Heidi Mirza

6/23/18

[00:00:00]

CTM: Welcome. Welcome, Heidi.

HM: Welcome, Sister Chandra.

[*Laughter]*

CTM: No, we're really happy to have you here.

CTM: We're in Atlanta, Georgia, and we're really delighted you could join us for this project actually. Having known your work over many, many years, and meeting you for the first time, but also really getting this in-person opportunity to have you on our project is really fabulous. So maybe you could begin by telling us a little bit about sort of what brought you into feminist work, scholarship, activism, however you want to think about your journey.

HM: I was actually born in England but, as a baby, went to live in Trinidad where I grew up. I went to school in Trinidad, Naparima Girls' High School, which is a school that was founded by my grandmother. But on the stone of the Naparima Girls' and St. Augustine Girls', on the founder's stone, is my grandfather's name, not my grandmother's name. So that was another maybe lightbulb moment for me, that though she did that hard work, though she did the committed work, because he was a minister in the church – and remember in those days, people were converted to Christianity in order to get an education and my grandfather was one of the first local people to become a minister in the Presbyterian church, which was setup by the Canadian missionaries – even so, he was the person acknowledged, you know? So I suppose it's 'women's work that always remains invisible'.

From there, I came to England in 1973, with my father and mother and my brother. And that was another wake-up moment. I suppose there was a kind of complacency that you have growing up in an environment where you feel relatively safe. But I do

remember in Trinidad, we had a coup in the 1970s, and they called it a 'Black Power coup'. We were a tiny island but being influenced by the civil rights movement and the Black Panther movement that was in the Caribbean. You know, [it] was in America, being – influencing – Caribbean politics. I remember seeing Angela Davis on the television, and it was just an incredible moment as well, around Black politics.

LEC: And because Stokely was Trinidadian.

HM: And Stokely was Trinidadian, exactly. The Caribbean was becoming alive for the first time, politically. Even though I was a young girl, I remember watching the small black and white T.V. and I remember seeing Angela being taken in cuffs and I was thinking, "My goodness," you know? "She is who I want to be."

[Laughter]

HM: I can't believe I met her many, many years later. So, yeah, I came to England in the 1970s, and that was a time of immense racist and fascist activity. There was the National Front, openly demonstrating in the streets against migrant communities, hostile, in cahoots with the police. There were the 'sus laws', where you would be just arrested. My brother, I remember, just being dragged off by police at a whim. It was a very ugly moment, and I guess that was another awakening that I had, from being relatively cocooned in Trinidad and understanding that racism is something that, in predominately white societies, shapes your entire life. Made me then reflect back on the kind of postcolonial situation in Trinidad and how whiteness also framed that existence as well. So, yeah, in Trinidad through to England, I started to make the colonial connection around whiteness and race violence.

Went to school in South London, in Brixton, which is a place where Caribbean people go.

[00:05:40]

[Laughter]

LEC: Yeah, Brixton is Caribbean.

CTM: Yeah.

HM: Yeah, and it was a very brutal experience. When you've been in school in Trinidad, and everybody is from India, of African origin, from all around, from the different migrant groups that came into the Caribbean… to be in London, England in the 70s with this sort of brutal culture of racism and to go to a school that is largely white. There was just four of us from the Caribbean in this school. When I started that school, the headmistress said, "Well, we'll let Heidi in, but she has to, A: learn to speak English," – because I had a very strong Trini accent then. And B: they put me

down a year, because they said I came from the Caribbean. When I passed all my tests of entry, they said that I must have cheated. I could not possibly be as smart as, or as well-educated as I was from the Caribbean. Standards were very high in the Caribbean. And I just got so angry. I thought, "This is unjust and unfair. I'm being judged in a way that I didn't deserve to be judged." And I had no power to change that. But I did have a sisterhood at school. We're still friends today. And that, I think, started to frame my Black feminist thinking: being in that sisterhood, challenging the school.

I remember we got together, and we wrote an article in the local newspapers about the amount of girls in the school whose parents and who themselves sympathized with the National Front, which is the racist organization. We were called up to the headmistress's office, and we were threatened with expulsion, that they would expel us from the school. I can't quite remember how; I think it was more trouble to expel us, and so they let us finish the year. But yeah, it was an interesting experience.

LEC: And then you went to college there?

