



Gail Lewis

04/25/22

[00:00:17]

CTM: Well—*[laughs]*—Gail ... Hello!

GL: Finally.

CTM: We have—I know, finally. We have Gail Lewis with us, who is an old, old friend. From, I don't know ... How many decades, right? For both of us. We are delighted to have you here. Now, today doing this—

GL: Thank you, pleasure to be here.

CTM: —Conversation. So welcome!

GL: Thank you.

CTM: And today is—what date is today?

LEC: 26Th.

CTM: Today's the 26th—

LEC: No, no.

GL: 25th

CTM: Today is the 25th of April. And you give us permission to use this video once—

GL: I do, yeah.

CTM: Okay? Thank you. So you want to start? Should I start?

LEC: Okay. So, Gail, the way we do these is we say, we start out by asking, tell us how you came to feminist practice, the work you do now, and that trajectory?

GL: Okay. I'll try to ... Seems it's so long now, as you say, many decades. But actually I think I would always start this with two places. One is almost classically, in the kitchen, watching mother and grandmother perform their gendered labors, but also watching how they were treated by the men in their lives. And having a sense that, I mean, it's all retrospective a sense that something a bit odd about this. These strong women, you know? And there's something a bit odd. Not just questions, not really understanding, but a sense a sense of something. And I think that stayed with me as an unarticulated question. Well, through till now. Really, you know, how does one explain it? And we're always struggling towards a collective way of producing ways of understanding this. So I think that's traveled with me through my life really. I became, I think, much more articulate in talking about an anti-racist politics in the context of a profoundly racist Britain. Much more quickly than I did become articulate in a feminist language. But the starting point for me with feminism as something that I might claim and might gesture towards, as opposed to saying that belongs to white women, I was in Sri Lanka—you know this Chandra—I was living in Sri Lanka for a year. I was married to this white guy who I'd met when I was working as a, just a regular over the counter library person in a university, you know, filing the books and putting them back on the shelves. He was a student and he was gonna do a Ph.D. He was a zoologist. He was gonna do a Ph.D. In Sri Lanka on a particular kind of macaque, which is a monkey, that's only found in Sri Lanka. So we went to live there for a year.

And it was there that I met Sri Lankan women. What's so strange is I can see their faces. I haven't got a clue their names or where they would be now or anything. I think of them. But don't know. And it was them who gradually sort of said to me, "but what do you mean? You know, you say that you are an anti-imperialist, You think there isn't a gender struggle as part of that? You're gonna seed this to white British women? This makes no sense. You know, it makes no sense." So there was a way in which they kind of introduced me to the need to think through an anti-racism and anti-imperialist politics that had a gender analysis as central to it as well. That you couldn't seed that. And if you did seed that, then actually there was something diminished in your anti-imperialism and your anti-racism. And they were activists. And they were artists. So they were producing cultural artifacts that were in opposition, often. I remember one woman was a sculptor and the figures of a woman's body that she would produce through her work with clay and stone, she worked with ... were just extraordinary. Then you see a woman's body differently, too. So it was just an eye-opening thing.

CTM: So when was that? 1970s?

[00:05:04]

GL: Yeah, it was 1974. It was the year of 1974. So then I decided I would come back to London, cause I decided that I thought maybe I wanted to try and go to university. So I had to do my A levels, finish my high school in a sense too. Cause I hadn't done that in order to go to university. It was then that I first sort of started to think, "oh, well maybe I'll go to a feminist conference." I remember I did go to a feminist conference, it was called, I think it was called the London Patriarchies Papers conference, Something like that. When already that tells you that that's not open to women laboring in—[laughs]—you know, in the working

women's charter organization, for example. But was an organization of Black, white, Asian, all working class women, working to a working women's charter was a set of demands for the conditions and pay of women in working class jobs. So that was an organization that I came to know of. And at this conference it was, well, I don't know, I don't remember seeing any other Black woman or women of color. Maybe there was one or two. I don't remember. But if there were, I would imagine I would've become friends with them. Cause that's what happened in those places.

