



Layla Zami

10/6/18

[00:00:00]

**CTM:** Today is ...

**LEC:** October 6<sup>th</sup>!

**CTM:** October 6<sup>th</sup>, okay. We're in New York City, and we're talking to Layla Zami. Welcome, Layla.

**LZ:** Thank you.

**CTM:** It's wonderful to have you here. And really looking forward to your genealogy, your involvement in feminist activism, art, projects – all over the world now, it seems.

**LEC:** You work hard.

**LZ:** Thank you.

**LEC:** Okay, Layla, so we usually start these discussions by asking the person to tell us about what brought you to feminism and feminist activist work and that history about yourself.

**LZ:** First of all, thank you for the invitation. I am honored because I looked at the videos, and in terms of age also, I saw that you have many senior feminist activists and scholars. And being born in 1985, being thirty-three years old, I was happy to be included. This is actually also kind of my life story, because I always do things earlier. [Laughter] And I've been thinking about this question, and I realized actually that I have been a feminist as a child already without really maybe knowing it or knowing what that word means. I think I knew even then I was a feminist but I didn't know I would come to theorize it or read about it in a different way later. So here I'm thinking about just growing up and celebrating holidays, so maybe I have to explain my genealogy first?

**LEC:** Yes.

**CTM:** Yes, please.

**LZ:** So my father's Jewish. He's of German and Russian descent. And my mom is Afro-Caribbean of Indian, African, and European descent. And I was born in France, so I like to say, "I carry the world inside of me." [Laughter] So we grew up celebrating different holidays. We would do Christmas, Hanukkah, all of that. I really remember, really clearly, the first time that I saw my father giving *kippahs*, which is what you wear on your head, to my brothers. I had two brothers. And he would start singing, and I would be like, "Wait a minute, why didn't I get a *kippah*?" [Laughter] He hadn't even thought about it before. He was like, "Oh, you know, that's how it's done. It's the gender thing. Your brothers get *kippahs*, you're a woman, you don't get *kippahs*." It didn't make any sense to me, you know? I thought, "Wait, this is part of the ritual, it's something spiritual. I want to have full participation in the ritual and in the community." So I asked for a *kippah*, and my father immediately gave me one. There was no resistance. He had to rethink about it. So in all family pictures from the holidays, you see the three of us all wearing the *kippahs*. [Laughter]

And thinking about the questions you asked me... or you know, this week, I've been thinking a lot about my journey as a feminist, and I realize, okay, these were first steps towards demanding equal rights or being treated the same way despite gender. Although I know where these rules come from and I'm not against traditions at all. I know that certain traditions are very meaningful. But in that moment as a child, it didn't make sense to me, especially because I was even more involved in Judaism than my brothers were. I did my *bat mitzvah*, for instance, and they didn't. I think that was one of the first feminist steps.

On the other hand, on the Caribbean genealogy, we would go to Martinique a lot when I was a child. And I would observe society and realize... I think I took it in subconsciously as a child, but later on I realized that Martinique is really much a matriarchal society, all these structures. Even in my family's, which structures would I play, and why women had certain power, and changing power structures... so I think this is really my beginning, as a child. I think another key aspect was when I moved to Berlin, in 2007. So I left France, and later on I met my wife, Oxana Chi, who's my wife today. She was really a role model for me also, in terms of feminism. She was older than me; she was very active in the Berlin feminist scene. So there was also a key moment of maybe thinking of feminism in a different way, through art, a lot through performance practice. Because before, I would be involved in political science. I studied political science. I would be involved in activism. But this consciousness of the role of performing arts and being on the stage as a way to reclaim visibility for feminism. That was something that happened in Berlin, in Germany.

[00:04:59]

Maybe another important step was when I worked for Christiane Taubira. I don't know if you're familiar with her. She was the first black woman who ran for president in France, and she was also the first black woman to be a minister of justice.

**LEC:** Wow, that's right.

**LZ:** Which is the highest rank in the government of France. She literally sat next to the president, in the government. But when I used to work for her, she was in Parliament, so she was a member of Parliament for French Guiana. When I finished my first studies at Sciences Po in Paris, I was really young. I was twenty-one. And I met her at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congress of Black Writers, which had happened in Paris in 1956, and so in 2006 they had the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And I met her, and we got into a conversation. She asked, "What are you doing?"

I said, "I just finished school."

"Are you looking for a job?"