HM: What was very interesting, they had no expectations – this is 1970s England – that any people of color had any place in higher education. I remember thinking, "Well, if these other girls in this school, the white girls, could go and be put forward for the entry exams and the tests to go into university, surely I could." But I was told I should be a typist, I shouldn't go to college, that university wasn't for me. And yeah, that was the fate of many people, and it came from a long tradition of how Caribbean people were seen: as "educationally subnormal". There was a big program by the government to actually put Caribbean children into 'special needs' schools where they were contained, really, and it's still going on today. They changed the name of it – it's not called 'ESN schools' anymore – but it's now called 'pupil referral units". But, you know, systematic expulsion and containment of young Black kids in schools has been a government strategy for the forty years that I've been in education. But at the same time, it was a moment in history where there was an expansion of higher education. The government started to pour money into higher education; it was called the Robbins Report, and so they were places available, and I found out how to apply myself. The school did not help me.

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And I went to University of East Anglia. People used to think it was like child development [*Laughs]* but it was actually about what was then called 'third world development'. And it just changed my life completely. I mean, to learn about the politics, the postcolonial politics, of that time. Everything from land use – we used to go out and dig potatoes and look at the water system and irrigation and social policy and education in Africa or India or across the globe. So it was a massively influential

time for me. But the most influential thing about that moment was it was 1977, and there was Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.

CTM: Oh, yes.

HM: And Zimbabwe was born, and South Africa was going through its struggles. And freedom fighters come to East Anglia through Ruskin College, it was a trade union college. It was just incredible. So I met these people from across the globe. They were people from the Pacific Islands, Prince of Tonga, you know? There were guerillas, who were called guerillas or terrorists at that time, from Rhodesia, ZAPU, ZANU, you know? There was also this huge, momentous moment in the Middle East, where they were saying, "Down with Western civilization; there is another way to think." It was the rise of the Islamic movement that we are seeing now. I met my then-husband, and he was very active in the pro-Palestinian movement, and I converted to Islam. It was a total feminist awakening for me. Which is the irony, because most people think of Islam as an oppressive religion. But I actually learnt to value myself. Because coming from the Caribbean… it's an extremely sexist place, the Caribbean, how women are seen and treated as really sexualized objects. I learned a dignity for myself through Islam, where I would wear my scarf and my modest dress. I felt like for the first time I could be Heidi, and I could be myself, not just how I looked. And I wasn't being judged for my sexuality. I felt I was being judged for my political ideas. And I know there's a big debate about this now, among Muslim women. Should you wear hijab, or should you not? Is it choice? Is it your choice? But it was my choice. It was a political choice. Of course, as you can see, I no longer do it, but that moment, it gave me a sense of freedom and possibility.

LEC: And what was interesting about that, right, is that so many of the revolutionaries from the Global South went to school in England.

LEC: All the ZANU people, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere the ZANU-PF leaders, Eric Williams, Norman Manley, all of them.

HM: Yes, yes, yes. Well, yes, it's from a long tradition of pan-Africanism and postcolonial Indian scholars. We talked about ourselves as 'Black scholars'. We didn't see that you were from India or Africa or Caribbean, whatever, or even Black-British, you know. There was a sense of solidarity that has now faded away, and now we have a lot of contention about the naming of 'Black' as a collective space. But I still call myself as a Black feminist from that—

CTM: From that time, yeah.

HM: —from that time.

LEC: Right, right.

HM: I feel a sense of rootedness in that identity, which I know young people do not share anymore. Particularly in the 90s, there was this 'hiving off' of separate identities: Asian identity, and African identity, Caribbean identity. But as you well know, Linda, coming from the Caribbean, it is so diverse. And yes, the racial politics are heightened. Political parties will compete with each other on the basis of a racialized agenda; it is an ugly scene —

[00:15:31]

LEC: In Trinidad and Guyana, in particular.

HM: Yeah, in particular, yes. And you know, this whole 'divide and rule' does not help us very much. Because the conditions that shape us isn't amongst ourselves; it's about forces greater than ourselves. But we need an umbrella, an umbrella that brings us together and we can identify politically. And for me, that revolutionary term 'Black' still has resonance.

LEC: Divisions work to the benefit of the state, though, don't they?

HM: They do.

LEC: Because now you have people, based on ethnicity and country of origin in Britain, fighting against each other or competing for the same small pie. Whereas then, what Black meant was a unity among different groups. So it's a huge disadvantage.

HM: An intellectual and political unity, yes.