And it was kind of, well it was two things. One was, it was quite interesting because there was a way in which they were thinking, trying to theorize a gendered economy, a gendered dynamic, a gendered social formation called Britain in the mid 1970s. It's just before Thatcher. But in major economic crisis and ... not a hint of questions of who were the working women in this town of London. What were their relationships to the imperial metropole, were they Black or white? What was an anti-racist politics? Not a hint. I do remember sort of saying, I wonder at one of the workshops, you know, do you think about those questions? Cause I was a new girl kind of thing. And somebody started talking about being brought up in Kenya by a white colonial parent and knowing Afrikaans. I mean, it was just extraordinary.

CTM: Terrible.

GL: Just extraordinary. So quite soon after that, I then sought out the Brixton Black Women's Group.

CTM: And when was the Brixton Black Women's Group formed?

GL: So the Brixton Black Women's Group was formed—I think it was formed in something like 1976. And it emerged from a group of sisters who were involved in the Panthers and maybe the Black Unity and Freedom Party. So some of the Black organizations, radical Black organizations. I'm calling this from memory now in Brixton and thinking we need to have a space in which we think about the situation for us as women. And they were a reading group that the group used to meet in Sabaar Bookshop. But it was either on Atlantic Avenue or Railton Road, one of those right in the center of Brixton in Sabaar Bookshop and study, pay attention. And that studying meant reading, you know, an anti-imperialist text from the colonial struggle as much as anything. Making links to the Caribbean, of course. But also to the continent those, to a particular, at that point. And the group formed out of those women in kind of a caucus within those organizations. And then they formed the Brixton Black Women's Group. I joined it because I did make it to university. I was at LSE and I was, I mean literally walking up the stairs.

CTM: So LSE is—

GL: London School of Economics, Sorry. Yeah. Walking up the stairs and looked at this Black woman coming down the stairs and saying, Girlan. And it was Girlan Dean, a sister who's significance to Black women's politics and to the Black struggle more generally in Britain, is so under named and under-recognized that it's criminal. She was absolutely central

to so many things. So many things. And including, I had first met Girlan many years before, actually when I was a teenager. A teenager. It was in a part of London, West London called the Harrow Road, which is near Ladbroke Grove. Well it's actually near North Kensington, which is much more a working class bit of Ladbroke Grove. Cause Ladbroke Grove is thought of as Notting Hill and all of that. So Girlan was a youth worker and in the late sixties she was forming girls groups, which became effectively Black girls groups within the youth worker community, organizing infrastructure, knowing that youth groups were needed. But youth groups tended to be for boys and the girls needed something too. So Girlan all at that time, early in the late sixties, was forming these groups. And I'd met her then and she'd taken me to the West Indian Student Center to hear people like Stokely, people like Penny Jackson ... you know, that kind of stuff. I didn't know there was a thing called West Indian Student Center cause I didn't know I could be a student, if you see what I mean. So she took me to that. And so gradually I'm introduced to a whole world with an infrastructure, something like West Indian Student Center, something like the bookshops, you know, something like the ways in which the bookshops are then going to link into the book festivals—

[00:11:32]

LEC: And the activism around it ...

CTM: The whole world opens—

GL: —and the whole world opens up! But Girlan said, yeah, come to the Brixton group. So I joined the Brixton group and I joined the Brixton group in I think it was something like 1978. Something like that. So that was kind of my route. But it was being in an ex-imperial site, an ex-colonial site of those women there saying "feminism doesn't belong to white girls", but more than that is part of an anti-imperialist project ... and we have a responsibility to think how they come together.

CTM: It's so interesting that you talk about seeing the significance of gender in Sri Lanka, you know, which is an origin story, which is very unusual.

GL: Exactly. But I bet you more common—[laughs]—it's not told.

CTM: Absolutely, yeah.

