



Favianna Rodriguez

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LEC: Well, Favianna we're so happy that you could do this. Seriously, we're really grateful that you could do this with us. We know that you're really busy and you don't have a lot of time but we appreciate whatever time you can give us.

FR: Thank you.

LEC: And you were talking with Chandra before so she told you basically what the project is about and the questions and so on. So we just want to begin.

CTM: Yeah, first we have to say we're talking to Favianna Rodriguez and it's the twelfth of November 2016. Okay.

LEC: We always have to put the date and the time.

CTM: Yes. Okay.

LEC: And so we wanted to start with you telling us basically about your coming to feminism and the kind of work you're doing, your story.

FR: Okay so thank you so much for having me. So how I came to feminism – that's a hard question because it's really about thinking about when I was conscious enough to understand that I was being viewed in a certain way and that as my body was changing I was being looked at differently. So I would say – I got my period at nine years old and I was one of those young women who grew faster than everyone and who had bigger boobs than everyone and I was always taller than everyone and I was one of the few Latinas in my class and my parents mostly spoke Spanish to me. So I always felt out of place. I felt like I really didn't quite know how I felt into American

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culture. I knew I had been born here but I had a lot of identity questions because I didn't really see myself reflected. I didn't even know my history. I just knew that my family was from Peru but I had no reference of what Peru could be like. The only reference that I did have around me was that of white beauty. That there was only one way to be beautiful. So as I was being aware that I actually even cared about how I looked and started noticing my hair getting really curly. I started to be aware that I was being watched and not just by my classmates or my teachers but even by my family. When I first got my period I definitely remember feeling a lot of shame about it. I remember that the way that blood was looked at was I had to roll it up in a tissue and hide it. So when I think about when I came onto feminism I would say that it was in my teenage years because if I were to think of my childhood – my childhood was very painful precisely because I didn't really have any positive references. So on the contrary, I didn't like myself. I couldn't understand how to style my hair. I remember staining my uniform pants with blood and really not knowing what to do about it. And as a teenager when I started noticing Cholas, you know, Cholas who were like the more gangster women. I was like wow they really have a lot of pride and yet my teachers would treat them like they were criminals but part of what I liked about them was that they didn't care. They didn't care about that beauty standard. And I would say that's when I began to understand the power of loving yourself and feeling really proud and I remember the first Chola that I really looked up to, she was really tall and large, she was Salvadorian and her hair was like super afro and for me – I've always had curly hair, my hair was always poofy so I was like wow and she wore really dark lipstick and that's when I began to for the first time see someone empowered. And I would say that that was for me the beginning of feminism in my life. My mother has always been the head of the household, she's always made more money than my father. She was always the one to run the house. My father never tried to take power away from her. He seceded to her power and on the contrary he was the domestic person. He would pick us up and he would take me to my programs. So in that way I would say when it comes to my identity, although I was very confused, I had a great model to see. And when I began to understand feminism in high school – from there it was almost like exponential that I knew that this was who I wanted to be.

LEC: Interesting.

CTM: So how – so that's one piece of your genealogy. What you actually do which is so extraordinary is that you're an artist who speaks about justice through the art that you create.

LEC: Feminist art.

CTM: Feminist art specifically. So talk a little bit about that, how did you come to that?

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FR: Well because I had a family who really – my parents really encouraged me to do anything that I wanted to do. I would say that most of the messages I received externally were very negative and were very much undermining who I was. But my mother and my father were very much like you are gonna do what you wanna do, we're going to support you-

CTM: Are you an only child?