LEC: Well, so now we want you to tell us about your work over the few decades and stuff, and how you see that work in the context of the larger transnational feminist struggles as a woman of color. With all that you just told us, from Britain, from the Caribbean, from Trinidad.

HM: [*Laughs*]

CTM: Big question.

HM: I don't know where to start.

LEC: Right there, because that whole thing about the divisions happening changed that trajectory for British Black feminists.

HM: Yes, well, I had a baby, my daughter who is now 38, Aliya, in 1980. And that also was a huge moment for me, obviously. I was very young, a quite young woman. I had just moved back to London. And I remember going into my doctor's surgery. I had very bad post-natal depression; I was really struggling. I didn't understand that it was post-natal depression, because in those days there was no word for it, really. But

I remember just putting one foot in front of the other so I could keep going. I put my foot, and I went into the doctor's, and on the board, there was this meeting for Black women, "OWWAD".

[*Laughter]*

CTM: Oh, wow.

LEC: Oh, yeah, wow.

HM: That's where it was, on the doctor's surgery on the wall. I don't know, somebody must have put it up there. And I thought, "That's for me!" You know, I was very isolated in London, because I'd been at university. When you come back, you don't have networks. I remember putting Aliya in a push-chair and just wheeling her to the Abeng Centre in Brixton. *[Laughs]*

And it was just an amazing meeting. There was so much discussion amongst these women. It was heightened, you know, and they were talking about the identity of the group. There were Asian women, there were Black women, who was more dominant? Should we get together?

CTM: And so this is the Organization of Women of Asian and African or African and Asian descent.

HM: Yes, yes.

LEC: That's right.

HM: OWWAD. The Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent.

CTM: Descent, yes.

HM: It's now considered the kind of birth of modern-day Black British feminism, and I met Stella Dadzie. And Suzanne Scafe came a bit later. It was just a meeting of such synergy and energy, and I guess what I felt in that moment of post-natal depression was possibility. And it became like a drug for me. [*Laughs*] I applied to go to do a PhD. I managed to get a scholarship for a fully-funded program at Goldsmiths College, and I chose to look at the conditions of Caribbean girls in British schools, because in my own experience of the racism in the schools and the fact that we were considered not to have a future in any shape or form. So I did it looking at the career expectations and aspirations of British Caribbean girls, because by now, we are coming onto the second generation. And that became my book, *Young, Female, and Black.* It was, I suppose, and still is considered the main text for looking at the Caribbean female experience. It's used in A-levels.

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LEC: I've seen a lot of dissertations where it's been cited.

HM: Yeah! And you know, it surprises me. I didn't really realize that [*Laughs*], how influential it was. And I keep thinking to myself, "There should be another book, by a new scholar." Because it is thirty years old, the data. And now, young Caribbean girls and women of color have a different world, with social media. It's impacted by a different kind of economic and social trajectory of 'post-feminism' and 'post-racism'.

LEC: You can be amazed. The more things change, the more things stay the same.

HM: It still has resonance.

CTM: Still has resonance.

LEC: Resonance? It's what being used a lot, because the state and its structures and its treatment of those people has not changed.

HM: Yes, but we need to interrogate those mechanisms now, more than we have. Yeah, so I did that study, and yes, it's had an impact, but I suppose one of the things I really feel looking at my academic career is that there hasn't been that sustainability of young female academics coming through the doctoral system. It's been incredibly difficult for them financially and career-wise, and they drop out. I've had some brilliant scholars who haven't seen it through. One or two have, but not that sustainability in order to develop the critical mass of scholarship we need for Black British feminism.

LEC: Because the way isn't there. The support isn't there. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

HM: What you realize is that higher education mitigates against it. Because it is a nepotistic system, and the nepotism means that unless you have someone—

LEC: Connections.

HM: Unless you're connected, and you know and you've got the cultural capital to fill in those very complex, very competitive scholarship forms.. you don't get funded. And if you don't get funded, you can't do a three- or five-year course, with all the requirements. So that sustainability, I suppose, saddens me, really. I've done what I can, but as we know, there are only 350 women of color professors in the U.K. in 2018, out of something like maybe 17,000 professors. And there were thirty Black women of African descent, ten of Pakistani, five of Bangladeshi British descent. I think it's something like eighty Indian women and seventy or so, seventy-five Chinese women. How could that be? We've not been a sustainable group in higher

education, in the forty-year trajectory that I've been there. In fact, I've seen a decline if anything.