GL: The thing about it was, of course, it helped me to begin to think, oh, okay. So I do know I had very early on, I developed an understanding that my households, two households, one in Kilburn mother and father, so white English mother, Jamaican father, being a migrant, sort of Windrush generation. And everybody else in that household, apart from my mom, being from the Caribbean—cause it was tenements—and every, everybody else, right? So there I was in this Black household, and then with my maternal grandmother—cause my Jamaican grandmother hadn't come yet—my maternal grandmother, who was very significant in my life in a working class suburbs outside. So these two households where I was trying to fathom these gender dynamics. The Sri Lankan women began to help me to see, you know what, even in your kitchen, even around your dinner tables ... you have all the elements. It's

formed, it's a so-called multiracial household, in one sense. Racism from one household, from my mother's father ... travels into the household with mom and dad. Everybody knew that he was a complete racist to chuck mom out and all that kind of stuff. So racism is structuring our dynamics, and that's in complete articulation with a structuring of class and gender. It's not that I could narrate it, but the women there helped me to see, but it's all comes together now. It all comes together in a single place. And our job is in—wherever we are—our job is to pay attention and to try to understand it. But you can't do that alone. You've got to do it in conversation and concert. Exactly. In action with others. And that was it. And I was an activist, I was propelled towards activism anyway. So I was involved in all sorts of anti-racist stuff. But increasingly trying to bring in the feminism with the anti-racism.

CTM: So just talk a little bit about the sort of high points of this kind of activist journey that was clearly connected to the way you were framing your analysis of how power functions in Britain at that time. And also sort of the development of all of the ways in which Black becomes constructed in Britain. And then the feminist engagements with some of that.

GL: I suppose high points are Brixton Black Women's Group, Haringey Black Sisters. Halston Asian Women's Center Sisters ... Aawaz—

CTM: Okay, spell that out

GL: Okay, aawaz ... means ... forward? What does it mean?

[00:15:42]

CTM: Aawaz? Aawaz means voice.

GL: Voice, okay. So that was an Asian women's organization with some of the sisters from South London. And Amrit Wilson, for example, and it's interesting. I'm not calling SBS, Southall Black sisters, here. And yet they must have been involved in it from the beginning. And yet, I don't know if they were in deciding, Oh and African Red Family and Black students ... African and Black Student Society of UK or something. Those women from those organizations came together to form OWAAD, the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. Originally in the conversations through African Red Family and through the Black Students Organization, we had a lot of sisters who were involved in liberation struggles on the continent, in those conversations. So originally we were gonna be called the National Black Women's Organization. Now, we didn't not call it that only because of Asian sisters being involved. We didn't call it the National Black Women's Organization because basically, long story short, Black meant nothing to sisters from the continent. Black is meaningful. If you come from a white society So for the sisters from Zimbabwe and South Africa, "Totally, yeah! We are Black, da da da," But the sisters from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, you know, Black is nothing to do. That's what they wanna call us. We're not Black, we are whatever. And that was a mix of whatever—

CTM: Yeah, we are from here, there—

GL: Yeah. And that was a mix. So why would we name ourselves that? So there was a really interesting conversation between sisters from certain parts of the continent and sisters from the diaspora about what's the meaning of Black? So that was one thing.

CTM: And this is when? 70s?

GL: Yeah. This is when we were having early conversations before we called it OWAAD. So it's like 1978 or—we have to look up when the first conference was. And it was the year and 18 months before that.

CTM: I see. Okay.