I said, "Oh, actually I want to leave France. I like traveling and I looked in a different country."

And she said, "Oh, well, give me your number, just in case you're still around in a few weeks. Maybe I'll give you an interview." I thought, okay, this is not going to happen. And she actually called me and invited me for an interview and I worked for her for a year. She was also someone really inspirational for me. I'm not sure if she calls herself a feminist. I haven't heard her use that word so much. But her whole role in Parliament, she was always challenging patriarchal structures. She passed many important laws. She's the one also who passed gay marriage in France. Very few people know it was a black woman who passed gay marriage laws in France. Working closely with her, I also got to be involved in a lot of struggles in the political sphere.

**CTM:** Say a little bit about your work itself. So the work you do, how you got to it.

**LZ:** I'm a research scholar, I'm also a performing artist, and I'm an activist. And so those are three aspects of my life which are really connected to each other, and I think they work best because they are connected. In terms of research, I got a PhD in gender studies, and I am also very much of a performance scholar, because I write about performance and memory. I'm really interested in looking at how bodies perform on stage and how they have a role in challenging the narrative that we learn in schools. In this book that I brought, because I wanted to show it to you... yeah, you can look at it. This is my monograph, which was also my dissertation, I wrote about six women and one man, so it was, you know, [Laughter] ... turning things around

this time. And it's called *Contemporary Performemory*. This is a word I coined. I use it also as a verb; it's inspired by Toni Morrison's 'rememory'?

**CTM:** Yeah.

**LZ:** In terms of research, I was really looking at how especially women, and women of color, have the agency on stage to challenge those historical narratives and what that means for current social, political relations. So this is the aspect of my research that I present. You know, papers, I give a lot of presentations and produce writing. This also reflects on my teaching. And then in terms of arts... so I perform on stage. I am a regular collaborator of Oxana Chi's dance company. But I am not a dancer, even though many people think so. She dances, and I create music. I write my own spoken words and texts, and I also use physical theater. We have a piece for instance called "I Step on Air". It's in memory of May Ayim. I'm sure you're familiar with May Ayim?

**LEC:** Mm-hmm.

**CTM:** Yes, of course.

**LZ:** So it was a commissioned work that Oxana Chi did for Dr. Natasha Kelly for Humboldt-University. May Ayim – just maybe for the U.S. context for people who may not know – was an Afro-German feminist, activist, poet, and scholar. She's known in Germany as 'the Afro-German Audre Lorde'. We have this piece called "I Step on Air" where we embody her story in an abstract way. I perform her text but in a more contemporary interpretation, and Oxana dances, and then I play music. The text I performed, she wrote it in 1990. And when I do it on stage, whether it's in India or here in the U.S. or wherever, people think it's my own text and that I just wrote it, like, a few months ago. Because it's still so actual.

**CTM:** So relevant.

**LZ:** So relevant, yeah. It's about political participation of minorities and how people are only invited before and after the elections to give their opinion, and afterwards they forget us. So this performance was also quite successful in feminist circles. And it was interesting to see how it was originally conceived as a commissioned work, it was part of a wandering exhibition. Then we started getting this invitation from many feminist conferences and departments. I thought there is something about this performance that enriches the discourse or brings another aspect to the conversation and the struggles women are doing in academia, but also outside of academic contexts. Makda Isak, who's currently one of your students as I was mentioning before, she invited us also to perform this piece.

And the third aspect is that in terms of activism, we founded an association in Berlin. It's called *li:chi*, a transcultural network for art and political education, or civic education, you could say, in English, I think.

[00:10:36]

**CTM:** So what we were talking about is emotion, and how your work really is something that takes emotion and affect seriously, and what kind of an impact that can have.

**LZ:** Yeah, I think it's important that you're mentioning that point, because that's also a thread that has been connecting my teaching, my performance art, and my research. The first time I was invited to teach at Humboldt-University, I luckily got to teach a course of my own, so I didn't have to teach something that's already offered, but I was able to impact curriculum development. And I was working a lot with emotions with the students, although it was not necessarily expected by the department. We would also go outdoors, and I would try to channel an embodied approach to the readings. We were talking really theoretical stuff, you know? Memory, performances of memory, historical traumas and things like that. Many readings were in English, most students were German, so it was maybe not so easy for them. And I would always use what I'd learned from my performing arts training and from my experience with Oxana Chi, and I would bring that in, and I got really good feedback. Great student evaluations. And then I won a prize, and this was my first class, you know? So I got the *Fakultätspreis für gute Lehre*, which is the prize for teaching quality, and the first prize out of it because there were actually three.

