Feminist Freedom Warriors

Lorgia Garcia Peña & Medhin Paolos

4/23/18

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CTM: Today is Monday April 23rd and we are delighted to welcome Lorgia Garcia Peña & Medhin Paolos to Syracuse University and to our conversation.

LGP & MP: Thank you

LEC: So glad you're here

MP: Glad to be here.

LGP: Very glad to be here

CTM: So ...

[00:00:25]

LEC: Well we told you how we go about doing this and so we wanna ask you we are gonna ask the same questions to both of you, but after one you can just follow up with the other. So tell us a bit about how you came to feminist work that you do and your feminist consciousness that got you into this work.

LGP: So I grew up with a lot of women, i was raised by my mom my grandma and a whole bunch of aunties who took care of me and my brothers and my sister so in many ways even though I didn't have the language for it or the terminology for it what I grew up with was a form of feminism, that was based on supporting women women, supporting each other and sharing the

work and the life, the everyday life, and as i became more, I guess more aware of the literature and the work that the women were doing in different spheres all over the world I - it became clearer to me that what my lived experience was was a feminist experience. That was sort of the origins, the origins of it. Eventually in college in graduate school I was introduced to new work, the work of Chandra and to the work of Latina feminists and it spoke to me, it was one of those moments of okay that's what I want to do when I grow up.

CTM: Did you grow up in the DR or in the States?

LGP: Both. So I spent the first part of my life in the Dominican Republic and my family brought me here when I was about to turn twelve and so I spent my early childhood in the Dominican Republic and I spent my pre teens and teenage years - I came of age in New Jersey, and I went to state schools in New Jersey, and I was fortunate enough to go to a state university that had a very strong tradition of reading and thinking through women of color feminism in a time in which that wasn't the praxis in most universities. So while there were so many other issues in my school and ways in which the corporate university was operating at least I was fortunate to be in classrooms where the norm was to read Anzeldua, and the norm was that you would graduate college knowing these really basic things about different ways of thinking through women of color feminism.

CTM: So what period are you talking about?

LGP: 90s. So I went to college from '94 to '98.

CTM: And you Medhin?

MP: I grew up in Italy. I come from a family of Eritrean migrants, both my father and my mother, and I didn't grow up like her surrounded by women in particular. I have a sense that my sense of feminism, or sense of justice and equality, it comes mostly from my father, even though my mother also, of course she did her part, but the way my father operates the way he moves around the world and the way that he shows me and makes me feel, like you know, like I have to demand my space, I have to demand whatever equality was needed where I grew up, and then growing up I started noticing quite randomly that all the community that I was apart of- the Eritrean Ethiopian community in Italy - the energy of it was women, on stage there were women, in the kitchen there were women and in those kitchens - those spaces were powerful, those were offices. Because decisions - it wasn't just the making of the food - it was decision making for a whole entire community. So I absorbed all of that - again just like her i didn't have the language i didn't have theory I just absorbed all of that and I made it my own growing up in Italy in a space

that was mostly white and mostly supposed to be not mine, I used those tools that I observed from my father to those women and I guess that's my version of feminism.

CTM: And what about the communities that then you became a part of, because I know that you've had a history of activism in different movements and spaces.

MP: Yes. Well I could start from far, far back but I'll start from the middle. At some point in my early twenties I joined a small group of people in Rome, actually in Rome and Milan and this group of people the members are all sons and daughters of immigrants and we simply decided to get together and get knowledge and we started working on the citizenship laws in Italy precisely because we have a law that's not inclusive - that's quite racist - that's not inclusive of the current Italian population. So children born or raised in Italy are not considered Italian citizenship. So at the time there wasn't a conversation going on regarding children of immigrants. Of course there was a conversation regarding immigration but the specificity wasn't there and specificity is important especially when bureaucracy is in the middle, especially when your citizenship, your papers are not there. That not having citizenship in this case would not allow you a whole bunch of opportunities. And we are today in the United States I am here because I am able to travel and get a visa because of - I have Italian citizenship. I don't think that with my Eritrean citizenship it would be as easy if possible at all to travel and have the opportunity to be here and have a conversation with you today. So that organization that started first around the central station in Rome, it was at first just, you know, not different from this scenario. And then we got online to reach everybody as possible because everybody's online. So from the online we - again we became physical again. So we became very political and our work was mainly lobbying and being in constant conversation with politicians and society, you know we went to schools to talk to students and we realized we also needed to talk to teachers we produced videos and at the end we were still working and now over ten years after there are newer organizations happening which I love seeing the work that keeps going and in different forms hopefully better, you know, the end result is not there yet. But we are getting older as you know activism when it's done right is very tiring. And it's not rewarding at all, it's not fun even, sometimes it gets fun.