CTM: Yeah, it's so outrageous, these figures. And yet, it doesn't seem to be something that is taken up in a big way. I mean, are there movements, people pushing back against some of this?

HM: Well, we talk about it a lot. There's a group of us that have just edited a book where we've talked about our experiences, and we're doing a roundtrip around the U.K. at different universities. In fact, this week, I was meant to be in Leeds, talking about the situation for women, and we've formed a tight group of us.

[00:25:16]

The book's called *Inside the Ivory Tower*, thriving and surviving the academy. We'll go, and it will be packed with young women when we go and talk. There isn't a white face there. The people who should be there, the vice chancellors, the people from the senior administration, Human Resources – nobody's there. And we're just talking amongst ourselves. I feel like… we expend all this energy, when we could be doing publications and other things, doing these…Yes, we are raising the race in many ways by supporting these younger women. Share their stories; we share our stories, a bit like what we've done this week. We share our stories amongst ourselves, yes, and you go away energized and feel a sense of solidarity. But the infrastructure…

It doesn't change. It's highly nepotistic as I was saying and structurally racist, right? When the students are doing their dissertations, they don't have anybody who knows about race and gender to supervise them.

CTM: Yeah, the reproduction of those kinds of knowledges. The hegemonic, colonial, racist knowledges that have always been in place continues.

LEC: Continues, yeah.

HM: And there's this very unpleasant and ugly debate in Britain, and I'm sure you have it here, around 'decolonizing knowledge'. So it's become, it's like 'intersectionality'- it's become a buzzword, so the university says they're 'decolonizing knowledge'. Maybe they've put one book.

CTM: Are you serious? Universities are claiming that they're 'decolonizing knowledge'?

HM: They don't claim it, but—they say they will make concessions. [*Laughs*] It's very interesting… they will get scholars of color to sit on curriculum groups and tell them what books they could add onto a literature course, so they get one or two books. But there is no—

CTM: Worst kind of tokenism, and the worst—

HM: It's tokenism, yes. But there was also a very ugly debate where the scholars of color at Cambridge, for example, have called for decolonizing the curriculum, and they've been vilified in the press, the white press, and in the universities as well, as actually being racist themselves against the white system, that they are against freedom of speech.

LEC: [*Laughs*]

CTM: This is Priya Gopal and a whole bunch of them, right? I know.

HM: Priya, yes. They are being embattled by the press or the universities, just for asking for a very logical and reasonable thing, which is to diversify your reading lists. It's not asking for anything fundamental or more than that.

LEC: Make the curriculum address the structure of society, so it isn't all white.

HM: Yeah, exactly.

CTM: Right, right. So you've already been talking about some of this. You know, we were going to ask you about what challenges you faced, and clearly that's been part of your narrative already. But maybe if you could talk a little bit about the decision, as a feminist, to both do the work within the structure – these pretty violent institutional structures – and then also the decision to leave them. Maybe a little bit about that would be really useful, which you and Sara Ahmed did.

HM: Yes. Well, maybe I'll backtrack a little bit and talk about the collective project of Black-British feminism?

CTM: Yes, that would be great.

HM: Because that evolved in the mid-90s, and again, women's studies had taken off.

[00:31:01]

In fact, Sara Ahmed in Lancaster University was the head of department, and they had a conference. I think it was in 1994 or 5, or something. There were just all these incredible women coming to this conference, women of color. And I just, again, had a lightbulb moment, thinking, "We need to actually write about this." And I asked many women at that conference, that I had also met. We are very fragmented, remember; there might be just one of us in the north of England and one of us in the south of England and one in one institution and another. Remember, we had no social media. [*Laughs*]

CTM: Exactly.

HM: No ways of communicating with each other, no email. We just celebrated twenty years of the book, and I went through my own archives. [It] was just like, hand-written addresses on the brochures. And I contacted all these different women and said, "Write a chapter." We were all at that moment just finished our PhDs, and we're starting our careers, some people were… a bit like your 'decolonizing people' … At this point, they were just becoming what you call assistant professors and the first lectureships, or they were just finishing their PhDs. And they wrote chapters. I edited it with a very keen eye, but I knew what I wanted. I wanted to show the range of work we were doing and the issues already, you know: the gender, the race. Because remember, there was Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. All the race scholars were men, and they were good men. [*Laughs*] Writing important stuff. But there wasn't anything coming out from women of color. There was Avtar Brah's work; there was Gail Lewis' work. You know, all these foundational scholars. But it wasn't collected together. So that book, really—

CTM: This is *Black British Feminism*.