And I didn't think this would impact other people, then. I thought, "Oh, that's great. I'm really proud of it, that the institution is acknowledging my efforts." But so many people would come up to me, students, sometimes women I didn't know, many women of color. They would say, "I think you're the first woman of color who got this award, and even just hearing about your class, other students who attended your class said it was a different approach to university. We hope we can have more of that educational system." And-

**CTM:** So give us an example of this. What would you do if you ... just thinking about how do you embody certain kinds of ideas and ways of thinking?

**LZ:** Yeah. Yeah. I would work a lot on breathing, for instance. We would work really with body movement, but it's a bit difficult to condense...

**CTM:** Right, right.

**LZ:** But I can bring another example, for instance. I brought an instrument with me, which is a very emotional instrument, but if you want, I can play a few notes in the video and see how that affects the room... yeah?

**LEC:** Yeah.

**LZ:** Would you like that?

**CTM:** Yeah!

**LZ:** I just have to get it a little bit warmed up.

**CTM:** Right. But while you're tuning, we'll continue talking, right?

**LEC:** We'll continue talking.

**LZ:** Yeah, of course! I'm happy to listen to you two.

**CTM:** Well, I think that it's interesting, because now we're talking about embodiment. Makes me realize one of the more radical things about bringing embodiment into a classroom is the fact that most of the time, traditionally, one is told that the body is not what matters in class. It's the mind. So what we're doing is working with people's thinking and mind. So to bring the body in seems to me... is so...

**LEC:** A unique approach.

**CTM:** Yeah. And unusual. So it can lead to different kinds of knowledges, right? Than just those that have to do with how one analyzes something or how one learns something pedagogically, which focuses on just the mind.

**LEC:** Because what that does, and we all have been trained this way so we do it, it separates body and mind.

**CTM:** Body and mind.

**LEC:** So you get into the classroom, you don't expect anything to do with the body to come up. So to bring it out in what you do is a really different pedagogical approach.

**LZ:** Actually, I know it's innovative in this context, but if you think of it, it's also a way of decolonizing feminism. And it connects to ancient practices, because we know in the societies of our ancestors, that's how knowledge was transmitted, right? I'm actually going back to something but making it for the future, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so that it fits the millennial generation, who come. I would always mix scopes, so they would do for instance a blog. We would use the newest technology, and at the same time really try to go back to the body and have all this approach. It was challenging and it was a lot of work for me to prepare this.

**CTM:** Yeah, I can imagine.

**LZ:** But I am really excited to teach this class at Pratt Institute in the spring. Because they've heard about it and they got excited and got me this invitation, yeah.

**CTM:** That's wonderful. So, now, what is the instrument?

[00:15:27]

**LZ:** This is called the chalumeau. I think it's also a metaphor for what we are talking about, because this is actually a really ancient instrument. It's made also out of a wood... I don't know the English name. It's called chalumeau in French. This is a wood that people used to use for instruments and also for rituals, and now people don't make instruments out of it anymore. That's how it is. But this instrument was made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was made especially for me. It's a mix. It has a clarinet mouth-piece, and it has a really warm tone because of this wood.

**CTM:** The wood itself.

**LZ:** Yeah. So I will just try to play. I didn't get to warm up, but [Laughs] I hope you enjoy it.

**CTM:** Is this an instrument from France itself?

**LZ:** Yeah, the maker lives in France, and I think it also used to be found in the Middle East. It's quite similar to many flutes or other instruments ...

**LEC:** And on the continent of Africa.

**LZ:** Yes, yes. And I also play *kalimba*. I didn't bring my *kalimba*. [Laughter.] You have to come to see the performance "I Step on Air" –

**CTM:** We will do that.

**LZ:** I'll send you pictures of it.

[LZ plays instrument from 00:16:43 to 00:17:28.]

That was just my offering. [Laughs.]