CTM: It depends on who's company you're in.

MP: Yes, yes of course but it gets - it's very… it's ungrateful work, so it's tedious, tedious. So to these these new groups, new communities left and right coming up and just taking inspiration, I love it. And nowadays there's no political party no politician that can't go on the platform - the mainstream platform and not talk about second generation.

CTM: So you got that onto the public arena.

MP: Yeah.

[00:10:29]

CTM: And you, in terms of your activism?

LGP: So I think my activism started in college, around - it was I think it was like most activism, kind of accidental, and as a reaction to, to something. And so when I was at Rutgers as an undergrad I must have been sixteen or something like that, the president of the university made a statement saying that black and latino students were genetically predispositioned to not succeed...we were born dumb basically. It was… I was practically a child but I knew there were so many things that were wrong with that. And we, I was part of a newspaper, a student newspaper, it was the oldest black and latino student newspaper on campus and I remember sitting there at like two in the morning or something like that, trying to make sense of how to write an editorial about this nonsense. And it just, it seemed like writing wasn't enough at the moment. And so Rutgers is a big sports school, and so we, my friends and I started thinking what would have the most impact. And so civil disobedience seemed like the way to go at that moment because writing letters and protesting otherwise was not making it happen. So we interrupted a game and sat in the middle of the court. That was my initiation to civil disobedience and activism. And then I turned around and looked around and it was mostly women, as it tends to be. And that - again it was one of those moment where yeah I didn't have the language to talk about intersection and intersections of race and gender and sexuality but it was all there it was mostly women, mostly queer women of color doing the labor, doing the work that wasn't completely public. So it was us writing the posters it was us doing the legwork and then it was the men taking the stage and talking in front of the news.

MP: True, that is so true. No go on.

LGP: So that was sort of my initiation and from there there was no going back, once consciousness is born you can't unlearn it. So every space I've inhabited since has been about: where is the struggle and where am I going to put my energy because the struggle is everywhere. So where is my struggle. And for me it was - there were two things that I've always cared deeply about and that has been the rights of undocumented people not just in the U.S. but undocumented people everywhere. Mainly because it was part of my own reality. I was undocumented for awhile as a teenager and I have a lot of family members who are undocumented and had to face deportation and family separation. Just a few days ago my aunt passed away and her two children couldn't go bury her because that would mean they can't come back to the U.S. So the heartbreak of that community was always very close to home. And the other issue has been the justice in education, however it looks which could mean the spaces, the academic spaces that

I've inhabited in that were always so unequal and so I've put my energy from the beginning on sort of merging those two spaces. What does it mean to create more just spaces for people who are excluded in the classroom, people who are excluded from academia, knowledges that are excluded from, what is my place as a woman, as a woman of color in academia and what is the amount of privileges I have precisely because I was climbing on the back of other women to get here. And so it's always been about finding that one thing that I think I can contribute within those spaces that were not created for me or for people like me.

LEC: I'm listening and thinking there are so many similarities with other women we've talked with and our own histories as well.

CTM: Our own histories as well yeah.

LEC: As I listen to your activism I'm thinking yep, same, Canada same, U.S. same. Capitalism does it.

MP: I was thinking the same, exactly the same.

CTM: And so much of all the stuff that the two of you talked about but also we've talked about all the time is how deeply these struggles are with the state and citizenship. And how, in some form or the other, especially those of us who cross borders, to, whether it's physically in this generation or pass generations, how those are always struggles that are key because usually the - where we live, those institutions are not created in our image, ever. So the struggles are always around. Those are the common threads that's why there's so much that feels familiar.

LEC: it's just so interesting you know because it makes you realize that there's a kind of uniformity to oppression that comes out of a place of organizing capital. That's how it happens. The movement of people the movement of labor followed by the exploitation. So systematization is amazing. So can you tell us now about your work, your own work and how you see that in the context of this larger struggle we've been talking about the work that you do?

