



Maylei Blackwell

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CTM: So, Maylei, let's—you know, we told you about this project and what we want is to have a conversation with you about the work that you do now and that you've been doing for many, many years. And, how you came to do that work. So, maybe talk a little bit about the work you're doing and however you want to frame it.

MB: Yeah. I've been working on ideas of difference and how difference effects transnational women's organizing. The current project I have is with indigenous migrant women, largely Zapotec and Mixtec and Maya women—women who became mobilized together nationally after the Zapatista uprising and began to use the very small spaces that were afforded to them in their communities to build spaces nationally, and then move from national to continental. So they've been very involved in the continental network of indigenous women across “abya yala” and that's a Kuna word that refers to the kind of interconnection between indigenous peoples in the hemisphere and more recently, being in Los Angeles, migrant women organizers contacted me and I began to work with ideas and people and political struggles of indigenous migration. And, so I've been thinking about the Latin American indigenous diaspora in Los Angeles. My previous work is on women of color feminism and US-Mexico feminist transnational imaginaries.

CTM: So if you were asked something like how did you come to define what your political and intellectual and personal project was going to be? What are the experiences or...

LEC: Or, what brought you to a feminist consciousness?

MB: I think for me it was formative I came to be an activist through the Central American Solidarity Movement. I came to activism in the late 80s as part of the

Central American Solidarity Movement and part of organizing a women of color, feminist coalition. And feeling excluded, you know—lots of people felt excluded in their La Raza student association or the black student union. For me it's been mixed race. I feel more comfortable in women of color spaces because many people are mixed or mixed with white and their other culture, but being Cherokee and Thai, being mixed of color, it feels more at home to be in women of color spaces for me. And I feel like my commitment to transnational feminism is borne out of moments of coalition and building home together, building community with other women who found their feminism in anti-colonial struggles, like I have. For me, that's been transformative. That's been transformative in thinking—renewing ideas of women of color feminism, consistently insisting on an anti-imperialist critique, anti-colonial critique. You know, the importance of the de-colonial work. I think, too, being—coming out around the time of Act Up, Queer Nation, I came out as part of the queer generation and for me, that was important because there was a lot of interconnection between, for example CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and Act Up, or different kinds of organizing I was doing that would help make the connection that, you know communities of color and communities who were marginalized by sexual difference were, defunded in the US because all the funds were going to pay for the dirty wars, the imperialist wars in Central America. So that helped me make a connection between the domestic and the international. But for me making home with other queer women of color has always been, I think, important. I think lesbians of color have always been a vanguard of women of color organizing...sometimes, that people don't recognize. And I think that's because of the multiple ways that we're marginalized in so many different kinds of community that we take those forms of exclusion to find home with each other or to insist on building community and home.

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And that's not to idealize it. It's very difficult work, it's very fraught work. It's gut-wrenching work, but it's the work of the heart. I think it's the true work of liberation.

CTM: And have you always been situated on the West Coast? Did you grow up there?

MB: Yeah, I grew up in Long Beach, California. I grew up—my dad is from Bangkok, Thailand and my mom is Cherokee and I grew up in largely a Mexican neighborhood. So, it's a mix of two cultures and growing up in a third culture. Long Beach is very diverse. It has the largest Cambodian population and there's a lot of African Americans, it's very queer friendly. So, to me this is the norm, you know, but other people are always like, "Wow that's so exotic, that mixture"—

and I think, you know, how did I come to consciousness around that—I was thinking about that today. I remember when I was a waitress this man said—you know he asked, “Maylei, what are you?”—you know people would say “What are you” like you’re not a human or something. And I said, “Oh yeah, I’m Thai, I’m Cherokee.” and he’s like, “Oh, I’ve been all over Asia and Thai women are the best”. I grew up with these guys who had been part of the military occupation, you know, the military imperialist wars in Asia and so having being tied, but not being connected to my family who—my dad moved back to Bangkok...it was like being left with this imperialist sexism, misogyny, you know; that Thai women were like the best meat of Asia or something. Just that kind of disgusting, painful...