HM: *Black British Feminism…* addressed things like sexuality, lesbian feminism, Black lesbian feminism, trans, transglobal issues. So Sara Ahmed talked about growing up in Australia and coming to Britain. There was Jayne Ifekwunigwe, talked about being mixed-race. So under the umbrella of Black feminism, you started to get real, diverse experiences, collected together. I think the book was influential in that moment in time. It kind of brought us together again, a bit like OWWAD did before. And it has carried itself as well, along. And it's time for a new version, I think. [*Laughs*]

HM: I do remember when I wrote that book, I was at South Bank University, which is an ex-polytechnic. So in the 90s, a lot of universities were created from the polytechnic sector, which were technical colleges, and they were given university status. That again gave me an opportunity, because the red brick and sandstone universities were very snobbish and almost… they were closed to somebody like me. But this opening up of this new sector allowed someone like me into good jobs, you know? So I became a lecturer, a senior lecturer, a reader, and then a professor. So I was able to navigate this secondary, lesser status system but achieve professorship at Middlesex University. So in 1998, I was awarded a professorship. It was just Lola Young and myself, were the only ones... British women of color to have a chair in the UK system, so that was…

[00:35:00]

CTM: And this was late nineties?

HM: 1998, yeah. Late nineties.

LEC: What was that experience like, in those institutions with mostly white people?

HM: It was very interesting that both Lola and I were at Middlesex University, who had a very progressive governor who insisted to the vice chancellor that he must diversify the university. And remember in this university sector, most of the students are ethnic minorities. So it was very interesting. They needed us, symbolically, in terms of the university's profile. This is about risky leadership. We've seen such conservative leadership in our education. This particular governor Edgar Neufeld had been very senior in IBM, and he brought the business model into the university. And they created the Chair I had, which was a Chair in Racial Equality. He got funding for this Chair from businesses all around London. My job was to service those industries.

[*Laughter*]

HM: So I had go and teach diversity to—

LEC: Corporate people.

CTM: To corporates, wow.

HM: To corporates or to the council or whoever had given money. And I thought, "What the hell? This is not an academic job."

HM: "This is like being a consultant", but on low-pay.

HM: And I just thought, "Is this the only way that we could get into the academic system?" I couldn't publish, because I was spending all of my other time doing this other work. It was very stressful… and I got ill, you know? I did get ill from overwork. And there was a lot of hostility towards me in that post as well, that I had to navigate. A lot of what I call 'white hurt' and 'white envy', that you got a job based on being the right place at the right time. Or it's just an 'equal opportunities' job, "You're not a real professor" … And it was a lot of work to sustain yourself. And it was lonely work, you know? So it was a difficult moment, really. And there was a new millennium that was upon us.

CTM: And then when did you move to Goldsmiths?

HM: I was at Goldsmiths for my PhD, in the eighties. My first job after my PhD was actually at Brown University, in the States. And then I came back to South Bank University in the nineties, early nineties. Then I went to Middlesex for the Chair, and from Middlesex, I went to the Institute of Education, where I took up a Chair… I can't remember the years now. I think it was 2006. A Chair in 'Race Equality and Education'. You see, you could only get the jobs—

CTM: Yeah, that were titled such.

HM: —in race equality, and again, you're expected to sit on every diversity committee in the university, to help them with their strategies and to service the university around diversity and the requirements the new equality legislation put upon them. So you just weren't really academically valued. You're expected to do their house cleaning. You're like a maid. [*Laughs*] And not taken seriously. So from there, after I left the Institute, I actually took voluntary redundancy after ten years there, and then went onto Goldsmiths where I was given a Chair, not of my naming. They named the chair: Professor of Race, Faith, and Culture. But by then I was working part-time, and so I then took retirement. Or shall I say, 'left'? [*Laughs*]

[00:40:12]

CTM: Left.

HM: Left. Resigned. [*Laughs*] Resigned in 2016, two years ago.

LEC: I guess you had had enough, across the board.

