college and graduate school in a adjunct professor position.

00:50:00

CTM: Right.

LEC: Or three or four of them.

BGS: Yes, and when I hear them talking—no prospect for a stable tenure track job with benefits. So what does that mean? So what does that mean? So we’re not even talking about a high school graduate. So we’re talking about highly educated women who cannot make ends meet and who don’t have health insurance and who sometimes are forced to make really difficult choices about the partnerships that they, you know, get into. So I worry. And I don’t see that women’s studies is—

CTM: A place where that’s being addressed.

BGS: No, you know there’s a big movement about adjuncts, but women’s studies is not—

CTM: Spearheading it or any of that stuff.

BGS: No. I would say that what I see happening is that highly privileged senior women’s studies people are moving into administration.

CTM: Yeah.

BGS: Becoming deans, provosts, college presidents. And they don’t even talk about adjuncts.

CTM: No.

LEC: That brings up the old critique of feminism, no? That it’s been good career—help assisting careers for those women, the same class of women. Very good for them. And some of that even in the global South. That where—places where

feminists, academic feminists in particular don't have any relationship with grassroots women's organizations or structures and you talk to those women and they'll say—
BGS: Or even staff. Or even staff. That's the other thing. Even staff on college campuses. None.

LEC: No relationships, no new relationships.

BGS: I mean Levi was appalled at those status of women reports that they do at John Hopkins. They don't even look at the supports. They just look at the professionals. Where are the—? The majority of women at John Hopkins are support staff and they're not even in the report. And they just look at him like, oh.

CTM: Right, right.

BGS: And even when I think about the support staff at Spelman, they're reduced now from ten months to twelve months. You know, my secretary makes \$28,000. Most of them are single with children. There are days that they have to carpool because they run out of money to buy gas. So I don't have to go out to public housing. I could just listen to those women on Spelman's campus and know, you know—we try to do a—what is it—what's the wage, what that project on campuses? We tried to do that on Spelman's campuses, it got shut down. And even the women admit...I mean we're talking about a women's college, a black women's college. The women administrators there are not caring about those women.

LEC: Yeah it's something about—

BGS: Fair Wage.

LEC: Fair Wage Project, yeah.

BGS: And you can't get most faculty on these campuses to care about...

LEC: Including feminist faculty.

BGS: Including feminist faculty, to care about the low wages of—so we don't even need to go out, we could just stay on these campuses. And also, there's—we've tried—there's very little solidarity between staff and faculty.

CTM: Oh yeah.

LEC: It's startling. It's startling.

CTM: Yeah, yeah. No, that's true. So what is the future for feminism then, Beverly?

BGS: Well, I think feminism has—I think the impact that feminism has on young men I mean, young men and young women who come into these classes is huge. I don't think it's made its way to K-12, which people like Peggy McIntosh tried to do. I mean, I don't know if private schools have women's studies courses. So we know that it has an impact on college students, young college students. I don't think it has an impact on the situation of women who work in most spaces.

00:55:09

CTM: Right. So—that's the big challenge. Right?

LEC: It's so true. We have the thing about adjuncts and staff at SU and it's a big thing to organize outside of women's studies thing and we may go. It's not there. It's not related to them.

BGS: Mm-hmm.

CTM: I wonder sometimes if sort of some of the spaces when women's studies was first started and it was not an academic field, but it was, women's studies was much more about committees for women, on campus. At those moments, I think there was actually more of a sense of cross-class space. And I think that was the case in a lot of spaces in the beginning, which were all white feminist beginnings more or less, right? I mean what's interesting about it then is it suggests, that we have been attentive to race and sexuality in ways that have completely invisibilized class—

LEC: Eclipsed class.

CTM: Eclipsed class altogether.

BGS: That is the case.

CTM: And so there are some people who talk in smart ways about all these things but, a lot of times because of the sort of development of the field into more and more theoretical and abstract paradigms of scholarship, you know there is a way in which we end up talking to each other about certain kinds of things. And those issues have been very complexly and interestingly dealt with but it's like the whole material basis has—

LEC: Collapsed.

CTM: Has collapsed or fallen out.

Feminist Freedom Warriors

*Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in conversation with
Beverly Guy-Sheftall*

LEC: It's like you say, no political economy taking place, no political economy is taking place, no political economy analysis is taking place then nothing can—because all of these separate identities and stuff, this has to be the foundation of it—political economy foundation. How do we talk about sexualities and the multiplicity of changes and levels and differences that I now have a particular gender pronoun or no gender pronoun, without understanding the foundation of political economy?

CTM: Okay, people, I think we're going to stop. Thank you so much!

BGS: Ok!

57:48

Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.