**LEC:** That was really beautiful.

**LZ:** Yeah, you like it?

**CTM:** Thank you.

**LEC:** You have to have controlled breathing, huh?

**LZ:** Yes, yes.

**LEC:** Incredible breathing.

**CTM:** And familiar, actually. So interesting, no? I mean that –

**LZ:** Did it remind you of Indian rhythms?

**CTM:** Yeah. It reminds me of traditional music coming out of the Middle East but also India.

**LZ:** Yes, yes. I find this really present in my body memory. So even before I knew my family had lineage from India, I would cook certain meals or play saxophone in a certain way. People would be like, “Oh! You learned that in India!” And I was like, “I’ve never been to India! What are you talking about?” [Laughter]. Isn’t that ... and when I went there, I was telling you, in 2017 – I got to take this trip – I learned so much about myself, about my family history. And to realize this Caribbean history is so much more complex. You know, I grew up thinking very much, okay, my mother’s black, my father’s Jewish. And reading everything I could about both histories and then making the connection. And it was enriching to also see we also have European ancestry, as you were saying, we have Indian ancestry. We have to know all of these stories and undertones and we are...

**LEC:** Yeah. Because this has strong African resonances. This instrument.

**LEC:** Incredible.

**CTM:** Yeah. And it is warm. It is like this full warm tone, which is just beautiful. Okay, we can talk to you for a long time about this, I think.

**LZ:** Yeah. You know, talking about the African aspect... We performed the piece “I Step on Air” in Ghana this summer. And May Ayim was Ghanan and German. So when we brought the piece back there – many people don’t know her in Ghana because she didn’t grow up with her Ghanan family – and so I’m playing the *kalimba* and doing the work that we imagined as Afro-Europeans, and it was really interesting to see the impact and how people reacted to the performance over there. How they connected that to certain traditions they would know, so from women, performance, and traditions.

**LEC:** Bringing memory for them.

**LZ:** Right.

**LEC:** Wow.

**CTM:** Right. It’s amazing. So shifting a little bit, Layla, how would you talk about the sort of challenges you have faced in really doing what you’re doing or have been doing for all these years?

**LZ:** In terms of feminist ...?

**CTM:** In terms of, yeah, within feminist communities, within any activist, political spaces. So challenges you’ve faced in terms of actually making certain kinds of connections and solidarities and alliances. Because clearly you embody so many

different narratives, histories, and stories, and then the work you do clearly also does express those different lineages and using different genres and forms. So what are the challenges?

[00:20:44]

**LEC:** And struggles too.

**CTM:** Struggles, yes.

**LEC:** Even in the academy. Because the course you taught at Humboldt, they welcomed it, they were really impressed and happy. But sometimes inside the academy, they don't understand what we're trying to do. Especially when you're trying to merge activism and scholarship. So all ... everything. We're in the middle of all of this.

**LZ:** I think it's like a puzzle. In terms of my genealogy, I realize really quickly that I'm trying to gather pieces of a puzzle. I have this image, and I'm trying to make this puzzle, but you realize very soon there's many pieces missing, and you know those pieces are gone, you won't be able to put them together. So what do you do? You can just throw the whole thing out, or you make a new pattern, right? You can still do something out of those pieces. In terms of challenges, I think the biggest challenge I have faced is that I believe that people who are against feminism or even the structures of societies that are patriarchic, racist, classist, or whatever, have the ability to bring people to not agree with each other.

So for instance, we may have conflicts within feminist communities. We can talk for hours and not get to the root of the matter. Because if the conflict is actually coming from another sphere and another realm – I would say from a spiritual realm – then we can talk on a political level forever and still not manage to agree. So I think one of the largest challenges that I have faced... I do believe in spirituality and I believe it can be a power that can be used in good and can be used in bad. Some people can use it against each other, or some people can be sometimes manipulated. So you might be talking to your feminist sister, but you don't feel like you're talking to your feminist sister. You may be talking to someone else. You don't know who that person is, who you're talking to.

**LEC:** Girl!

**LZ:** You have to first be aware of that and realize, "Who am I talking to right now?" Maybe get back to the point you can actually talk with the person in front of you. And I think that is a really big challenge that I have become very conscious of. The first step is to become conscious and to realize it. I think it permeates all fields of society. It can permeate academia. It can permeate household, all various spheres. So as long as certain men, who don't want feminist struggles to move forward or who don't want

equal rights, will also be able to influence people to go against each other. I think the key word is just, ‘divide and rule’. Yeah. I think the main challenge I face is ‘divide and rule’. The ‘divide and rule’ strategy which we know comes from colonialism, and it’s still present today, so how can we always work on ourselves? And talking also about myself and any other people, always keeping in mind there is this ‘divide and rule’ strategy going on. Even if we may have different interests within feminist communities, we have different goals and different experiences... but how can we go back to maybe the larger goals?