LGP: So I - my work is research and teaching and for a long time it was activism research and teaching and at some point i decided that they couldn't be separated. So that, there is three words that I put together, activism, research and teaching, and they all happen in every single space. So that - what I try to do, is if you can call it activism or social justice, I like to teach with justice and I like to write the same way. And the way that is working for me in my current position as a scholar and as a teacher is that I teach for a particular population in my class and I make it very clear both in the way in which I write my syllabus - so one is who I teach, you're going to find in my work I'm going to be teaching your work. I'm going to be teaching other women of color,

I'm going to be teaching the stuff that I didn't find in books when I was trying to find a language to describe what was my reality. But I'm also going to be teaching for women who are like me in college. First generation college students of any type of background, students of color, LGBTQ students, students who are always excluded from the classroom because of who they are or what they look like. And I make that very explicit in the classroom - I am teaching for you, and anybody else is welcome but I am teaching for you. And so I think that - it's been really amazing for me as a teacher because what happens in the classroom is there's a lot of community building that to me is way more important than anything else I can teach because students end up feeling comfortable and safe in my classroom. And the work is amazing because the students are comfortable and safe rather than having to defend themselves. So that to me is the biggest activism - it's important that I call it activism because as someone on a tenure track position, there's always a threat to your tenure and it - something that's been repeated to me since the creation of Freedom University - 'oh you're not going to get tenure if you keep doing this work, why don't you wait?' Well there is no time to wait. We cannot be waiting for something. The work is now. The work is always now. So my work has been my activism my interventions has mostly been within the university, within the classroom, within knowledge production and that has many shapes - one is advocating at the administrative level for students rights and that usually means admissions, particularly admissions of undergraduate students, decisions about funding and support for undocumented students. We created an organization called Push at Harvard that literally is protecting undocumented students at Harvard as what is called. And what we've been doing is demanding institutional resources, clear institutional resources for undocumented students that are not just about emissions but once they're there. So one of the things we were able to do this past year at Harvard was hire a lawyer that's going to be supporting undocumented students and their families so it's serving not just undocumented students but also mixed status families that are also affected by the situation. Funding for DACA renewal and visa fees and so on. So practical things that are necessary. So on the one hand it's negotiating with the administration and on the other hand it's finding - creating courses that are relevant in terms of the material the students are learning but also in terms of the spaces. And the final leg of it is the research. I'm producing an interesting - producing research that goes against this sort of dominant ways of thinking and that allows us to get out of this canonical, colonial and capitalist led of knowledge.

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CTM: Can you say a couple words about Freedom University?

LGP: So Freedom University is sort of one of the most beautiful experiments that I've been part of and in 2000 - my first teaching position was at the University of Georgia right after FMS and I started in 2010 and the semester that I was hired as an assistant professor of Latix studies the

Georgia board of regents banned undocumented students from accessing higher education and that was a historic rule because undocumented students as you know have always had a hard time getting funding but they were actually banned from schools and what this legislation meant was if I was rich and you're undocumented and I say, 'I will pay for your school' you still cannot connect - so it was the most retrograde and racist legislation that we had seen in the south since Jim Crow. And I had just been hired to teach in this place - Latinx studies! And I saw my students leaving. The few Latino students that I had in the classroom were just dropping out of college, packing their stuff and going away because they were so afraid. Because that also came with threats of deportation but also the fact that they were undocumented in the school served to identify them as undocumented and therefore identify their families. So it was really really horrible. And so I came out of a class in which one of my most exciting students who was committed to the class came to my office hours and said 'Professor I'm leaving, you know, I'm the only person in my family who has papers, we're just packing our stuff and moving away from Georgia'. And I came - I literally came out crying from my office feeling completely impotent because nothing that we were doing within the university system, writing letters, nothing was working. And so I bumped into a colleague of mine in the hallway between a caplan and we just looked at each other and we didn't have to say a word and we just looked at each other and said 'what are we going to do'? And so we met with a few undocumented youth from Georgia Keish Kim was one of them, and Gina Perez was another one of them and we asked them what can we do to support you because nothing within the university was clearly going to work. And they were like, 'well you're teachers. Teach.' And so we began to think outside the box. Okay so nothing within this school was gonna work so we are going to make something else because - and that's now Freedom University was born. It became the first in its nature and there's been some replicas of Freedom U all over the U.S. but it became a school for undocumented students. And it's been quite the experiment and the journey for us.

CTM: It's amazing. Yeah I remember being completely blown away when you all started that and thinking this is just - it's bold but it's also interesting that you all were assistant professors.

LEC: Taking those risks.

CTM: and you just, you know -

LGP: I was the only assistant professor.

CTM: Okay so the others were tenured?

LGP: They were all tenured. I was the only assistant professor and I was the only woman of color.

CTM: Yeah.

