



Makda Isak

11/29/18

[00:00:38]

LEC: Hello, Makda.

MI: Hi.

CTM: Hello, hello. [*Laughter.*]

LEC: Today is November 29th, and we are having a discussion with Makda Isak, visiting ...

CTM: German feminist.

LEC: ... Afro-German feminist, visiting us here at Syracuse University for the entire semester. We've been really happy to have you, and we really enjoy your discussions, every event that you've attended, and the kinds of insights that you bring from your background in Germany. So we want to talk to you today about that, and your own work, and your scholarly development, and so on. Just a kitchen-table conversation.

CTM: So maybe just start by saying a little bit, reflecting a little bit on your own process of politicization, as a feminist and then anti-racist thinker and activist.

LEC: And what you think brought you to that place.

MI: Interestingly, it started with entering the university, but it didn't have anything to do with the university itself. It was rather the sisters I've met in my first semester during undergrad. I was twenty, I think. And I came back from Tanzania, I was living for one year in Tanzania after I finished high school and was like really energized and was ready to enter the university and was really excited. And then I had one class where I'd met which are today one of my best friends. They are my best friends, my comrades, my sisters. I met them, and we started having conversations basically about us, about our lives in Germany, about our experiences on campus, in the university. All three of us had cultural anthropology in our minor which focused on African studies, and I was really naïve, entering the university and thinking that African studies would help me develop certain consciousness. But it didn't. Quite opposite, obviously. So I think processes of consciousness started with this event, actually entering the university.

But when I think back now, when I think back through my own life... it actually started with my mother, and the conversations with friends I'm having and I've had over the past years helped me also realize that. My mother's actually the person who's the first feminist that I encountered without using those terminologies. But when I think about my childhood, it's mainly my mom who played a very central role in also showing me what it can mean to be a woman and it doesn't have to be to play certain roles which society prescribed to you. But interestingly, also because some women don't have another choice, especially if you are a Black woman in a country like Germany or in the case of my parents, first-generation refugees ... my mom always worked. I'm the first born, I have a younger brother, and I can remember since I was eight or nine, I used to do breakfast for me and my brother. It was something normal. We were very often alone at home, but it was also because our parents trusted us. So this trust, this responsibility, is something I'm still remembering when I think about my childhood. And going alone to school ... I just told that one to a friend last week, and she was so surprised that I started taking the train to school when I was ten years old, because certain high schools were not in our neighborhood. Because it was a working-class, migrant neighborhood. We had to go downtown to go to certain schools.

[00:05:02]

CTM: This was Frankfurt?

MI: Exactly, yeah. Frankfurt. This was my hometown, where I was born, raised, and where I actually moved back two years ago and started my master's studies there. When I think of home as a location, it's Frankfurt. Also because of the huge community we have there. Frankfurt is actually the city in Europe with the biggest population of Eritreans and Ethiopians from forty years back on. Because there was work. So all the women I know, they work. They work really hard. Sometimes they even work more than their husbands, because they have more jobs than their husbands. And my mother, she works in a factory like my dad for thirty years now. She works three shifts, so we even had days where we didn't see her, because it correlated with us going to school and coming back home and going to sleep. When I think about certain ulterior questions but also certain feminist questions, I have to think of her. Because without her, without my parents in general, I wouldn't be where I am.

But then I finished school, which was also a big deal. No one would think that second generation refugees would do the so-called *Abitur*, which is the A-levels in Germany. Because the German school system divides you from age ten on. They have three different schools, and say, from age ten, your destiny is already set, because the teacher can decide if you are intelligent or able enough to go to college or not. Because there's just one school which can prepare you for college. I remember it was a really big deal for me going to the Gymnasium, the school which prepared me for nine years, then to have a certificate that could send me to university. I finished, and I didn't know what to do. [*Laughter.*] I remember telling my parents, "I want to go to Africa." It was not a certain country. I was just like, "I want to go somewhere where I see people who look like me." My parents were laughing at me. They were like, "Where do you come up with this from? Why are you saying this?"