Let’s say, we talk about dividing the salaries, for instance. I think that’s something that all women would agree on, that women should be paid the equal as men for the same work. Something that we can agree on, and can we keep the wide goals in mind? Make sure we still deal with the arguments or the challenges, but we connect our forces together when we need to reach ... and I think women have been doing that, and feminists have been doing that. I’m quite positive, optimistic, I would say, in terms of activist feminism. Because I think the women who came before me did a huge amount of work that laid the base for me to be able to be where I am today, and able to do the things that I am going to do.

[00:24:57]

**CTM:** How do you read the current political moment and what we are facing in this moment? Either in Germany, France, or Europe, and then here? Because I think there are some very systematic and difficult and toxic connections that are being made through forms of governance, authoritarianism, and all of this kind of stuff now, across these spaces. In some ways, we continue to do the work we do, but they also pose some really significant challenges, in terms of not being seduced by it, not being complicit in some of those very violent forms of rule and ‘divide and conquer’ as you were saying. So if you were to think about what is it that we are facing at this moment in the spaces that you know best, in the geopolitical spaces you best? And any ideas or strategies of how we can make connections among us to move to a different space here and not allow us to actually be colonized in the ways actually we’ve been talking about?

**LEC:** That’s a ...

**CTM:** Big question.

**LEC:** ... Big question.

**LZ:** [Laughs.] It is.

**LEC:** But a starting point – I hear Chandra entirely – could be looking at the here and now in this country and then you can take it to Europe and stuff. Because 53% of

white women voted for Trump, and look at the implications that are all negative for women since that day. So we can begin there.

**LZ:** In terms of the current political situation, I have to say that there are two things that strike me. The first one is that I see that many people who were not used to think[ing] of themselves as political now start talking about topics I would never hear them mention before. For instance, I hear friends of mine who are white professors in the academia get really concerned with the situation with, let's say, migrants at the border or whatever. I won't say that maybe they didn't think about it before, but maybe they had other struggles they were interested in? So I really have to say that, I notice that when something is happening on the media level and is talked a lot about, it forces sometimes people to become conscious about certain things. Especially in the U.S. society, I feel. Also looking at social media. I saw someone posting something recently also about visas and things like that. I really see that I didn't use to hear people talk about that so much. There's something very much about, "We're in the U.S., and we're citizens, and we have our struggles, but we may not..." People in the U.S. are not always aware of what's going on around the situation of people here who don't have citizenship.

**CTM:** Absolutely.

**LZ:** And so one good thing about that is that I realized it forced certain people to become aware of certain realities, which also I think are not new, in any way. To be honest, politics changes, governments change, whatever, but certain things people are really getting upset about now – I know – are realities that were already existing. It's just that the press didn't talk about it, maybe? And that kind of thing. Whether it's Germany or the U.S. or different countries, I see always a continuity in history. I see still issues in the way the past is being acknowledged, that that explains very much the present power structures. Which is why I've tried to address, you know, at my modest level. I think of history as more a spiral. So I don't see it as something linear. I also don't think it's just a regular circle which is, things come back the way they were. But there is a spiral. You see certain patterns that are repeated, and it's really important to become aware of these patterns and maybe of the strategies as you say, so maybe that would be the next answer... but to see what are the tools that have been used in the past and helped people move forward in terms of political agendas. I think solidarity is a key word. You asked me about which solidarity, so I have to get a bit more precise, but 'solidarities' is usually my answer to this type of question. How can we move forward? I think the most important thing is that all people who are being discriminated against – and I'm talking about women but here I think also about beyond gender, really – connect their efforts to fight, for instance, discrimination in the classroom, in the media, in the curriculum development. For instance, in Germany, because you wanted me to address it, we had a really big movement to suppress the n-word from all the old schoolbooks that were still being used in class.

[00:30:25]

**CTM:** And still had the n-word?

**LZ:** And still had it... many, many. I mean, this is interesting, because people still use it in the U.S. context.

**CTM:** Oh, yeah.

**LZ:** But in Germany, the word is really problematic, and there were people moving forward on this. The reason why they managed to achieve this and to say that when books are being reprinted, it's okay to look at historical books, but we don't want to have this word in it anymore, and we don't want to have racist content in these old books ... because the argument was, "It's an old book, it's something that the children have to know about." The German history, the cultural heritage. And it's because many, many different parts of the activist scenes – so the ISD, the Initiative of Black Germans, the feminist circle, all of these overlapping circles – really connected their efforts on this. I think that's emblematic of how it can work out? Especially in public appearance, people manage to agree on certain goals... this can help us move forward.