LGP: And I do have to say, my colleagues - and it was all women, at the beginning when we first met there were two men, and they got scared. And they dropped out. So who's got the ovaries here. *[Laughter]* They walked out, well we - as soon as the Ku Klux Klan started threatening us and all that the men disappeared and it was the women who stuck around. And it was the women and mostly queer women that led Freedom U and they - I was the only assistant professor but the other three women were incredibly supportive and protective of me. I have to say - I mean they were all supportive of my work and supportive of making sure I was taken care of at every level. Betina Kaplan especially was; we were at the same department and she - she always took the heat when she could for me. So that - but it was still you know, still a huge risk and the reason why I had to leave was because it was clear that I wasn't going to get tenure at that institution because I was against my employer.

CTM: Right.

LGP: But you were one of the first people I contacted, Chandra. And I wrote Chandra because I had - once Freedom U was open and running we were teaching it was great, it was a lot of work but it was fantastic. But then there was the question, the lingering question of what next. What are we gonna do with these kids? They still don't get to get a degree; we were not accredited. And so that's when I…

CTM: She contacted me and then I contacted Linda and we figured out ways of access.

LGP: You made it happen

LEC: And then we contacted schools in New York because we - I know a lot of undocumented kids in Brooklyn. And then we started a recruitment.

CTM: Yeah.

LGP: It was amazing and we found partners in other schools too, Williams College ended up being one of our partners eventually, Tops University, Dartmouth, so that we - we ended up having something like three dozen Freedom U kids go to school.

CTM: In all these different spaces. Which is kind of amazing no? To be able to do that.

LGP: It's been amazing

MP: Didn't you mention also something about Mexico? You have universities…?

LGP: The other thing that ended up happening was that some kids self-deported. Forwarded eventually. And so then we had this situation of Freedom U students who were now back in Mexico and didn't have a way to continue their education so we started working with Tecnológico de Monterrey and other schools in Mexico to make sure that they could go there so we have two now, degrees there and it's been expanding. The network - it's quite something, yeah.

CTM: And such a wonderful example of what you just said which is to you know the activism around scholarship, research, pedagogy, education and knowledge, right? Because the knowledges that you all were highlighting in your classrooms were basically knowledges of resistance and histories which go against the grain of the dominant narrative of history around all the inequities.

LEC: And you know the schools, the schools that are participating you can refer students. I referred a student to Dartmouth 'cause I knew that line was there and it was open and possible, and she graduated.

LGP: And that kind of network building continues so that now we are working MIT in trying to create some sort of pipeline for students and what continues to be very challenging is the students who are artists and whose interests are in music and visual arts because it's a lot more challenging to find some of the schools that are…

CTM: Going to be open to this.

LGP: To this and also understanding the population right? Knowing that it's very common for undocumented students to not have very high grades, so it's really easy to place the stellar students that have a four point o, but the ones that are average in terms of their grades…

LEC: They get overlooked.

LGP: They get overlooked and it's impossible to find them funding but most of the time it's because if you don't think you're going to be able to go to college, and you're working a full time job while going to high school and taking care of three siblings it's very very hard to have a four point o and that's the majority of the population - so trying to create awareness around that has been helpful but also the replica - the multiplication affect if you will I did what I did for Freedom U and like you said, then I went and let it be to the next generation, but that then next

generation - it was something else. And so now we have the students who graduated from Freedom U are now in PhD programs telling the University, 'you need to look at this population, this particular way 'cause otherwise you would have overlooked me' and I think that, just seeing how that's going the work that Keish is doing at Harvard and that did at Syracuse. The work that Melissa is doing at Dartmouth I mean they're opening more doors for undocumented students.

MP: This type of work only works if the people involved, (a): use their platforms with bravery in some cases if they're not protected enough. And, if the people involved pay it forward. Otherwise it ends, and that's - that's more difficult than it sounds because sometimes people just, 'okay,' you know, either they don't feel like they can do it, or they don't see the bigger picture. They don't see the other people - the reflection of themselves into somebody else but the pay it forward thing is key to almost anything in any platform in any arena.

CTM: And I think that can be - that itself is, a very fundamental feminist value, so it is not about yourself always, yeah? So if it is only about taking credit for what you're doing, then you're not, you know, you're not - you're paying it forward by doing - being such a badass, but you're not actually in fact relinquishing the work to people who should be picking it up, and withdrawing from it.

LGP: Which is why I think the classroom is so empowering, 'cause there's a notion of the collective that happens in the classroom and also a sort of leading by example kind of thing, where feminist praxis again, especially women of color feminism that always begins with 'okay this is where I'm coming from'. So if i'm telling my students this is where I'm coming from, I come from Trenton, New Jersey, and before that the DR and my parents were janitors, and I'm teaching you at Harvard, it is a lot clearer to them that they can do whatever they want - with bravery, and using platforms but it's not - and also with sincerity: this wasn't easy. And it isn't easy everyday, it's a struggle. I had a student who was just admitted ask me what was it like to be a women of color grad student at Harvard. And I said 'it's hell'. It's gonna suck everyday. Everyday you're going to get up and you're gonna say 'this is awful, I hate this I don't know how to do it' but you're going to have to get up while you're saying 'this is awful I hate it I don't wanna do it' and do it.