And I said, “Well, I lived here now for over eighteen years, and I’m kind of frustrated, and I want to see an environment where it is normal to be Black. Where it’s not something which is strange or something like that.” And then they were like, “Well, we don’t have any money to send you anywhere.” And then I did this classical thing, which many Americans also do ... I did a voluntary service. Because the German government paid completely for it. I used to crack jokes when I came back, like “Oh, you even saved money.” Told my parents they saved money on me for the complete year. But it was really naïve, looking back, because then I went there, and I was completely ...

CTM: Blown away!

MI: Blown away, because it was so complicated. And then realizing how diverse Blackness is, and what it means to be a European Black person in an ...

LEC: African country.

MI: ... in an African country, yeah. And then also having to do with really educated people in an African country, which was really empowering to see, but it was not something which is my background, because of my parents obviously.

LEC: Were you in Dar?

MI: Leah. Dar es Salaam. But it was really interesting, and I think it was one of the ...

CTM: What kind of volunteer work did you do?

MI: I was at the Red Cross. The headquarters are there. It was actually interesting, but when I look back, this year really framed me, and I think after this year, I got also a kind of sense I’m still thinking about or reflecting on. And I came back totally energized and ready to hit the university. And it was so frustrating to realize when I entered the university that it was not something which I needed. It was actually more stressing me out in a way that the university always told me that I don’t belong. So it was really mind-blowing to meet my two friends in this one class. And we started work on campus, after our first semester. We did a lecture series on racism and critical whiteness, invited activists and scholars from Germany, like, people of color. The reactions were really interesting. People from all over the country contacting us, and people from the region coming to the events, and so on.

LEC: Wow.

CTM: So what year would that have been? Around when?

MI: It was spring 2014.

CTM: So it takes until 2014 to get this kind of project going in the university!

LEC: Just recently.

CTM: Yeah. Which is just literally four years ago. So was that the same year they had the Angela Davis professorship at Goethe?

[00:11:35]

MI: No. I was not at Goethe during my undergrad. I was at another university. But the Angela Davis fellowship was the winter of 2013, actually when I started university. And we started in our university in the spring of 2014, our second semester. After that, we said, “We need our space on campus.” So we started a student of color group on a German campus, and thinking back, it was quite big, and we didn’t see it at that point. It was big, in a sense of it’s not easy to talk about race in Germany and especially not on campus. There goes certain reactions especially when ‘of color’ starts to formate and starts to organize themselves. We didn’t even call it ‘organizing’. We were like, “Oh, it’s so empowering to see all those white faces when we are, like, fifteen women of color entering the cafeteria, for example.” It started with conversations, with eating, with watching movies together, with reading together. But those were the times where I actually felt, “Okay, I have now a surrounding where I can have conversations where I feel felt, where I feel a connection, where I feel understood.”

It was almost all of them were bad-ass feminists, thinking back, but we didn’t really talk about feminism. We talked about decolonizing our minds and stuff like that, but of course, we read mainly scholars which are feminists, decolonial activists. And then we started a reading circle for ourselves, where we actually did it like a class. Every week, reading one text or one book, and we facilitated it on our own. We said, “Okay, I will facilitate this week, you will do next week.” We had to really prepare a reader for every semester. People could join us, and people also came from other neighboring cities like Frankfurt, for example. This was also the time, spring 2015, where I invited Layla and Oxana, for example, to our university to do the play about May Ayim. Thinking back, this was university for me. We were so much on campus but not because of our classes but because of us. We spent so much time on campus without imagining the campus as a space of where we have to be but where we want to be. We kind of reclaimed the campus for ourselves.

CTM: Did you feel connected to earlier generations of Afro-German feminists?

MI: Yeah, definitely.

CTM: And did you have contact?

[00:15:55]

MI: I mean, intergenerational conversations were something we also did in our activities. I went to the university in Mainz, which is next to Frankfurt, and this area ... there is such a rich history of Afro-German movement. The ISD, the initiative of Black people in Germany, one of the chapters had actually started in this area. The Frankfurt, Vespa area. And the ISD chapter in Frankfurt is very big, and it is such a beautiful community space. It is one of the spaces that I am going to. It is one of my spaces, and especially the women, the Black women, the Black aunties, the Black mothers who have been active for decades. And seeing even their daughters, who are for example our friends, growing up in such spaces ...