FR: No, I'm one of three. But we only grew up – I only grew up with my younger brother. My older brother, had been adopted out and he didn't find us until he was 31 so I didn't even know he existed. So I was always treated as the oldest and early on I started making things as early as 8 and my mom would encourage me to submit my art to contests like the Spanish language contest, fsf contest and I would always win. And my teachers would tell my mom that I was very gifted and I was very creative and I always wanted to make stuff. So my mom made a deal with me that if I got really good grades then I could go to after school art class because school time was for math and science. So I did really well in school so my teachers would just let me go to the art room and just be by myself. For me expressing myself was a means to have some control and to really make things that I felt good about because I don't – I wasn't learning anything that was about my own history. I remember always knowing that I was brown and knowing that the white kids saw me as different, that my white teacher saw me as different but in high school when I got to the 9th grade and I saw for the first time, because I was in catholic school up until the beginning of high school and then I saw people – so many Latinos! So many Latinos! And I began to take pride in it and I started the first Latino club at my high school and I remember even challenging the administration because they would profile, I mean this was the 90s, they were profiling Latino students. And I really took joy in understanding – oh this is the Aztec calendar, wow I've never seen anything like it. All these symbols that really made me feel present, made me feel valued. More things that I began to attach to and when I saw a poster by Yolanda Lopez, her poster said – it had a man ripping up papers and it said "Who's the illegal alien, pilgrim?". And when I saw that I was like wow they are challenging white people. I couldn't – I knew then that I really wanted to be an artist because first I didn't even know a woman had done that poster but second I felt so empowered just by seeing an image and I knew that for me it just really lined up. I liked to play with color and that's how I became an artist and I think for me I'm an artist because I want to be seen. I want to exist this I want to create things that validate and reinforce what I look like, who I am, all the experiences I've lived through. That's why my art is about food justice or gentrification because I didn't have access to those things to really feel like I existed.

There was no reflection back and so for me it's important to make objects that reflect back who – what I wish I would've seen.

CTM: And also, then for the communities-

FR: Absolutely.

CTM: -That you've come to care about who are also-

FR: Yeah, because I realize that there's husbands, millions of girls who go through this. Children who just don't see themselves in a complex –

LEC: That's right.

FR: In a complicated way, multidimensional way because I do remember when we saw one documentary about Peru I would get teased because people would say 'oh, your people they're all burros' or this very limited two-dimensional version of who we were. Or we were just seen as Cholos or as people who like low riders or even just as Mexicans. My family was not from Mexico, my family was from Peru. I'm an AfroPeruvian woman, AfroPeruvian American woman and the complexity of that was always invisible. So I always, when I make art, I think about the fact that people will have a reference that is big and wide and expansive. For me, my only reference as a sixteen year old was Frida Khalo. I would tell my teachers I want to be an artist and they would say here's Matisse and Picasso and Rembrandt. I know so many white male European artists and it's just a shame because, you know, I'm like-

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LEC: You're thinking who are they? [Laughter]

FR: Yeah and then when I finally found out who Frida was that was an amazingly empowering experience but it shouldn't just be one person.

CTM: [Shows Frida Khalo phone-case to FR]

FR: Oh! Cool.

CTM: One of my favorites too.

LEC: So making art then was liberating for you?

FR: Oh yes. Always liberating.

LEC: It was like a self-emancipation thing.

FR: It was and I think that since I had also a very bossy mom who wanted me to go into math and science and that's how I was groomed. For me art school was never an

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option because I couldn't take art in high school. So if you don't take art in high school there's no way you can go to art school. So when I finally got to UC Berkeley, the university, I realized that I was living by my parents' desires and the academic world just felt so oppressive to me and when I would think about going to art school that was just not doable. Not only that, when I looked at the art department it was just all white kids, white teachers. So I decided to drop out of school but for me I think art is not only a – it's about loving myself and creating things that are about my experiences and thus about my community but it is also a way to be free because being an artist gives me almost like a license to be wild and expressive and to create things that are just very deep and reflective.

CTM: So is it something – is your work something that's solitary?

FR: Sometimes, yes. And I think that my mom and my dad always wanted me to have children and they always ask me that. I'm thirty-eight years old now and they don't ask me that but I have never been inclined, I've never felt in my body that I wanted – in fact I've had two abortions in my life. I know I don't want to have children and I feel like my art is such a gift because I'm investing in the future because these are also objects and things that will live beyond me and I feel so committed to that. Precisely because of racism and inequality. I think people don't understand how much it messes with our sense of self when you really don't have any kind of reference point. Culture, the culture around us when it doesn't reflect us it's very damaging. Not just that, the culture around us tells us how to have relationships, it tells us you're just here to be a mom, you're just here to be a wife and so for me-

CTM: To have babies.