CTM: Yeah.

LGP: Because you have an immense privilege in your hands and you do not have the luxury - nobody from our community has the luxury to be just complaining.

CTM: Yeah

LGP: It's just not, not an option.

MP: Complain for two minutes, and then work on the solution. *[Laughter]*

LEC: Yeah.

[00:33:40]

CTM: Right, right. So, tell us about you and your work.

MP: Ooo, I'm not as good of a storyteller *[laughter]* but I'm gonna try. So my, my...not desire but my draw has always been sort of finding links and finding - yeah, more or less finding links. I started when I was around nineteen years old. I was a member of a musical band and that - the idea behind that musical band was to bring to the present a part of Italian musical tradition, music tradition by fusing it - infusing it with electronic music. And so that experience that lasted a decade for me basically my whole twenties I found myself traveling - again citizenship - traveling a part of the world with these band members old white Italians and I was going around the world bringing Italian culture - traditional Italian culture in North America, U.S., Canada, Mexico, all over Europe. And I started to see the reaction to me from the crowd. They would come to see our concerts and some, you know, some would be surprised, not in a negative way, but surprised. But the best was receiving the reaction of people with experiences of migration themselves, their families. 'Ah you are from Italy, exactly where from?' Where my whole life I received, 'no really where are you from? You cannot be from here. There's a piece of the story you're not telling me'. Yes there's a piece of the story I'm not telling you because it's not your business. *[Laughter]* And the question wasn't that one. So that gave me, again, the traditional music we were bringing to the stage, to the stages, was...was originally from females. The tradition of female vocals. I'm talking about mondine rice weeders which were young women working in rice fields. So there is strong tradition and the boss, the *padrone* used to keep the rhythm of the work by making them sing. So in more recent years they form a choir of around twenty women, there are a few of these choirs in northern Italy. So as a band we brought to the present their music. They're still singing by the way. So we had this project together called From Mother to Daughter. Even though there were some men involved, you know even original members, so it wasn't all - you know feminist doesn't mean necessarily woman.

CTM: No.

MP: So that was a start. That start brought me to photography and social justice. Social justice came again from the experience of receiving this, these eyes on me you know, 'okay you are a weird kind of Italian I've never seen anything like you'. And yet in Italy, it's full of people like

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me. Asians, black from all over - but Italians. We speak with an Italian accent and all of that. I-I spent a lot of time working on citizenship rights and later on with newcomers and refugees and asylum seekers precisely because I always feel like I am somewhere in the middle where I can communicate this group and this group and not just because of language skills my Tigrinya is actually very broken so it's not that - it's recognizing and knowing the language of each group and making it - bringing it into conversation. For example I grew up - I live in Milan still - very - in recent years we've seen the coming of new people trying to pass by through Italy to resettle all over Europe. People mostly either from Syria, Palestine and the horn of Africa. Many from Eritrea which my family is from Eritrea. So I've observed, and the treatment of these people coming was so different, especially in Italy it's a little bit different now. But it's different because there were people that put already in the country people who put themselves in the middle to say 'oh wait, you cannot treat those people like that'. We speak your language we know the rules we know how it works, this this and this needs to be done. So this is what I do - this is what I do always. I see something that doesn't make sense, that doesn't work and I try my best to fix it somehow. But one thing that I always found myself - a position that I found myself in is that - okay, when I was working on citizenship rights that was a job - citizenship rights. And when I was working on LGBT issues that was a job - LGBT issues. But the thing is that that can never...connected in practice on the job, let's say. But in my life, it was always intertwined. So it was always difficult to me, for me to separate those type of works.

CTM: Right.

MP: So I spent a lot of time trying to pull everybody and everything together and I found a resistance, I found curiosity - 'but okay we are talking about this how can we - we're talking about LGBT issues why are you talking about migration?'. Well… you know - and I would explain the 'whys' and all of the 'whys' and why it makes sense. And this has been for many years. Italy is not there on the concept of intersectionality yet, you know, even though it's obviously everywhere, you know. It's in people. It's in people moving. But it's been - that's mainly my work - trying to put everything together trying to find links and letting people know ' look, see? This is it'.

CTM: And how did you get to photography and film?