HM: I had had enough of the aggressive bullying cultures in universities in general and in that university in particular. But maybe it was because I returned to a place where I had been thirty-odd years before, where I had suffered endemic sexual harassment, through my doctoral career there. And when Sara Ahmed and the Center of Feminist Research, her colleagues, had a campaign to expose the continued sexual harassment in that university… endemic, in certain departments and among certain, what I would call, 'packs of men', who set themselves up in kind of liberal arts colleges as 'gurus' and molest their students relentlessly and had caused huge damage amongst some of the doctoral students, ruining their lives. When she took a stance, I took a stance with her. We had a big conference. Of course, none of the senior people in the university came to the conference. And we talked openly about it. We said, "The university will bury it, because the reputation of the university is always at stake." It's their currency. To get students to come, to bring their fees and their funds – the reputation of the university must stay clean. They were not sacking these people. They were not investigating these people. They would say that they were important scholars for the REF, which is our Research Assessment Exercise, how the universities get their funding. They were well-known, global scholars. "You cannot sacrifice them". And so we resigned.

LEC: That's even worse than here. At least we have sexual harassment committees, and not just to cover face. In many institutions, graduate students and faculty have a place to take this.

CTM: Yeah.

HM: There was nowhere to take it. What the students were doing was coming to us personally…

LEC: And saying the same thing is happening to them.

HM: The same… and it's been very interesting, this week, after I gave a talk where I taught at your conference about it. Several women came up to me, including yourself, to say that this has happened.

LEC: Yeah, we know it's happened.

CTM: Yeah.

HM: We live in our isolated ways, carrying this shame and burden and the trauma of it. And this is an institutional trauma, you know? And we are told, "Oh, we need more women in universities. We need more women of color in universities." But the universities don't change. They are patriarchal, sexist, elitist, anachronistic, backward places, and we're just meant to insert ourselves into these places as if just by being there, somehow it will be transformed.

LEC: We know—

HM: But I mean, how many students today said they want to leave? They want to leave, because their careers are not sustainable, either as young women, but the young men were saying the same thing, you know? If you don't have support and mentors, you don't feel safe.

LEC: I think the racism thing is more intense for them.

HM: Yes.

LEC: In our Democratizing Knowledge summer institutes project, Just Academic Spaces, that's what we've heard from participants for three consecutive years. That is, that institutional racism is so ingrained that despite some small changes having been put in place because institutions have been forced to be more sensitive, as new faculty of color, with strong academic skills and good mentors they still have to wage battles against of racism. But then they don't see institutional change. The institutions are hiring people, and they have these offices of diversity, and what they get are people who look like us to help them manage and maintain their practices of racism and inequity.

[00:45:16]

HM: Yes.

CTM: So they undercut a lot of our political work.

LEC: Yeah. So that's harder for them, and these young scholars say they want to leave. But the sexual harassment thing… because it happens across the board, to all women… and now some gay men have talked about it. That they have these real institutional structures, and in some ways, in some institutions, if you take it—

CTM: They work.

LEC: They work. Because we've been on committees where we know there's a real avenue and it can work. But what I tell my young female Black students is, "Learn self-defense, because that male professor will not tell anybody that you knocked him out."

[*Laughter*]

LEC: Yeah, I'm sorry. It works.

HM: Yeah.

LEC: They be too ashamed.

CTM: Yeah.

HM: The thing with racism is that it's endemic, and it's so hard to get the evidence.

HM: It's the intangibility of what you know is happening to you, and the reason why you're being excluded, you know you're not being asked to certain meetings. You know you're not being put on certain bids for grants or not being given your sabbatical or not being forward for… You know why. But you can't prove it.

CTM: You can't prove it, and experiential narratives are not seen—

LEC: Don't count. Don't count.

CTM: —as legitimate. It's not your opinion, my opinion. You say one thing, I say another. So it's also the knowledge structures which only privilege certain forms of evidence. And, yeah, it's really problematic.

HM: And as you were saying, I went to a very good, fabulous discussion between Hortense Spillers and Gail Lewis at the ICA about two weeks ago. She was saying just what you said, that people can look like you in these positions, but they are the face of whiteness. They are Black faces, but they are in those positions for self-interest.

LEC: And that's why the institution gets them, because it works for the institution. You can't call us racist; we have such-and-such in these primary positions.

HM: It's an industry. It's an industry now.

CTM: Right. It is, it is. We have a whole rainbow of colors in our upper administration.

LEC: Yeah, in our upper administration.

CTM: But it doesn't do us any good.

HM: Highly paid.

LEC: Highly paid.

HM: Highly sophisticated, highly educated. But no commitment to the cause. And it's making our job increasingly harder.