GL: So then it was like, okay, so let's call ourselves then Organisation of Women of African and African Descent. That was the first. But then we realized, hold on a minute we're excising a whole group of women as well. And that was quite complicated. And I shouldn't really talk for Avtar Brah on this case. But because Avtar was, was and still is so identified as yes, as Asian, but from Africa [*Laughs*] ... the Africa something to her, for example, but not to many. So then we said, "no, we've got all these sisters, South Asian sisters." So we then changed it to Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent. So that was the—but it's an interesting history of the naming because it also shows—well it shows two things, doesn't it? One is the complicated trajectories of a name when you root that through the gendered imperial logics, and locate those geographically—because it's meaningful in one sense and not in another. But it's also absolutely an example of a process of a becoming "we". It was nothing automatic. We got together because we had a political vision that we had to oppose, from the British state in all kinds of ways. Whether that's through its imperial practice continually, or its racist gendered practices at home, as it were. But it's also, we were forming a "we" under which we could convene ... through the discussions about what's a meaningful way to name ourselves? A way that speaks to both our histories, but also our visions. So that's a really important moment. Then the question of Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent was really, really crucial too. And yet calling ourselves Black feminists, so convening under a sign of Black, as well as feminists was really important because we were able to make material really, to really manifest the disconnection between skin body morphology as the foundation of a politics. It's not linked to some physicality in that way. But do so in a way that could hold—even as we were trying to understand and articulate them more precisely—the connections between us through this "we're here because you were there—"

[00:21:10]

CTM: There, absolutely.

GL: That thing that joined us together about a common—but not a sameness a common experience of Britain as a colonial, racist, misogynistic, patriarchal, racial capitalist society and how that played out. We could hold that, but we could do so in a way that didn't want to reduce us to all the same. And we could still then form something called a Black feminist

politics because we were trying to signal the renamings. The possibility of a renamings. And that kind of idea of Black, which I suppose in this country equates a bit like to women of color, i.e. there's nothing automatic about a woman of color feminism. It's gotta be made. But it's trying to bring together a number of threads. I guess it's the same, you guys will tell me that. But we were trying to do that because it felt so, so important not to be divided. So long as we could hold onto trying to understand—ever increasingly—the specificities of the ways in which what we now call normative womanhoods and normative masculinities, etc., were playing out and impacting on us deleteriously with bad effects because we could never live up to them. And erasing all the ways in which we knew to do gender differently. So two, we were trying to make sure that we could hold onto an understanding that this was within racial capitalism. It was within capitalism and that class was absolutely crucial. Cause we were only in the country because we were recruited as surplus labor. And we became ever increasingly surplus population. So I would, I'll kind of just do a little backup here. I would say that the surplus population that we were in the 60s and 70s when we were recruited as laborers ... the character of our surplusness changed once we got across all the increasing imposition of immigration legislation and nationality legislation that both kept attempting to keep us out of the country,—make sure we couldn't get across the borders—and through nationality, couldn't become citizens. So it repositioned us in terms of the national state and the imaginaries and increasingly tried to recode us as illegitimate. So not once former commonwealth citizens who had a right to come. But increasingly immigrants who were trying to take what the Brits had, to cheat and get welfare resources, take our jobs and all that kind—and then ever more increasingly, not even kind of cheating, but illegals, increasingly. So once you start shifting into that ... then the character of our surplusness, in a sense, isn't about labor anymore. Cause we're not coming as laborers. It's about surplus population in its totality, therefore surplus in the ways in which we can reproduce ourselves with a claim to Britishness. And once you get into reproduction, you're into a gender terrain profoundly.

CTM: The reproduction was important because it would mean, eventually, a claim on citizenship.

LEC: Because the reproduction is a part of the process of social production. If they don't want to acknowledge you as the laborers or from wherever outside of Britain, but it is that labor that they depend on through the reproductive nature of it. So the ones who are being born British are caught up in that.

GL: It's that, but then of course the people who are being born British now, because of what's happening with the global restructuring and capital locating those kinds of jobs in different places ... then we are not being produced to be laborers. we're being produced as surplus, but we are needed to be surplus as well because we are the constitutive outside of what constitutes the real proper inside of Britain, even in its transformations now under Thatcherism, where the social settlement of the post-2nd world war and the welfare settlement is being absolutely eroded. So the attack on the working class, and so who can the working class blame? All you illegals, all you've come here to take not just our jobs, but to take our culture, to take what it means to be British. To take the greatness out of Great Britain. You know, which is what the Brexit—

[00:26:39]

CTM: Toast with ketchup? *[Laughter.]* Sorry. *[Laughs.]*

LEC: But this is complicated, no?