MP: Well, photography came through music if I am completely honest. When you are on tour a lot, you have a lot of downtime. So once before a tour, before coming to North America I simply went back home bought an Alogic camera and started taking pictures - it was just to spend time. But that became a media - I've always been quiet as a person, very much not a speaker, very much a listener. So I started taking pictures of - just because, and then it became 'aw, look' you know I could observe and make sense of certain situations more. And I have sort of a passion a

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sort of a like for archives so I really spent my time going through art - documents and pictures and postcards from way back when and many archives. And so I found materials that then - I started using photography to talk about this issue or that issue. You know usually LGBT, migration and so on. At some point I decided along with a colleague, Alan Maglio, to work on the Eritrean Ethiopian diaspora. And in fact we made a documentary called "Asmarina" and we're both photographers, he's actually very good photographer and we tried to work with that, but photography wasn't enough. So actually we needed to hear people's voices we needed to use music, and even in the music that we used in the film each - not each but most of the tracks the songs the way they are made they are a mix - you can hear the layers of whatever is in that context, a little bit of electronic, a little bit of the drums, a little bit of the vocals from this place that country, that tradition. It's a weird, very balanced fusion. So yeah photography brought me to movie making. I really really enjoy documentaries it's an art form that is fascinating to me. You know it's a film so you can... but it's also reality. Cinema di la realitá, we say in Italian. And so I love forever watching them. I never thought that I would make one and now I'm about to make another one *[laughs]*. So that is very fun to me.

CTM: Thanks.

[00:44:00]

LEC: And do you see, in that work you see the possibility of expanding something to reach larger audiences? Across borders?

MP: Well - which borders do you mean?

LEC: National, international.

MP: Well it's already happening because - yeah. If we talk - if we think about "Asmarina" which is a very very small production already, already it's been going on not only at festivals but in schools, which, she was talking about education, fair education earlier. And I - it was a hope that I had but I didn't know it actually happened. So "Asmarina" has been used in schools, in high schools and universities to teach about Italian colonialism, which I don't know around here...

CTM & LEC: It didn't exist.

MP: Exactly if you could - yeah. I studied in Italian high schools and college, it's just...it's not taught. It's not taught. And of course the newer generations don't know about that. But the older ones - that was deliberate. It was a deliberate omission - and it worked. But they were not able to

- they were able to erase the whole colonialism history from books - but it's all around. If you read the names on the streets…

CTM: Yeah.

MP: *[Laughing]* ...you know statues, the paintings, art, it's everywhere. So all we have to do is point it out, and say 'look'. Basically that's my work I say look *[Laughing]*. So that's it.

LGP: The method that you use in the film is so...it's so powerful. Because you have these documents you were talking about, photographs that you were looking at in the archive, and then the voices of people and putting them together along with the music, the music that came out of that encounter. And it's just - I feel like this generation responds really well to the multiplicity of media and any type of archive to me your film is an archive of Italian colonialism and its results right? Of diaspora and now, quote unquote refugee crisis.

MP: Yeah and when you say archive, of course we use material from institutional archives but also, photographs from people's drawers, from their homes, and that's the - that type of material is just as important as also history.

LEC: You all have a unique thing going you know? You have a unique thing going because we have a question that we ask 'how do you see your work traveling across borders and divides to create solidarities' and you are actually doing that. This is very unique.

MP: It's been a lifetime of observing these similarities all over, because I didn't just grow up the Eritrean community I grew up in a very, very, diverse situation. And I was lucky enough that I could travel so i real - the similarities the situations people go through is really… so there is so much that can be linked and it's not just a game you know this link, put the dots together, it makes sense because it helps you handle current situations. Like for example the asylum situation in Europe, the media talk about the issue in such a nonchalaunt air of way, 'okay there's a flood of people going and coming and now what are we gonna do it's an invasion'. First of all, no: it's not an invasion the numbers are quite clear. So there's no invasion whatsoever. But second, know the context. Don't - and also - don't just look at people coming this way. There are also people migrating towards African countries all the time. It's just that the doors to them are open, and the possibilities are open to them. So they can go with their passport wherever they want.

[00:48:56]

CTM: So Lorgia, talk a little bit about what you see as some real serious challenges that you might face in doing the kind of cross-borders solidarity or organizing or even the work you do in educational and higher educational context, you know.

LEC: Because what you were saying before just struck me you know like what's rewarded in the academy, it's not what you do.

LGP: No.

LEC: That's the context of this question I find very interesting. So I wanna come back to that.

LGP: Yeah I mean…

LEC: For people who do this kind of work.