I'm really interested in decolonizing feminism; that's why I think people like us who have the chance and the privilege to have had traveled and to have had maybe seen other forms of feminism can bring a lot to how we think of it in the West, and also to not think that because we are here in the West, we are more advanced in terms of women's situations than somewhere else. That's my opinion personally. I think that patriarchs' structures take different forms, and so here we may have certain rights that some people don't have in other countries, but they may have other forms of using power. I think it's really interesting to observe this in all the communities and to bring that together.

Maybe to go back to the film, because you were asking me about that... so this is one example of this female biography that was completely forgotten. She was brought up back to the public by Oxana, and she made this movie-project. We laid out a commemorative stone and now in the university program at Humboldt-University, people discuss her biography. The film is in the curriculum of certain universities, but the movie is not only about her. It starts with her and then it switches over to the present, even into the future. So it's very much about current discrimination issues and struggles. That's also, I think, is an answer that I have, is to always try to think of history maybe not so much as linear? So I always try to think, "How is this all connected? How do you see ..." As you say, there is a current climate, but what happened before that? Why is that people are paying attention more closely to certain things? I always think it's good when people become clear about the realities of their countries and about all of their own individual agency and that everyone has the

power to impact politics. Start with yourself and then impact the way you treat other people. I'm saying 'you', but I don't mean 'you two', obviously. I mean the general 'you'.

**CTM:** But you do mean us too. [Laughter]

**LEC:** Everybody, everybody.

**CTM:** Yeah.

**LZ:** It's my third language, you know, so I'm trying my best but ... [Laughter]

**LEC:** But in this case, it's right. They're everybody. And you know, in talking about looking the past and connecting it to the present, so that we can understand that what's happening now is not new ... and how important that is. Because you see so many things – you're right – that are happening now, like the whole thing with migrants at the border, that this man doesn't want them to come here, 'that's so horrible'. But the U.S. has had that kind of history with different ... even individuals. I was thinking as you were mentioning that woman, that ... what's her name? Claudia Jones. That Carole Boyce Davies did that thing, that brought back Claudia to life here, in this country, where she was deported. Imagine! Deported out of the United States, and that she left here, in what they were doing at the time – because she was 'this communist' and the kind of work she was doing was so incredible for black people in this racist America – and then she was forgotten. Just deported, forgotten. And then here comes this Trinidadian scholar, who brings her back to life and goes to London and finds that her grave is left of Karl Marx. The name of the book. You have so much of that.

And I was also thinking about Zora Neale Hurston, an incredible feminist activist. Just recently that some people are doing this work...

[00:35:22]

**CTM:** Sometimes people now talk about her.

**LEC:** Sometimes now people are talking about her. So you're absolutely right. It's been there. It's happening. This is what makes your work, as a young scholar, you're doing all this historical work that is current. Bringing it to the present.

**CTM:** One of the things that seems to me to be so key in what you've been talking about and what Linda's been talking about is really this idea that there are all of these historical stories and narratives that exist all over the world that can be really inspirational if in fact people knew them and could connect them. So some of the work then, the strategies that you're talking about, is about – and these are the things we can do, because we know how to do research, we think about these things, and we're teachers – so it's to really multiply the histories and the genealogies that are

available in the public realm, so that in fact people can make these connections. Without Carole writing about Claudia Jones, very few people know about her. Now suddenly there's this whole lot of research that historians are doing about the role of black women in liberation struggles in the United States.

**LEC:** Who'd been forgotten –

**CTM:** Who'd been completely forgotten, and now their names are now out there.

**LEC:** Even the Left and the Communist party didn't talk about Claudia Jones with the deportation. So you're absolutely right. The different levels of racism that we have to look at, and in terms of solidarity it's so important. How do you form solidarity across borders, across nation-states, without how inclusive we have to be about differences?