GL: Yeah, it might, sorry ...

LEC: No, I mean, really this is really complicated because at the same time that you are having this collective struggle of peoples from the Global South who are now recognizing what's happening that's making them alien in a place that should be theirs, and whose labor is central to the growth and.

CTM: Prosperity of the nation.

LEC: Prosperity of that nation...trying to forge a kind of collective struggle. But it can't be on the basis of sameness in that struggle. So that unity is not there. And at the same time, the state is trying to divide and conquer.

GL: Absolutely. And it's trying to do it by mobilizing a discourse of ethnicity and multiculturalism. So suddenly it's about, "oh yes, okay, we'll promote you getting better community-based resources. But you have to apply for it on the basis of your ethnic origin" So Black groups apply for services to support the Caribbean services. African organizations must apply to service Africans So black, even old style Black ... Muslim women must get services to teach them to speak English because they're the ones who refuse to speak English, whereas Indian women, who are thought of as not Muslim, can get supportive services to help them to make sure that they're not getting violated in abusive homes.

CTM: Yeah. That there is no child marriage and violence in the home.

GL: All of that. Exactly. All of that. So there's a way in which a kind of state strategy of, and state, both at central level and at metropolitan level, that's kind of regional level—doesn't happen so much now cause they've actually got rid of the metropolitan authorities—is now then kind of dispersing funds to community organizations to help promote the development of services for specific groups on the basis of ethnic origin.

LEC: So some become more important than others.

GL: Some become more important and we break up—.

CTM: And they break up, the whole coalition around Black ... *[cross-talk 00:29:10]*

GL: But feminists, even within that feminist and people—this is my view, I might be wrong, but feminists and people in the labor movement, the trade union struggle held onto that old notion of Black longer than anywhere else. Certainly longer than any of the brothers did in

the organization. Definitely. Who could be pulled so easily into the framework of the kind of masculinist, nationalist discourses of the now post-independence governments back home. That's what they could get pulled towards. So we held onto it for long enough, but we also lost it. And partly, I think we lost it because—and maybe this is another ... it's a high moment in the sense it's an important moment but a low moment when as we began to narrate our histories as feminists organizing under the sign Black, we began to say we failed on the basis of sexuality in particular. To some extent on the basis of the specificity of cultural difference i.e. that Black eroded the specificity of particular kinds of Asian culture, per say, and that was important. Culture can be an important resource for mobilizing an anti-oppressive practice, we got caught on that. But it was also apparently on the basis of sexuality that we were unable as a contingency called Black feminists to really take on the question of lesbianism. I was—

[00:31:04]

CTM: Early 80's, mid-80's?

GL: Yeah, no, this is more mid 80's into the nineties. And it's funny, I still find myself in such a contradictory relationship to that in a sense, cause I was one of the first cause I was the older generation. I was the one who was out. Some of the young ones were coming up behind me. Some of the sisters of my same generation were in same sex relationships, but not out, per say. I disagreed with the call for separate Black lesbian groups at that time. I personally disagreed for two reasons—I think I was wrong ... but you can see my hesitancy is still a little bit unsure. I've never really been able to have the full collective conversation about it. But I know why I was concerned about it. One was, although it had sometimes been very lonely to be the only out lesbian woman in Brixton Black Women's Group. Cause sometimes sisters could feel a little bit ... "it's fine Gail, but don't let people in the community know because duh duh da." And I knew that people in the community, there was all sorts of out lesbians and gay men in the community *[laughs]*. But nevertheless, so there was that concern, it could be lonely. But I think there were two reasons that led to my hesitancy. One was a good reason. One was a bad reason. The good reason was I thought, "we need to hold on on how to work together and know each other in our differences and still be together. Now, there's no reason why you couldn't be out in the Black lesbian group or the ZAMI conferences and do that, but it felt like a fracturing.