LEC: So did the people in the community come to your events, then? It was public?

MI: Yeah.

LEC: It was a public space in the university.

MI: Yeah. And we also invited them as speakers and storytellers. I think that was also really important for me but I think also for the rest of us. We didn't see us as starting something. We saw us as continuing something. Having the privilege to live next to people who also continued something from a generation ago, who are still alive ...

LEC: And talk about it ...

MI: It's something we draw up on. Yeah, we had many conversations and are still having many conversations. But it took me also a while to find home in such a setting, like an Afro-German setting, for example. Because the term itself is also something which I was like, "Hmm... Am I Afro-German? I don't know." And I still don't use it. I don't see myself as an Afro-German, because for me, this term has a certain history which is not my history. And that's the beautiful thing about Blackness. It's so diverse, also in Germany, and having conversations between so-called "Afro-Germans" or people who define themselves as Afro-Germans with me or others who actually ... of course, I am Black, but for me, growing up, it was for us this thing ... "Oh, we are actually survivors. I am here because my parents were refugees." Then, it's also interesting which two you are connecting and based on what. The intersections are really narrow and also really wide and really interesting. Seeing I can have some many connections with a working-class, third-generation Turkish person, for example, because of the class background but also because of the [fact] we spoke our mother languages at home and stuff like that. It's a certain history I have and other Black people have different things.

CTM: And that's so interesting. Because the Afro-German idea ... it claims the German state as a space to belong, right? That's why it's sort of interesting when you talk about the complications of different genealogies of blackness and probably feminisms and coalitions and solidarities around different questions.

LEC: Because they're not bringing their blackness to that space as a uniform doing, as a unifying thing, but as with multiple experiences, different experiences. So how would you say being in Dar did anything for your consciousness around being Black? I'm interesting, because you said you felt really clearly you were not African with them. Even African-Americans, when they go to Africa, you've read about that stuff and what it feels like. People feel like they're going home, and then they get there, and Africans don't know. Like, "Do you know yourself? What do you want?" So when you said that, it made me think of that.

MI: Yeah. I realized how German I am. That I am actually German. And before that, I hated the term German; I never wanted to be associated with it. It's still frustrating me, that I somehow have to associate with myself with it. But I am German, also when it is per coincidence. I could also have been Italian or Swedish now, but I am German, and that's

what I learned in Tanzania. But it was also kind of home-ish. Because I also played with certain identities. It was depending on also to who I was talking. But to my friends there, it was really important for me that they know that I have an Eritrean history, and then it was also like, “Oh, you are our East African sister. You’re just a bit different.”

CTM: You’ve come via a different route, or something.

[00:21:09]

MI: Exactly. I realized both how German I am and how Eritrean I am. Because I saw so many things which I felt so connected to because it reminded me of home, of our apartment, where as soon as I enter my apartment, It’s like, “Oh, okay, I’m Eritrean.” But it also reminded me how I was socialized in Germany and that I should not ignore it. The process also started of what does it mean actually to be a Black, young woman in Germany, born in Germany, but I was always say it was ‘per accident’. Per accident in the sense that it could have been any other European country, because my family is all over the world. So I could have also been born here.

CTM: So it feels like the community that you have around you and that you’ve created actively for yourself, is very much a community where you walk across racial categories and boundaries, and that you all have a space where you can actually think about feminist and other antiracist politics in Germany together. So talk a little bit about what are some of the challenges in doing that but also what some of the joys are, what some of the benefits of that.

LEC: Because that’s a kind of unique experience, because it’s across race and ethnicity. So what do those intersections look like in the work itself?

MI: Ethnicity is so interesting, because we don’t have it in Germany. We don’t even have race, but that’s another story. [*Laughs.*]

CTM: You mean the terms are not ...