CTM: Stereotypes.

MB: Yeah, so that’s I think always formed me. Just like the psychic, the psychic place in which I operate. And the wounds that we suffer I guess as young people, or as children...how, if we were to heal those, they become your gifts. You know, they help you become the warrior women that we can be in the world. I was thinking about that the other day...how many times that it happened to me, men said, “Oh I’ve been all over Asia, Thai women are the best”. So...

LEC: Well, with that kind of background and history that you just laid out, what are some of the challenges that you have encountered doing the work you’re doing. Whether in institutions or academically, intellectually...what are some of the challenges you have encountered as a woman of color trying to do this kind of work.

MB: I think some of the challenges are that people have this misconception that transnationalism doesn’t happen in the US or neoliberalism doesn’t affect the US. So, when I teach my students about neoliberalism, they’re like, “Neo-what? That’s a very technical, fancy word,” and I’m like, “Well, if you went to Mexico in a small village and talked to pretty much any peasant farmer they would be able to tell you what neoliberalism is and so what does that mean...that we’re in this country and we can’t name the kind of economic system and economic oppression that we’re facing. And I think for women of color, it’s been an oversight of transnational feminism, that people don’t understand that transnational feminism isn’t just the feminism that crosses nation-state borders, but it’s also the kind of feminism produced by immigrant women activists and women of color activists in the US, who are fighting those conditions of globalization here. And so, that’s one of the major challenges and ideas that I work with in my teachings. Just thinking about that at home right now. Where does it start? And I really started to think about this when I worked with farmworker women, and they were migrant Mixtec and Triqui women who were organizing with mestiza women in California, in the fields...realizing that indigenous farm workers make less than mestiza farmworkers...and having to

think about how different power systems, not just, come together, like kind of Mexican racial system, anti-Indian prejudice is coming into and getting mapped on to the American system of racial dynamics and how Latinos are treated, but also how those system hybridize in migration and then they are working together and then you add gender in the mix...it's even more complicated.

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So you know, I've used ideas like hybrid hegemonies or complicated things to talk about this, but I think those women are already on the frontlines of having an analysis and having no way to think about that. And so, even our clumsy academic language that we're using, I think we can take the lead from those women, so some of the challenges that we have are translation problems, you know. So you know, translation between activist realm and academic realm and all kinds of realms. I've been thinking about this a lot...about what I've been calling translingua...you know, how to translate our histories together, because often times I think another challenge is that people want to do an equivalency...like women of color should know women of color in Latin America or in Africa or in Asia. But of course, the term women of color doesn't translate, it doesn't travel, right? And in some ways that's good because it's not the high universal theory that it's supposed to, you know, be used to erase everybody else and explain the so-called universal. But what people are missing is that the political vision, the political project does translate. And sometimes people get too stuck on the actual...you know what you've talked about, Chandra, is, it's not a biological project, it's a political project. That's the translation we're working on, as translating the political project, so I'm thinking about how to be translingua. How to use, knowing each others' histories and being able to translate those genealogies into a shared frame of vision, a vision of liberation, a grammar of liberation. It doesn't mean we have a shared identity, because that's not...

CTM: And it's not necessary.

MB: Exactly.

LEC: In your imaginary...we all imagine the kind of world we would want to see, you know...what do you envision this work contributing to, in terms of a transformation of society? What kind of tomorrow do you want to see?

MB: That's a good question. I feel like we spend so much time critiquing and dismantling, it's like what is all this for, anyways?

CTM: So, dream a little, you know...