**CTM:** And some of those solidarities again can come from making visible those histories of solidarity, that have already happened among different women, from different nations even. I'm thinking of the Vietnamese women who talked about this whole idea of getting together as women and what they called 'speaking bitterness', which is sharing their own lives as women and the difficulties. Which inspired women in the United States to talk about 'consciousness-raising', and there were those connections among Left women, at that time. But that's again not a genealogy that is visible, that people even know about. So people were involved in antiwar movements, in Communist movements, and in feminist movements were able to make those connections. To me, that's a really amazing example, and when I hear you, this is what I'm thinking. So that the imagination is just much more capacious than what we are taught to imagine, because we have these narrow stories in the media and in the public realm that are repeated over and over again, and they're all stories that can lead to despair rather than hope.

**LEC:** Because there's no recognition of history and no understanding of the significance of history in the current stories. No recognition, and no understanding what it means. And so that prevents solidarity. That prevents connections. People start seeing themselves as individuals, and then when that ties into this ideology of individualism, it's like, "What can I do? Everything is hopeless."

**LZ:** That connects very much to language. Maybe that's an aspect I didn't touch upon so much, but much of the work I've been doing in Germany was to transform the German language. Not only in terms of racist language but also sexist language and more generally even certain expressions, how they're used to tell narratives. I was working a lot with a white feminist called Professor Lann Hornscheidt] who is really active in challenging the German language and trying to-[imagine—because we are talking about imagination—how can we use other words to say certain things? Because if we don't have the words for it we won't be able to...and as you say, this is

cultural enrichment for society as a whole. I think this is the key point. You gave the example of the Vietnamese women who were inspiring feminists in the U.S., and although many people in society may feel challenged by this aspiration to make history more visible and different genealogies, it is in the long term, in the end, an asset for society as a whole and for, as you say, moving us forward, our consciousness forward, and being able to imagine societies in the future that are also more equal and where everybody can be more happy, I would say.

[00:40:32]

**CTM:** I think these connected stories are only threatening if you have a mind which says, “Somebody else is doing well; I’m doing badly.”

**LEC:** That’s the individualist.

**CTM:** The individualist, comparative attitude. “We are the best, and somebody else can’t have taught us anything.” That, to me, is one of the major things feminists, especially anticapitalist feminists, are fighting against, right? That sense that we are all just a small pie, and we’re fighting for our little piece and to be superior.

[Laughter] And meanwhile Trump and company have walked off with, like, 80% of the pie already. [Laughter] So it’s not ...

**LZ:** I’ve been thinking also about talking about strategies. I lived in Cameroon for six months, and I was doing an internship with an organization called AfricAvenir. The founder was a man from Cameroon who was the father of my best friend, so he knew me since I was very young. He had always told me, “When you’re older, you’ll probably be a political science student, and you come, and you will learn a lot on the mother continent,” and all that. I was like, “What is he talking about?” [Laughs]. And I would see the book from May Ayim on his shelf, so that’s also how I got to learn about Ayim. Both him and his wife were professors in Germany and he founded this organization. I went on to study political science in Sciences Po, and at one point, they said we need to do an internship abroad. So I went. We had organized conferences where he would connect people from the civil society ... he would invite maybe someone from the government and then a woman from the marketplace, and all kinds of different people and a lot of women ... and they would all have to listen to each other in a very much Western African-centered tradition practice of listening. The people who were obviously higher in the hierarchy would go back and have also new knowledge or many things to think about. At that time, he had a really great library where I could read also many feminist works. I would read about how some feminists use ... because we were talking about tradition, so we can use the elementals. The spiritual elements and the knowledge that has been transmitted to us, maybe not always consciously, but sometimes it’s still present. So how can we also use that to move forward? I think it’s really important when we today as feminists are

very much involved in day-to-day political consciousness, very material things ... how can we keep enhancing our spiritual strategies to have a feminist impact on the world? That's an aspect I'm really interested in.

**CTM:** You're definitely an old soul.

**LZ.** Thank you. [*Laughter*]. And even you're an example of that, Chandra. You and Linda, with your both different backgrounds and as colleagues putting this project together and having been doing it for several years and giving this platform and both bringing in perspectives ... that's also inspirational and a great example of solidarity.

**LEC:** And the power of collaborative work, which feminists have to learn too.

**CTM:** Yeah, absolutely. So I don't know, maybe would you mind playing something else to kind of end?

**LZ:** [*Laughs*] I have maybe to warm up a little bit.

**LEC:** Yeah, no, each time she has to warm it up.

**CTM:** Okay.

**LZ:** Yeah. So if then, I would need a little break. But I also just wanted to tell you about our movie. This movie also has very beautiful music. It's called *Dancing Through Gardens*. It has a lot of dance scenes and unseen archival material. This is Tatjana Barbakoff, by the way. She was a Chinese-Russian-Jewish [dancer] ... I don't think you can read from here.