LGP: I think Medhin talked a moment ago about how tiring this work is and I hear that from every single - mostly women, mostly women of color - that is in academia whether or not they're quote unquote doing activism, because it's questionable if the kind of mentorship that is demanded of women in academy is not activism, sometimes it is.

CTM: Right.

LGP: So I think one of the biggest challenges is that we face is there's a growth in terms of the demand of time and effort form people that are doing the kind of work that we're doing. As the times become more challenging the political and economic demands are growing but it seems like the number of the people doing the work is not. So I think there's a - the biggest challenge I sort of see within the immediate future is questions of exhaustion. Of human resource just not being enough to be efficient for the growth of exclusion. In all of these spaces where - now with the new administration in the U.S. context we're seeing more threats to more people, more challenges to more people and more fear to speak up and to do certain work because the consequences are more serious.

CTM: Dissent is completely penalized.

LGP: Dissent is penalized and criminalized in different ways, in multiple institutions that - there are levels of penalization right - so at the level of academia is you're not awarded for the work you do and the majority of the work you do as an activist or as somebody who's trying to do right by your students basically it's not rewarded but it's also discouraged. So I just had a lunch with a senior faculty in my department who encouraged me to do less mentorship because I was

spending too much time mentoring. And it was framed in: 'I'm worried about your time and your…' but it's more about, 'you should be doing this other thing'.

LEC: Because it's not going to be counted.

LGP: Because it's not going to be counted towards your tenure right? But also penalized at the level of job and promotion where it is not enough to do what is required for your job but also if you rattle too many things, you piss off too many people your tenure could be jeopardized. I mean you are in a precarious position and when you come to the fact that most of us doing this kind of labor are also not rich. For most of us doing this kind of work, we're the ones who made it in our families. So that it means that your position is - there's a reality of people who are dependant financially on you so you need your job, it's not just you need the prestige of the university. I'll be happy to quit my job and do this full time out of the living room of my house. But you have a child to support.

CTM: You have to earn a living too.

LGP: I have to earn a living. So there is - I think the biggest challenge is how to balance the question of earning a living, doing the work you want to do and serving the community you want to serve in this political climate. So that's on a very practical level, and then Chandra, in terms of the more transnational challenges, it is very interesting how it feels like ten years ago we were more ready to have transnational and global conversations than we are now. Everyone wants to be isolated into the national structures. And I think it's a strategy, right? Because if I can see that there is very little difference between what is happening with the Habesha community in Milan and what is happening to Latinos in the U.S. especially around issues of undocumented immigration, we might actually find a way to collaborate and dismantle things at a global level and then knowing what we know about structures being globalized capitalist structures that are in place because they work that way - so I think there is a resistance in having more transnational conversations but I think there is also a danger in having those conversations from a privilege - position of privilege in a U.S. university in which we often don't see the specificity right? So then we run the risk of going to Milan and saying 'this is what's happening in Milan because this is what's happening in the U.S. and not understanding the context. So I think context is important, listening a lot is important and finding very small ways of collaborations at a very small scale so that understanding can be built so that's a challenge but it's also where the productivity could be.

CTM: It's also a horizon.

Feminist Freedom Warriors

LGP: It's also a horizon. I'm a very hopeful person. So I feel like if I didn't have hope for things to be better I would just quit and go grow ajuga and fry plantains and just be happier in a grease truck or something like that.

CTM: So maybe talk a little bit about the project you all are working on "Mind the Gap".

MP: Do you want to start?

CTM: Because that's a really important collaboration.

LGP: So "Mind the Gap" gives me hope. It gives me hope.

CTM: It's like this gives us hope.

LGP: Yeah.

CTM: These conversations.

LEC: For me personally these are exciting times.

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: What's happening in the United States, it frightens people it excites people cause…

CTM: The possibilities are clear and aware.

LEC: As a longtime Marxist I'm very excited.

LGP: Also I don't know if you're following all that's happening in Chile, where now there is a requirement to have light eyes to request a visa for Chile so we are all staying here. Nobody's going to Chile - yeah you have to have light eyes light skin and your hair texture so the three of us - maybe you can go - but the three of us need to get relaxers and eye contacts.

LEC: You'd have to get contact lenses colored contact lenses.

MP: I have a feeling she wouldn't get in.

LGP: No. *[Laughter]*

LEC: It's a strange requirement but it tells of big support.

LGP: But it is a reaction to Dominican and Haitian migration to Chile.

CTM: So I think what's happening all over the world in many ways is making it so ridiculously overt that nobody can deny the racism. So I think that's what's exciting about it. People are like 'oh we didn't know this happened, oh really there is racism' and yes it has always been there it has been there the whole time and I'm very grateful it is evident to you now. So I think that's what's exciting about it.