And I suppose, for me, it was like I would, where would I go? It was very personally driven at some level. But there was that. But the bad reason is, you have to remember, I'd come up through Leninism *[laughs]*. And that way of thinking, which now is gone but at that time was still around was ... but hang on a minute. There's the leadership, there's the thinking head ... and the jokes must follow *[Laughter.] [Cross-talk 00:33:30]* That kind of Leninist mindset was around for me. And I only came to understand that later and think, "Oh, that's why you did that nonsense about the arguing against that." You know, it was not right. But just to say, so there was something about could we really embrace our lesbian women and bisexual women and gay men in a way that still felt was central to our politics as Black feminists? Could we do that? And increasingly, there was an ability to do so ... but it felt like—the

young sisters will tell you that's why OWAAD fell apart. And I'm still not sure that that's the whole answer. I think it was part of it. But if I think about some of the sisters who formed ZAMI, for example ... they were still committed to OWAAD. They were still committed to us doing something under the big umbrella sign of the national.

But that we could do it through chapters as it were. I think we, part of our project for the future must be to say, "can we go back and really think about what happened? How would we understand this now?" So that it's not for just reminiscence's sake, it's so that we can say when we come to yet another moment—which we have around trans—where there's a big issue in the—[gestures]—that's pulling us at the seams of our analytic frameworks, of what we think our project is. Can we learn from that moment so that we don't just slip into an easy answer of "here's the problem ... ", and rather say, "what are we being called upon to think about and to live in our practice that feels unbearable, and so we fracture?" Because I think sometimes that's what happened. Rather than say, we could go two ways with that question, what are we being called upon to think about, and have an analytic frame for, and live in our practice. We can either help each other to do the living or we can walk away from each other. And I think that's, that was one of those moments. And I think we're in another moment now around some of the trans stuff and maybe that history can help us.

[00:36:11]

CTM: Yeah. It's amazing because you've talked about, you've responded to some of the things we were gonna ask you about already ... about what were some of the challenges and what were some of the difficulties—.

LEC: And the solidarity question ...

CTM: And the solidarity ... the reason I think this history that you just mapped in Britain is so important is because it is really very different from histories of Black feminist politics in the U.S. Which I think also in the 1970s were far more left and internationalist. And they evolved into different spaces. So I think that this, to me, it's always been really important to think about how in the 80's, there was that formation which was really about "we are here because you were there". It was just so—and that is such a clear analytic understanding of that's what binds us together, that's what makes us struggle...have things in common, that we need to be there for each other.

GL: And you know, the thing is ... I think we were in that sense, we were good ancestors in the making. Because I think that—I suppose we might not call it anti-imperialist now, they would call it diasporic. But that diaspora space to invoke Avtar a bit. The sense of a feminist practice that is both informed by the legacies of struggle—not just in Britain but in our places of origin—is absolutely—is just bread and butter to the young ones. And the young ones where I think that the energy for the work is coming out in all forms of artistic practice, that's where the energy is. Extraordinary stuff is going on in sound making, in filmmaking in sculptures, in dance, in performance stuff. Just extraordinary. And the call to ... not a place of origin. But a heritage, an ancestral that informs ... well, that has to be discovered cuz it's not

just just available We have to find it. But that informs where we might go. And is layered into the cultural artifacts that we're trying to produce, is absolutely there. And it's not the same slogan that mobilizes it and that kind of stuff. But the same sentiment, the same kind of political vision, the same sense of ... we may be in Britain and people do use a term that I never use, which is Black British feminism.

But when you probe beneath that they really mean Black feminism in Britain that has all these roots of legacy into it that feed it from the continent, from South Asia, from First Nation communities, from the Caribbean, from African-Americans, from Latinx from across feeding and trying to make so—and from Arab feminisms, South American feminism, because of the links that we used to have with Chile and El Salvador and all that. We were all part of the summit called Black feminism and that we have left the heritage. We have, and I can claim, cause I do a lot of work with some of these young artistic people, not cause I can do anything arty, but they call on me to do things with them and you can see it. Partly they're calling on it and say "when you guys did that, what did you do? How did you ... ? And we kind of think together and we create something new. So it is quite rich actually. Even though people complain it's not a movement, but there's a lot going on and we laid down a foundation well, I think.