**CTM:** Can you see?

**LZ:** And even the way I met Oxana is because I saw these posters of her performance, which is dedicated to her. I thought, "Oh, it's an Afro-German artist. She's doing this piece about a Chinese-Russian-Jewish woman. This is really interesting, because it has to do with me." So you were talking about collaboration, so our whole work is very much about collaboration on-stage and also collaborative research and all of that. I have always also noticed how this is enriching, how you get so many other perspectives through collaboration.

[00:45:02]

**CTM:** If you work through collaboration, it makes you think about things you don't think about on your own.

**LEC:** Yeah, and you're constantly learning. That's how you learn from each other.

**CTM:** Especially when you collaborate across differences of various kinds, but you have similar visions for how you want the world to look like, so it makes a real difference.

**LEC:** Which brings us to our last question about vision. What do you envision as a future for women across all these borders of feminist work and bring them together? What kind of society would you like to see?

**LZ:** Oh, okay. [*Laughs.*]

**LEC:** We're assuming you have some problems with the society as is, whether it's Germany, or France, or the U.S.

**LZ:** In general, what kind of society I would like? I mean, I would like to see a society where, as I was mentioning earlier, people get the same pay for the same work regardless of their gender or their cultural heritage or their race or all of that. I would like to see a society that is less imperial and colonial, and I think that involves all of us, because even though I can say I'm a feminist, activist, and I do a lot of writing... but also, I have to work on myself and see how by living in the West and certain structures, I also benefit from the colonial system. I'm thinking of the environment, for instance. Or I'm thinking about imperial war policies, about countries being bombed and things like that. It's easy to say, "I'm against this!" but I need to drive my car, and I need my oil, and all of that stuff. I think a great challenge ... it's not an answer, it's more a question I have for the future: how can we maybe find a society where we can have the comfort we aspire to, but without this on the cusp of other people and other countries? I'm also thinking of food, because I travel a lot. So I see countries I've been to and countries I've been going back to after several years, how they will have to give their food away a lot to Western countries. Then people in the original countries don't even get to eat so much the food that is actually from there, because it's being exported so much to other countries. And I don't have to understand to that, because I also like to shop my food here and eat the things that I want. But these are bigger ...

**CTM:** Systems.

**LZ:** Bigger systems, that also have to do with the fact that certain systems have been destroyed. I'm thinking of agriculture, that countries are heavily reliant on other countries now in terms of food and other energies. So I think that feminists also have a contribution to make to that discourse. Because I believe that feminists and their spirit are more aspiring to think of a more equal society, so they can also make comments in those fields. I know there's many women who are doing such work with feminist environmentalism and this kind of the thing. More generally, in terms of borders, we were talking about borders... I think that's really a big wish for the future, that there would not always be certain people deciding they are in charge of a border which doesn't actually belong to them. And because we are here in this country, I think also wishing for more visibility and presence of indigenous women in society, and that's also something I try to think about constantly or to do my

homework in this term, to learn this history and to also be aware. For instance, when I'm curating an event, I'm curating this [Celebration of Women] event in November, and to make sure I invite black women, Indian women, white women to perform. And it's really important to me to have a Native woman from this country to be performing on stage and to realize maybe I don't have that many contacts even to those women. Where do I find them? Why is it that it requires more effort to do this programming? So it was successful, I recommend also November 17<sup>th</sup>, at the festival.

More generally, maybe it may sound a little bit cheesy, but more love. I think love is a very strong force. When I read bell hooks later on, I already finished my semester. She was talking also about love as a force for teaching and in feminist circles, and I had not read that before teaching at all. So I thought, "Oh, this was something I was doing instinctively." I also think love and respect for each other is a very strong power that can impact society, and rich, the material fact that we're doing on the material and physical realm, but also starting with acknowledging the value of each person.

**CTM:** Wonderful.

**LEC:** And if we did that, there would of course automatically be stronger solidarity. We would recognize the sameness across difference.

**LZ:** Right.

**LEC:** Well, thank you. This has been really, really, really wonderful.

**LZ:** Thank you too. Thank you, Chandra. Thank you, Linda.

**CTM:** Thanks, Layla.

[00:50:19]

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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.*