MB: I think for me...what gets me out of bed in the morning and the reason I can keep doing the work is I aspire to make a world where I can be whole. Or all the different part of me... all the different parts of my community can exist together. Where there is not those schisms and divisions within myself. And I feel like, you know, it's a vision where your body and mind can be connected, you know where my heart can be connected to my mind, where my spirit and soul work is connected to my intellectual work. These are the things that really allow me to do the political work I do in the world...is so that I don't have to continue to try to make those things separate, that to me are all together and connected and inform each other. I think you know, there is the kind of persistent answers...the injustice we see...the continual injustice we see...and so if you wanted to relax or sit down, you can't. You have to keep moving. We have this crazy Donald Trump situation, or crazy...you know, it just never ends. But I think you have to be coming from that deeper place of motivation so it's not just always defending yourself against these external threats of racism or homophobia or you know, attacks on criminalizing migrants, or...so, I feel like, for me, my vision is informed by the need to be whole and finding a holistic liberation for all of us to be...this world that we're creating that we can find together.

CTM: So what about...you know, all of us who are involved in these kinds of revolutionary projects, going against the grain, in lots of different ways, at different levels...part of...I always have believed that part of what keeps me going is the fact that there is a lot of hard work, a lot of isolation, violence...all of that stuff is there, but there's also an immense joy in finding community to work with and building community on grounds that are not about just hierarchy and power and so on.

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Do you feel like that is something that's important that you've been able to find or build?

MB: I'm glad you asked about that...I was speaking to students about that the other day, 'cause it can feel like drudgery. Especially when you're so young and your heart's so tender and you're out there. I was talking to some students at Colgate who had...you know, they did a sit-in last year and then things changed but not so much. How do they keep going? And it is the joy...it's the joy of connection, it's the joy of community, it's the joy that we're all seeking. We're seeking that place...we're seeking that place where we can be comfortable, where we can be seen, really, I think we're seeking a place that we can be seen and acknowledged for all the things that we bring to the world that are devalued. I think there is a joy in that recognition, in that celebration, in that connection and in that collaboration, or we wouldn't be doing it for so long, right? It would just

be all drudgery. Who said that I don't want to dance, you know, if I can't dance I won't be in your revolution?

CTM: Emma Goldman.

MB: Yes, that's right.

CTM: Yeah, because it's no fun. One has to have fun, right?

LEC: Do you hope for the younger generation...you were talking about your students like after the sitting-in, I was thinking about The General Body, too...do you have...do you see hope in your students for that kind of tomorrow that you're envisioning?

MB: I do, you know there are some amazing organizers and amazing kinds of therefore, organizations. I do feel like the young people I work with—I work with a lot of undocumented youth and there's some amazing bravery and courage. There's also a lot of young spirits that are beat down. They're beat down by having to hide. They're worried about if their parents are going to be deported. By working two or three jobs, cleaning houses, 'cause, you know, it's difficult. I do feel like—I've been thinking about this a lot—I do feel like, you know, when I went to graduate school, I do feel like there was a shared political project that I had with my mentors and it was multigenerational. And now, I feel like students do—some students have that shared political project, but there's been a lot of wear and tear you know. There's a lot of generational differences and so I think there's a lot of work to be done to build and reconnect the generations.

CTM: I think that's actually a really interesting point about feeling shared political project with mentors, you know, because when you and I went to graduate school, we had no mentors at all, let alone shared political projects, so it's sort of interesting to then see...so who would you, in terms of your vision, who were some of the mentors?

MB: Well, I feel like I'm a middle generation; a bridge generation. So, I was trained by Angela Davis. Angela is my mentor. I would walk Westcliff and talk about writing with Gloria Anzaldúa in Santa Cruz. You know, I had mentors that really helped me think about making change in the world, yeah and even...you know, I was thinking this even for queer generations. A good, dear friend of mine Tatiana de la Tierra just passed away a few years ago, this amazing Colombian American lesbian feminist, and I was thinking about how when you entered her apartment, you entered into a whole different world of women's music and women's poetry and now part of the cost of integration and slow, you know ...the homonationalism of this moment is that students and young people don't meet other generations that created a whole different world, of women's culture, of lesbian culture, of queer culture.

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Part of the cost of integration is that differences lived in the flesh and...

LEC: Their knowing of those people is intellectual.

MB: Yeah, it's intellectual. You don't know that felt sense of entering into someone's home who has spent their lifetime creating a different world, creating a different culture.