FR: Yeah to have babies and so for me it's been the act of also being about myself is actually – I'm the first generation that can do that in my line of family and that's a really courageous thing. SO yes I would say it is a solitary thing but the individual unit makes up the community. And I very much, I think that also we're all – we all have a relationship to each other just because we're in the natural world and I think also artists sometimes need to really lose their mind a little bit. They just need to try things. They just need to do things that other people haven't done and be unapologetic about it.

CTM: It sounds so wonderful Favianna. I'm sitting here thinking why am I an academic?

LEC: Because you're not an artist.

All: [Laughter]

CTM: Yeah because what's amazing just hearing you is the fact is it's so clear how liberating this is for you

FR: Yeah and also I think for me, you know, you live in a capitalist world we have to – I was actually just in Mexico and Peru and I was realizing how much living in the United States of America made me feel that I always had to be productive and this is not what humans are here for. We're not built to just be a productive species and I was realizing wow my art, in a way, has given me the ability to sustain myself and although it's been very tough because this is also the problem with white supremacy, white supremacy has created an environment where only kind of culture is important, only one kind of culture receives attention or legitimacy and this is the bigger issue and why I'm here to talk about at this conference is that culture and art are so critical to the imagination and yet we don't value it. We see – I don't believe that in our – not in academia, not in social justice do we really value cultural power and that those who hold cultural power are still white guys.

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FR: So me as an artist, if I want to ascend and I want my work to be recognized, the level of hardships and obstacles I'm going to face is a consequence of white supremacy. Those white male critics will never – it would be very hard for them to understand what I do. The people at the museums who run the collections are not going to include me in their shows. The people who direct the publications. I mean at every single level where there has to be recognition or research into my work and the work of many women of color, it's just not there. So in every single – in all of the arts, it's music, it's performance, it's visual art. So I also think that the fact that I've been able to sustain myself is a tremendous – I'm very proud of that and it's always an ongoing battle and what I think needs to happen is we have to understand that art is what touches our hearts right? And that these institutions who art setting the tone, I mean these white people who voted for Donald Trump they- the reason also why white supremacy, they continue is because this is what culture is giving them. They do not understand our stories because our narratives are not in pop culture. So over the next ten, twenty years artists like myself have to create, continue to create narratives but we need avenues of distribution. We need people to write about what we're doing, people to understand it, break it down, support it, invest in it. And when I was in Mexico I was just thinking wow the lifestyle here is so different and I don't feel like I'm in a rat race, it just doesn't feel the same. I was thinking to myself that I'm so grateful that I have my gift of art because I could never go work for a white boss who is going to tell me to go have a 9 to 5. I just couldn't. so for me the art is not just healing but it's also a way to have freedom. Because I can make my work and frankly I mean, the generation before me could not do that. It was really hard.

CTM: So are there other people, do you see yourself within a community of feminists of color or artists?

FR: Absolutely. I see myself in a really amazing community made up of social justice workers, academics, teachers, students, organizers. I'm part of that community and I see myself in a community of artists who are taking on social change. Sadly, very sadly I'm part of a very small community of women of color artists and the truth is that the economic opportunity to women of color artists is very limited just like to migrant artists, just like to queer artists. This is the reality of our time. So when I think about the few other Latina artists who are in my generation it's tough because you realize how much more we have to go and that we're looking at the consequences of inequality.

LEC: I just wanted to wrap the last couple of things we have together. So the first part of it is how do you see the work impacting communities and what do you envision for the future, how this work is going?