[00:57:19]

CTM: Okay so project.

LGP: Well "Mind the Gap" is a three pronged project that on the one hand is an archive - so the first level is an archive, the second level is a network and the third level is a curriculum. And it was Medhin's idea and it's a spin off from her film. And what I - I met Medhin because I'm writing a book about black Latinos basically and I'm looking at Italy as one of the sights. And I interview her and I learned about her film that she was finishing up. And I was very excited about the activism that she was doing and the intersections that were happening in Milan and we were having this conversation about her dream to have this platform where it begins with stories and the stories will allow the creation from sort of curriculum and I was like, 'ohh me too me too'. And the project was like this - it begins with a personal story so a conversation very much like this one of a human actor. For now it is mostly women who define themselves as immigrants in a very loosely articulated way; second generation, refugees whatever. And what we've been doing we're following the story and putting the story into a historical context. We're working with a group of graduate students and students will listen first to the story and then visually and physically figure out what are the moments in this story that they can go research. So rather than begin with the research and sprinkle little stories here and there you always begin with the person. And it's a way of rethinking history that's no longer linear but also a way of highlighting these processes that lead to where we are now. Highlighting the presence of colonialism the presence of capitalism in the ways of immigration through personal stories. Do you wanna talk about the network a little bit?

MP: The archive will be a digital network. Visually it will be sort of a web. And each dot will be a person connected to - a person in their little world connected to other points of history, places and then to other people. Also we have a personal story connected to other parts of history. And this creates…

LEC: And it gets bigger and bigger.

MP: It gets bigger and bigger and it's a digital open source platform that the Media Lab and MIT are helping us put it together and we are almost there. It's there now we are feeding it with content and it's gonna be open source. It's not going to be mine or hers, it going to be yours, theirs, yours to do with it whatever you please.

LEC: Last night on Sixty Minutes it said something on Media Lab at MIT and the possibilities with food and technology is amazing.

LGP: It's incredibly, incredibly exciting. And we're teaching a class together called "Diaspora Archives" that follows the methodology of "Mind the Gap" and students are doing on the one hand a lot of reading on diaspora and also an archive theory and the other they're using as their primary source, the interviews that we have. So that work throughout the semester - throughout the semester they've been researching the seriousness of which they have done this...they've got it. They got what the vision was, it's been a journey together and what was most challenging, what I thought was the most challenging was the question of authorship. How do you do all this labor when you know it's not gonna be your work or your by line. This is communal. This work is not Medhin's it's not mine, it is everybody's and anybody can add to it. So that has been the sort of exciting part - the most exciting part of the project has been teaching this class and also seeing the level of involvement beyond the class because students don't want to let it go because they know it's not finished and the whole point of the archive is that it will never be finished.

CTM: Yeah.

LGP: That people can add - we are gonna make it open source but also people can contribute so that if they hear in the story, 'oh wait I was in 1965 in this particular location I have three photographs of' - you know - they can continue, they can contribute that to the stories so the network grows. It is endless the whole point is to make it endless. And so we envision it as a three year project next year we are going to be working with MIT on the network part on the stuff that we technically challenged people cannot do alone. With the third year the idea is to have a series of workshops with high school teachers and professors who are interested in developing a curriculum a few sample curriculum that uses the archive as a syllabus basically.

CTM: Isn't that amazing.

LEC: When I found that program last night on CBS I mean there are amazing possibilities at MIT because of this lab. These labs what they are doing into the future into this global kind of

picture that you pointed out, this is where that kind of work is going. Amazing. So you have this massive virtual community and the real human community.

CTM: And what's exciting about what you all are doing is where you begin to - that to me is the most important piece so we begin with the stories of the people whose stories are not told and are not in history. But then you created an entire historical mapping from a very different place. And once it's created we can see it people can't ignore it. You can't say these people don't exist.

LGP: You cannot say they don't exist.

CTM: And you can't say this history is - 'you made it up. It's not as important as the history that's canonical'. You can't say that because it's there.

LGP: Especially when a lot of these people are people that are part of canonical history, they've just been excluded.

LEC: It's part of the history of disrespecting our relatives.

LGP: Exactly.

CTM: Well that's really…

LGP: Yeah that project gives me hope. Yeah, "Mind the Gap"

CTM & LEC: "Mind the Gap".

CTM: You remember "Mind the Gap"? Okay. Well I think we'll end here so thank you all so much it's been wonderful.

LGP & MP: Thank you.

[01:05:05]

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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

Feminist Freedom Warriors

addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.