CTM: Yeah. I mean I think some of that is also...it's these different historical moments that we are living, right? So, I think that...and this also connects to neoliberalism, I think...and how the spaces where we live are actually way more segregated in so many ways. You know, politically as well, so which then becomes a larger challenge in terms of how do you create those forms of solidarity as well? So, I think when you're talking about the shared project with your mentors, so these are people in my generation, really and then I think that the whole construct of a woman of color or a Third World feminism was, you know completely vibrant, was deeply political, was very tangible. But I think that those have shifted; those ideas and even sometimes taking for granted a community of that kind.

LEC: And those shifts have happened with neoliberalism. There are market forces that are pushing students, I find, in different directions. I mean they're all focusing on—have to, focus on what's this going to lead to? What kinds of jobs are possibilities? Because they're thinking about their existence...their maintenance and their existence in very different ways. It's a kind of do or die thing. So they feel, "If I can't put this to this kind of tangible use then...it has this exchange value...this economic meaning to it...then it's kind of useless". There are many things that we did that were really exciting and for the sense of being that came out of that political work, that they don't have the ability to feel it seems.

MB: Yeah, what I'm getting I guess is that the archive—

CTM: You said, you seem to that have though. You seem to have anchored in some of this.

MB: Yes. There's like an archive of the feeling of that; of that political solidarity, of that whole different world. And I do think it's a cost of neoliberalism, because, you know...under neoliberalism there's the selective co-option of different identities as market forces, these kind of, difference incorporated...and so, sometimes what I feel students are missing—or young people is—what it felt like to be creating something completely autonomous or outside. Not that we stand

outside of power but that it wasn't something accepted by society, it wasn't something that you would be able to find on Amazon, it wasn't something you could access through capitalism. It was really truly how people make community through poetry, through art...in a separate sphere, through their music. Yeah, I don't know how to describe that more to them and I feel that sense of loss, you know, so I do feel like I'm bridging one generation, too. All the students I mentor—and I—it's not to say that they don't have their own political vision, because they do, of course. And there's many vibrant, important movements happening right now from Black Lives Matter to Idle No More to the UndocuQueer Movement...to LGBT organizing. I feel like, in my experience women of color feminism was a glue that held these multi-issue kinds of struggles together, from solidarity with Nicaragua to HIV/AIDS to—so it was kind of an analytic lens and framework but it was also a...heart...something of the heart...you know, it's in your...it's affective...it's not just of your mind.

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And that's what I feel like a sense of loss about for the next generation is that interconnectedness of those struggles. Now there are really important struggles but they seem to be silo-ed off from each other.

CTM: And I think that some of the impact of sort of institutionalization of some of our knowledges, in particular ways, right, has really led to losing the heart at some level, right, so...

MB: Or just the connection. We've lost some of the connection that we used to have with each other. I was talking with Lisa about how we used to be able to keep up with each other and even if we were working in different fields or with different racial or ethnic groups or different communities. And now...

CTM: It's become more and more hard because...also because our work has intensified in the most ridiculous ways, right?

LEC: And some of the institutionalization is appropriation. So you are busy trying to counter that. I mean, that's another kind of problem in itself...which, what you just said made me think about. So, you are part of that bridging generation and you feel like there's a battle on both sides that you're trying to bring together and gel for them...the next generation, your students. It's really a challenge.

CTM: So, how would you talk about what challenges there are for feminists building various forms of solidarities and understandings within the US, across various differences and then outside the US, across differences?