MI: Yeah. Yeah, I think it was actually really challenging, because there was a lot of pain, and thinking back, I also wonder sometimes what could we have done better in a way of realizing that it’s actually something really big to put different young women in one table, in one living room. We often worked in living rooms, fore example. But it helped to have those conversations. We also had to think of realizing it’s important to talk about differences and having those conversations about what does it mean to be a person of African descent in Germany, what does it mean to have Turkish descent in Germany, and so on, and realizing we have so much in common, but we are still differently-positioned. For me, it helped also analyzing more race in Germany, because in Germany itself, we all have this common experience of being racialized, mostly second-generation young women in Germany. As I said, I felt so connected to second-generation nonblack immigrants, sometimes even more than to so-called Afro-Germans. Because our everyday lives were so similar ... fighting our way through the educational system, which is actually a really big issue in Germany. What does it actually mean that you make it up to university? Because university is for free when

you think about the money issue, but it costs a lot to enter the space, especially when you are not meant to enter it. Looking back, it's important to realize, we are all different, even as I said ... blackness is so diverse. But the good thing is to have those conversations about differences, because sometimes I have the feeling that especially in racialized spaces, we are scared to talk about differences. Because there is so much pain in it, and then we realize we have so many different privileges and experiences with oppression. What does it mean when someone is even complicit in it, when you are complicit in my oppression, for example? Because it's not just about black and white, it's about so much more. And I think that was something we did, without realizing that we did it.

CTM: Like talking through that, figuring out how to work together while acknowledging those things. Which is really unusual and often is very difficult to do in academic spaces, for sure. University spaces.

[00:26:24]

LEC: So did you all talk about issues like differential privileges amongst you?

MI: Yeah.

LEC: Because the German state relates to people of color the same way the U.S. state does. So what kind of consciousness does that forge? Because your experiences are different from mine, then it'll be different from hers, but we're all at the same table, talking about our alienating experiences in the university and in society, right?

MI: Yeah. I think we could have done it more, but we were also scared what it would mean for our group if we put more courageousness on the table. Because it was also a lot about pain and trauma. And it was sometimes also interestingly difficult to persuade certain people to join us, because they were like, "Hmm ... is it really a space for me? I thought it would be just a Black space or just a Muslim space or so on." So it was really difficult. But I would say, with especially the two other young women, we started it, we had many conversations, we still have. With that also comes more trust. I trust them with my own whole life, because I know we could have all those conversations, which was really hard sometimes. I think this makes solidarity possible. That would be my wish to do it more, also in other spaces, in certain spaces.

LEC: So now you have this broader experience. I mean, the Dar one was jarring, I'm sure, and other places you've traveled to, and then the United States ... what do you think you're taking back to those group discussions, to the work you have started?

MI: More confusion.

CTM: More questions.

MI: More questions. I didn't think it would be so tough for me, here. I'm still reflecting on this. I really didn't think about it. Because I think it's also just focusing on, "Oh, I have to do my classes here." It was rather on the contrary, "Oh, I'm going somewhere where there are

more Black people or more Black representation.” I was even happy to go. But as you know, Syracuse is a really tough space to be, and I just realized again how sometimes even when I know that I am not African-American, people on the street don’t care about this. It’s really interesting to enter spaces, also here in the U.S., and realizing you are just a Black person. It doesn’t matter who you are. They just project everything on you. But I think going back to a more empowering side, being here made me realizing again how grateful we as Afro-Europeans also can be, especially for all those Black feminists who did so much work here in the U.S. And that made me realize again how important it is to draw also back on this. Because in Europe, we often have those conversations about [how] it’s so U.S.-centric, everything we do, especially in antiracist, feminist practice. We even have English words. We can’t translate it in German. We didn’t even find our own language. So my policy was always like, “It’s too much U.S. for me. It’s too U.S.-centric, everything we do. I love Audre Lorde, but I can’t hear her name anymore, for example.” But coming here made me realize there’s a reason why it is so. And it is because of this huge legacy and all this work, which was also so profoundly connected to us and Germany for example. It has a reason it has a certain history, and I just started to maybe appreciate it more again and realizing that it’s more complex than just to say there is U.S.-centrism or U.S. imperialism.