FR: Well first I see it impacting on many levels. First when I see children look at my faces and they see the indigenous features, the African features, I see something click in them. I also see them have a positive association with who they are and I see them have curiosity. When I see women or moms interact with my work or girls or teenagers that's when people like, you know, lose their shit in a really positive way. Like I've taken my pussy power stickers and handed them out to young women in Mexico and they're just like 'Oh my God! Oh my God!' and so I think that for me it's really interesting to see someone – it's so amazing how a symbol or even just a set of words can really touch words so I see that one: people feel seen. I also think that people see something differently than they hadn't seen before. I've seen my work be used across the country, across the world so I definitely – what I think it is, it comes down to is that people see their stories reflected. And you also have a moment where you get to see that on a wall or on a street and that's empowering.

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LEC: Or on a website.

FR: Yeah. Exactly and there is something that happens to your heart. And so what I want to do is I want to create more of that and I want to think about how to create it in a multidisciplinary way. So for example, when I came out about my abortion I didn't realize, because I've always been a visual artist, but I didn't realize that part of being an artist is also performative and that you are sharing a story in order to give permission to other people to share their stories, you're holding space for that. I began to understand that my work is multidisciplinary and a lot of what I also need to do,

precisely because very few people study my work, that I have to know my work, I have to be able to talk about it, I have to understand its influences. So that's helped me really create almost – it's forced me to be able to be a public speaker. It's given me the ability to really think about what story I want to tell here. This is not just about one body of work, this is narrative, this is a larger story about courage and self-determination. So for the future I really want to look at how I can continue to tell these stories in ways that feel differently. Whether that's – now I'm working with textiles, I'm thinking about also how to create environments. Not just a piece but a place where you walk into and we engage in group discussions or we think about how we connect and heal to each other because a lot of my work is about transformation because as I've been able to share my story something has happened. And I've changed. I feel like I'm constantly changing precisely because I'm having these public conversations where people tell me how they're feeling about a particular image. And of course I'm always in collaboration with social movements so there's always a lot of change happening and learning. So I want to continue doing that and I also feel that I want to normalize the experiences of women of color. So when people say that I'm a political artist or I'm a Latina artist, I mean, to me I think that I'm an artist and what I'm doing has a universal value because our stories are human stories so I want to really get out of my comfort zone and reach people who really maybe have- who never even had an interaction with someone who's Latina and who's had two abortions because I think that's where the real work is. I think that when people really begin to understand who we are, I think that's how you dismantle hate. People have to humanize you. So I'm interested in thinking about, besides visual art, what are the other mechanisms to help people understand these human stories and to also say we're a very complex people and in the culture around us white men are shown as complex people. They can be in outer space or they can fall in love with a computer. They can have swords or be with dinosaurs, they can do anything and yet people of color are not shown in those ways. So I want to show a complicated way of what women of color can do in order to show we're a really - we're a very complicated, complex people and racism has taught other people to view us in this very limited way and it's turned into bad, bad policy but I want to think about all the other ways in which I can reach people's hearts and minds and really undo white supremacy.

CTM: What a wonderful place to start.

LEC: It's clear that our other pieces would've been how do you see that going forward-

CTM: But you just did all of that. I just want to say that what's so interesting is the way you're now talking about telling stories because telling stories is something, I think, many of us who do social justice work have to do and to tell multiple and

alternative stories and then to normalize them in such a way that they're not always marginal, the stories.

FR: Yes. Exactly!

CTM: So it's wonderful because now you can see how we're doing these things in different arenas and the arena that you've chosen where you have a gift to do it because of your very deep thoughtfulness about what is is you're doing and why you're doing it, the stories are going to be really speaking

LEC: They're stories of self-empowerment.

CTM: Yeah. And liberation.

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LEC: And liberation and how you have empowered yourself. How you have emancipated yourself from certain kinds of prisons and that they like little kids you were saying when they see the art you see it lighting up their faces because they can see the message as well for their own liberation and emancipation and self-empowerment. Great work.

FR: Emancipation, I love that word. Thank you so much.

CTM and LEC: Thank you

CTM: It was wonderful to talk to you.

FR: Thank you! Thank you so much. That was a lot of fun!

CTM: Wasn't it? Good! Good! For us too right?

LEC: Yeah. That was good.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors

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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.