MB: I think one of the most...I think for me devastating challenges have to do with that neoliberal incorporation we were talking about. Because some forms of liberation are no more freely discussed and acceptable and those are often used to regulate others. I noticed this in my work with indigenous women organizers in Mexico that because of the success of the feminist movement in Latin America, you know, that gender has become a language that the state uses, and the IMF and the World Bank and so, there's kind of gender technocratic language and that's being used, you know, to regulate who is a good and bad indigenous subject. So, when the Zapatista uprising happened, they said, this can't possibly be an indigenous uprising because it had a women's platform and then yet when they got to 2001 and they were going to formalize the peace accords, the Senators peace accords into law, the legislator said, "Oh, we can't give Indian rights, we can't give autonomy to indigenous people because they don't protect the rights of women", even though they had just said you know it's kind of this dual logic of racism that's rotating on one discourse of liberation to regulate others. And you know, we know this as an old strategy, we heard this that Fidel Castro doesn't protect the rights of LGBT people and these kinds of things but I see it in a more subtle and sophisticated way. Like in asylum law, they are now accepting gay and lesbian claims, you know, to seek asylum but they apply it then to transgender people who may or may not be gay and lesbian. So it's like to do...to incorporate yet another group of people...they're enacting a kind of violence by using the discourse that we've struggled so hard to get it recognized. So that's really heartbreaking for me, is that, even in movements I see trans...undocumented trans women standing up and speaking on behalf of transliteration and then saying don't mention you're undocumented. Or the undocumented immigrant rights movement saying don't say you're LGBT and so that...I feel like part of a moment of women of color feminism was insisting on all those interconnections and the transnational feminism...so now I feel like part of what hasn't translated over the generations is this idea that we can separate one oppression from another and if we're not careful the state will do it as well, and use one liberation discourse to police and surveil another set of identities.

CTM: And yet, you see how intersectionality is like the new word and theory of not just the academy like all over the world in many ways, but also the state...and how then it gets completely domesticated any of the radical potential of thinking...thinking together is gone. It's quite...

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LEC: Twisted.

CTM: Yeah! It's quite amazing.

LEC: Appropriated and twisted.

CTM: Right.

LEC: So what are moments of solidarity in your life that have been really important to you?

MB: Moments of solidarity that have been really important to me. I think the one I mentioned that was very formative was where members of Act Up were participating with CISPES. You know...those were the moments where I said, "Oh domestic policy is interlinked with international policy". I think for me...I mean that's why I'm so committed to women of color feminist vision is that some of the most profound moments of solidarity are people who may not know too much about where you come from or what you're saying but do have a shared sense of experiencing those oppressions or those expulsions and have named them and theorized them and talked about them or just felt them in their heart so they know what you're talking about without you having to explain yourself. So those...for me those private moments of solidarity when you don't have to explain yourself, when you just say and someone says I know what you're talking about, I see you. I do have to admit, like being someone who is mixed of two different cultures that are marginalized and who is queer, it's like a lot of...it's exhausting just to be understood sometimes. So, to me those moments of solidarity are like, yes, of course, you know, yes of course. There's moments of solidarity when—even among native people I think, when we grow up in an urban context, we're seen as kind of like not authentic, we're not reservation based, even though most people are growing up in urban contexts. But when your sisters come from other places and say, "Yes, you are. We see you. Of course, that is—of course, you know you're connected", those have been really powerful for me, too. The ways in which people say, "Keep doing that work." Yeah...keep doing that work. I think there's a lot of important solidarity work that happens within spiritual communities. I've seen within liberation Buddhism...even within native spiritual communities, a lot of interconnections between cultures.

CTM: What about in feminist communities?

MB: In feminist communities...I think...yeah, I mean what I've been talking about in terms of women of color feminism, but I am talking about feminist spiritual practitioners, you know...people who understand your relatedness to all things...to the earth and to the trees and those things...and that that's not metaphoric, you know...I find amazing forms of solidarity and understanding from other people, other women of color about that, even if they're not from where I'm from, or they weren't raised how I was raised, you know...yeah.

LEC: That's it.

Feminist Freedom Warriors
*Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in Conversation with
Maylei Blackwell*

CTM: That's it. Anything?

MB: [Laughter] I want Lisa to come back to us now [Laughter].

CTM: I know, I know.

MB: She can have her pre-interview.

CTM: Yes. Thank you so much, Maylei.

LEC: Thank you.

MB: Yeah, you guys...thank you!

LEC: A pleasure.

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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.