HM: This is what Sara Ahmed has called the 'walls', in an institution.

LEC: Yes, that's right. I really like her analysis of that.

HM: And you see the walls, and you tackle it, and she calls it 'beating your head against the brick wall' when you are doing this diversity work, when you know what it is. And the performativity now of equality and diversity. We perform it. There are excellent policies that will circulate. The documents that will circulate; there are meetings. There'll be diversity committees. Fabulous policies.

HM: Everybody will sit around, and they will nod, and they will appoint some very junior person to see it through, and they will bring it back again. And the documents will just keep circulating, and nothing will ever happen.

CTM: So we're going to end with this question. What do you see as the best way for feminists across various kinds of borders and divides, within and across different nations and et cetera, to build solidarity right now in the climate which we have now described very well?

HM: The neoliberal climate. [*Laughs*]

CTM: The neoliberal, but also, I think, virulently militaristic, and the national security state climate, that corporate climate that seeps into all of our everyday lives in the kind of work we're trying to do. So how do we build solidarity?

HM: I mean, solidarity, I think, is the absolute key to building capacity for us to move forward.

[00:50:06]

And we live such different lives across borders. The language that we use, the context in which we live will be so different. But I think what Black feminism and postcolonial feminism… they are slightly different, but they are talking about women situated in relation to the postcolonial condition and racialized. What I think can bind

us together is first and foremost our gendered experiences around sexism in its many different forms. So whether it's about issues around childbirth or marriage, careers, inequality, whatever – it's a gendered condition that we don't have access to power, access into the jobs. It's racialized, the Global South, and as migrant women in Global North, I think the conditions are the same, because I think what shapes a woman's life in a factory in Mexico is very similar to what's happening to a woman's life in Nigeria. It will be corporate capitalism that shapes your life, gives you the conditions under which we live. So I think that it still, for me, remains very much a Marxist struggle [*Laughs*]… around corporate capitalism, and the way it reaches into our lives and it uses sexism as a means to oppress, extract labor, and reduce the opportunities that you have.

So how do you build solidarity? Well, education. I talked to my students a lot about this, and I just think we need to write and, nowadays, use social media to raise consciousness. Because I think the raising of consciousness is really important around these issues. I find it really difficult, because we've been enjoying ourselves buying clothes and whatever, and I always think about who's made those clothes. This could be a woman in Turkey or a woman in Bangladesh, and we enjoy the fruits of her labor at a price, at a cheap price. And I always think, "Should I even buy this shirt? And if I stop buying this shirt which costs relatively nothing because their wages are kept low, would that help the economic conditions of those women?" We're so bound into a capitalist system of exploitation based on women's labor, and we're so fragmented through that system, because it does not want us to talk to each other, to communicate, and to have solidarity.

I think white imperial feminism is at its zenith at the moment. They speak the language of intersectionality, but they are the ones who are now becoming… They are colonizing higher education, and I don't see solidarity there with them. Because our vice chancellors, so many of them are now women.

CTM: There can't be solidarity, because they are in those positions because they manage all the—

HM: They manage the system.

LEC: The solidarity we refer to, the solidarity we're talking about is among women of color feminists. So how can we bridge those divides? That's the solidarity we're referring to, because we know that capital is organized in a way that labor isn't. So one of the things we want to see happen or we're struggling to work towards is conscientizing our students that this is where the struggle is at, is how to create that solidarity globally. So that we can fight that capital and come back to unionization and the things that can challenge capital.

[00:55:27]

HM: One of the interesting experiences that I had after giving up my job at the Institute of Education, I thought, "Oh, I don't want to go back to higher education." And I got a job working with Marks and Spencer, which is a very big department store. It has, of course, a global network of factories all over the world that supply them with their goods. And they said, "Well, we want to have educational programs in health and literacy and so on in the various places, because we want to be good employers. We want to be right on. So we want to set up programs for these women." So while they're in the factories, they would learn about health and education for the betterment. And I said, "Yeah, and so we'll start trade unions." [*Laughs*] I said, "Are you prepared for what that means. Not that this is window dressing, but what this is really, really means. This means that you will have an educated female workforce that becomes conscious and able to organize against the conditions and the pay which you are offering, which is peanuts and also bad conditions. And they looked at me with real shock. They never thought that this is what this means: the conscientization of these women. For them, it was just like, "We need to tick the box that we are doing the right thing."