CTM: Well I think that it's this understanding of a movement as something that's only out in the streets, is problematic.

GL: Yeah, exactly.

CTM: I mean, literally the theorizing and framing of a movement is what makes certain kinds of connections, relationships, and solidarity possible.

[00:41:08]

LEC: So Gail, what do you see as—I'm reflecting on what you said and thinking in the context of Canada, another commonwealth country of a similar kind of history ... on some levels in racism and the trickery around ethnicity and visible minorities.

GL: Yeah, exactly. Same terminology.

CTM: And mobilizing multiculturalism to undermine antiracism.

LEC: All on the part of the state to say we are one here. You know, we are not really racist. So it's those people and those people and those people who are the problem, the role of the state in this kind of structuring that happened in Britain at the same time. Because when we looked at this from Canada and saw the divisions and how they were happening, of course you're looking at the United States too and you know what that politics looked like, which was very different ... Combahee River Collective and sort of what they did. But this thing that you just described in Britain, similar in so many places where like Canada where it was a migrant population and the state was instrumental in creating divisions among those. Did something similar happen there? Because when Black took on a different meaning outside of

that split with the South Asian women ... that was really striking in Britain, really, really striking and it was really disturbing for many of us looking from the outside. Because that politics of solidarity was something that we were hopeful about.

CTM: We all looked up to!

GL: Yeah, no it's true. See it's interesting hearing it viewed from the outside as the split. Cause I don't know if—one can only say from one's own location in a sense. For me, for example, I'm always struck by the fact that Southall Black Sisters to this day call themselves Southall Black Sisters. And it is totally, I don't even know now, but fundamentally a South Asian women's organization in terms of the people who are active in it. In the earlier days there'd been some African Caribbean involved in who started it, actually. But they still call themselves Southall Black Sisters and I heard Pragna Patel do a very interesting kind of brief talk on a panel recently where she said "we mobilized the, the terminology of Black because for us, Southall Black Sisters, it was a way to absolutely avoid collusion with the kind of divide into ethnic particularisms of the South Asian kind. Pakistani, Gujarati, to avoid that, to avoid a kind of ethnic absolutism or fundamentalism that would be detrimental to our work in terms of violence against women and girls." So you could see the power of this sign, Black, for mobilizing and it's different meanings and Pragma talking about that. So I really applauded her, cause I thought that still resonates with me ... I had been very much in opposition to the political framing of say, an organization called East London Black Women's Organization, ELBOW, because for me it was too African nationalist and wouldn't, kind of picked up a kind of African nationalist thing.

We could never therefore be Black enough if you weren't from the continent itself, and the kinds of gendered politics were not up for conversation. So it was that kind of return, it felt to me ... and that's both the thing is it's both healthy and not healthy because it's both saying that we could begin to—within a terrain called Black feminism, there could be a wider landscape of analytic positions, political practices, et cetera. And still all happening in a space called Britain to try and dislodge the racism in Britain in the way. With more confidence than in the earlier days when maybe we felt we couldn't quite articulate some of those differences. So who knows, what it leads to? But it was just the split I think was often in those kinds of directions. And of course that then anchors the what's happening among Black feminists in Britain into the large, obviously the largest national stage of the U.K., but also the global stage because of what's happening with the wars on terror and the so-called Fundamentalisms and all of that that's going on post 9/11.

[00:46:41]

CTM: Right. So, okay. So last question

GL: Yeah, cause I don't know the answers to any of these *[Laughter.]*

CTM: Well no, you've answered everything we didn't need to ask questions. *[Laughs.]* But the last one is really, what do you think we need right now? What kind of feminist politics,

thinking, imagining is necessary right now, given the urgency of the moment? Both in terms of the sort of militarized carceral states and that have fundamentalist right wing state practices that we see connected globally. No longer just really separate nation states.