[00:31:30]

LEC: Because you have your foremothers in Germany, like you talked about so nicely, in the community who you knew, as your group continued to develop the work, that these are the people that you must honor, because these are the people on whose shoulders you stand. Then you come to the U.S., and you see these shoulders too. Because Audre Lorde has contributed globally, and whatever movement is happening for Black people or Black women, they can’t do so without acknowledging what they got from that too. So then they became jointly your foremothers.

MI: Exactly. And that’s what I mainly take back home.

CTM: I mean, it’s interesting, because with Audre Lorde, I’ve never seen Audre Lorde as American. And I’m clearly not American, even though I now have citizenship. But I have never ever read her or seen her [as American] although I know that her life was anchored in the details and the materiality of living the life that she led in the U.S. But she never forgot where she came from. She never forgot that there was a world outside the U.S. And so it’s sort of interesting because there are Black feminists who I see as ‘African-American’ in a very specific way, which is both useful and not for me as a feminist thinker and activist. But Audre is not one of them. It’s sort of interesting. Then in that sense it makes sense to me that she was the one who was so important in Germany, and she was like that in lots of different countries, in fact. Not just Germany.

But what you’re talking about is also what happens generationally. People then become institutions, which they never intended and they never thought was going to happen to them. But then everyone refers back to the one or the two people, and people are like, “Well, surely there’s other ...”

It's like when we go to Britain, and people say, "Well, there's a lot of Black feminists here, who are producing important knowledge and thinking about activism in certain ways. But we're always looking to the U.S. to invite people, and the same people." So there's also that process that happens, part of the neoliberal world we're living in.

LEC: Part of that comes from, I think, this commodification process in the countries wherever the activism is happening in, and in the universities, the professionalization in the discipline. So that African-American studies, Women's and Gender Studies ... I mean, these started out as incredible, insurgent knowledges for different kinds of reasons on what they contributed to and the changes that they forced on the academy and the society and all of that. But then there's some state interplay with that, that turns it into a commodity. So they're referring only to certain people. And Chandra's right. I mean, when you were in the Caribbean spaces where Audre Lorde was present, she was a Caribbean woman.

CTM: Completely, yeah.

[00:35:12]

MI: But I would say, in general, also apart now from the Audre Lorde example, in general African-America feminist genealogy shaped so many Black women in the world. I see it as a kind of responsibility as a non-African-American woman to also acknowledge this.

CTM: Absolutely. No question about it.

MI: To honor this. Because they did so much work for all of us. This is just what made me realize again, being here, and having certain conversations, and reading again certain texts and books. Also, when you talk about disciplines, it's also all tracing back to the U.S. academy again. Disciplines like African-American studies or Black studies, which is a huge discussion in the Europe at the moment. And then also seeing, "Yeah, but it's nothing new. It's actually something we are continuing as a legacy which has already been already there." Which has been here. I think those connections are also really important to see, that this is actually transnationalism in practice, realizing or acknowledging that certain struggles have been fought already. It is already there, how to draw on ...

LEC: And you see the connections to those histories. You're so right. The whole thing about doing this kind of thinking and the kind of work that comes out of it really speaks to that particularity of being African-American and doing so as an African-American but understanding this is where the civil rights movement happened. There's a civil rights movement in the United States that all Black people in the world can connect with. And as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking of myself in the same-age spaces in Canada and what that meant. A really oppressive state trying to curtail all the work. So we kept looking at what was happening here.

MI: And they kept looking at what was happening on the African continent. This connection is also so important for me to look back and realizing Black internationalist solidarity has

such a long history and African-Americans were always in solidarity with Black people all over the world.

LEC: And [they] went to those spaces. All of the civil rights, real activists, leaders ... they went to those places. All of them.

CTM: So I think this is a great place to stop. [*Laughter.*] Thank you so much.

LEC: Thank you.

MI: Thank you.

CTM: This was really interesting, listening to you. Good luck with all the work that's ahead of you.

MI: Thank you.

LEC: Returning with new power.

MI: I hope so. Thank you.

[00:38:40]

*

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.