LEC: But in North America, we have that down. Because we know historically when women… I mean, feminism in the early days was about getting women, even with Betty Friedan and they who were talking about, "We want to go to work. We have an education; we want to go to work." And Black women were saying, "I wish I didn't have to work, because we've always had to work." So 'working'… we know and understand the conscientization it brings around among working women. It has happened historically, and that's been one of the driving forces behind feminism as we know it started. So in North America, corporations have that under control. Women go into those workspaces, and they are overworked. They don't have time to organize. They have to leave work and go home and take on that second job. I did a lot of union organizing. When we tried to get union—

HM: Get the women to organize, yeah.

LEC: They can't come to those meetings quite often, because we have them in the evenings, right—

HM: Because they have two shifts!

LEC: —and they're doing two and three jobs. The other thing, Heidi, is that – and you know this, because it happens in Britain too – the corporations hire them for a certain number of hours without benefits or whatever. So they keep them oppressed.

HM: Zero hour contracts as well.

LEC: Absolutely.

HM: So the conditions of work are mitigated against trade unionism. But what my point was is that the dismantling of trade unions throughout the 1980s, well, in Britain and here too—

LEC: And nineties.

HM: —and nineties… has left us decimated. So when you ask me about solidarity, it was trade unionism when I said – when I was at East Anglia – it was the trade union movement that brought those scholars from Africa and around the world, through a network, an education network. It was transglobal. And it was powerful. Those people went back to positions in their countries to raise that whole postcolonial, post-independent… And what I'm saying is that the kind of way in which the terrain now has changed so much…

CTM: Absolutely.

LEC: In capital's favor.

HM: In capital's favor. It is at its zenith.

HM: We have to build solidarity through workers' movements, I think. Through the trade union movement. "How do we re-invoke the trade union movement?" is the question. How do we build transglobal solidarity that we had in the sixties and seventies, which has now fallen away? I just think social media is a very powerful way to do it.

[01:00:02]

LEC: Yeah, because there's some organizing taking place in this country in some underground networks that give us hope.

HM: And you know, what happened to Black-British feminism in the nineties, it started to fade away. In fact, I've written about the fact people would say, "Hey, I though Black feminism was dead." Women of color would tell me this. "Oh, what's the point?" It's reviving. It's through social media at the moment. And these young women are coming up and they're going, like, "Yes. We want to belong." Yet, they might not meet in cold, dark rooms like we used to. [*Laughs*] With no heating. They're meeting in hyperspace.

CTM: Absolutely.

HM: And they're having very sophisticated conversations… And that gives me hope. I'm not that good with social media. As you know, I'm not on Facebook. [*Laughs*] But I am on Twitter and I can see the power of Twitter.

LEC: And in this country, the same thing. Occupy is still occupying underground. Black Lives Matter is now a force to be reckoned with, nationally. People connect with their oppression with others. So part of this is a reaction to capital, and it's helping us organize.

CTM: So some of the hope, I think, is in terms of reimagining our horizons in terms of what struggle and solidarity can mean. Sometimes it's not how classical trade unions look like and trade unions struggles, or—

HM: I think it's our job to describe these new movements as academics and intellectuals – who are also activists – to bridge that for that new phenomena, to understand it and describe it. Again, when I was looking at the pictures and photos in the Martin Luther King Visitor Center, what really struck me was it had a historical trajectory. Looking back to the Underground Railway? Railroads?

CTM: Railroad, yeah.

HM: And I remember again a foundational moment is when I was sixteen and I went to stay with my cousins in Montreal in the early seventies. They were part of the Underground Railway from Cuba and all the people that were fleeing from oppression in Africa and South America. They were the Canadian—

CTM: Like a stop.

HM: —stop. And I just remember all these people would come through the house, and all this food will be cooking. I said, "Well, who are these people?", and they said—

LEC: "They're on their way."

HM: "They're on their way." Yeah. And maybe, we could think about social media in terms of being like an Underground Railway. Because all of these subversive movements, scattered though they might be, whether it's the nascent trade union in Bangladesh or Black Lives Matter in America. They are connected through the anti-capitalist, anti-state positioning that they take. Maybe that's a way of thinking about it. Because I still need to think about things … [*Laughs*]. Not in hyperspace, but a geographical sense of 'peopledom'.

CTM: Thank you. That's a good place to end it.

HM: Thank you.

CTM: Thank you so much, Heidi.

[01:03:50]

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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.