GL: Two things. One is the one that I've always had because I was taught by those Sri Lankan women, so well—and by my earlier inheritors as well; that unless we hold an internationalist frame, by which I mean, unless we know that we cannot know everything about everywhere. But unless we can say what I need to know about the place I'm located, where I'm charged to do the work—I'm charged to do the work here, wherever the here is for us ... in order for me to do that work, I cannot proceed in any way that's meaningful unless I can gather with me other sisters who say, "to understand our world, we need to understand that of those sisters over there in Palestine, say. And what's happening in an Israeli Zionist apartheid state and how that's linked, the security practices that happen under the name of that state is linked absolutely to the ways in which our sisters are being locked up in deportation centers up the road in Oxfordshire ... waiting to be put on a plane to be thrown back to Jamaica, or wherever. Brutalized while they're doing it, by the very same global security organizations." Unless I can understand that, et cetera, multiplied then actually, I can't even achieve the opening of my own back door into a vision of something called health and healing and freedom. Because that's the pro—we won't get the thing called freedom, but that's where we're trying to go to, that's our imaginary. And to do that, I need an internationalist understanding of how all this stuff works and the agencies involved in it. So it's states and its private global capital agencies. So like that one, Israel and deportation. So that's the one thing. And then the, the second thing I think is ... I'm gonna do three things actually. The second thing is to pay attention to the ways in which we as feminists and those who we call allies collapse into collusion with forms of framing and attending to issues about people that are not us, not me. That just reproduce their dehumanization, the violences against them ... how are we—

CTM: Colluding.

GL: Colluding with that. And at the forefront of my mind at this moment is the question of trans ... because it's such a vibrant and ferocious issue in England, more than in this country. I mean it's really, really violent. So unless we question, are we colluding with how it's being framed? How and why, why do we think that's in our interest? So I think that question. But that could, it's on trans, but it could be on anything. And the third thing is to not ever forget that we are in opposition to so much, but it's for in the service of being for something that's transformative. That we can't even imagine but we know we are trying to journey toward.

[00:51:34]

LEC: And we know it's necessary.

GL: And we know it's necessary! It's transformative because it's called something like freedom. And we were driving today and I kept seeing these banner, no what are they called ... placard things to the Underground Railway. And I thought, that's it, we're on these

Feminist Freedom Warriors

Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in conversation with Gail Lewis

underground railways, do not forget, we're journeying towards something called freedom. We may not be buried up the road, but we're gonna be journeying toward freedom and that thing about a vision of transformation ... what we're going for, not just what we're—not ever more complicated understandings of what we're against. That seems to me vital. Cause that's the healing, that's the spiritual, that's the ancestral. That's what we need.

CTM: Yeah, wonderful. At which point ... Thank you so much.

GL: Brilliant! Pleasure.

LEC: So many more things we could talk about.

CTM: I know there are, there are. There's a lot of very generative ideas, but also just ... we can talk about a lot. But thank you.

GL: Oh, pleasure! I hope it makes any sense to everybody [*Laughs.*]

LEC: [*Cross-talk 00:52:40*] That's the stuff that we have been looking at, working on, for those of us comes through different kind of feminists organizations and bodies. Like in Canada, the whole thing. I went straight there. And I'm looking and thinking of the struggles that we had and who we were thinking of being in solidarity with. You know, across the ocean. And so you all were really—.

CTM: Doing some of that stuff.

LEC: Looking at it and thinking, "wow, in some ways we looked at solutions or possible solutions differently." Even though many of us came from that same Marxist-Leninist background—[*laughter*]—and that's where the hope was. There was an answer that was almost, you know, tangible. And then you look and you say, when the state, the capitalist state is so adept at it's nasty actions. And the collusion with them is stealth, steller, like they have it down.

CTM: No exactly and so it's subtle it's multiple levels of collusion.

LEC: And they have managed to create those kinds of conditions amongst us. They're throwing crumbs and we got people scrambling. Next thing you wake up almost enemies. It's disappointing.

GL: Yeah. Okay.

LEC: Thank you.

[00:53:55 end video]