The many futures of gender
Oral histories of feminist theory (2024), 4, 1–22
www.oralhistoriesoffeministtheory.com

Activist scholarship means that we recognize the interconnections of our lives

A conversation with Margo Okazawa-Rey

Patricia Purtschert

About the many futures of gender

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices, and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality, and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender, and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

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Cite this article
Purtschert, P. (2024). Activist scholarship means that we recognize the interconnections of our lives: A conversation with Margo Okazawa-Rey. The many futures of gender: Oral histories of feminist theory, 4, 1–22. DOI: 10.48620/43071

Activist scholarship means that we recognize the interconnections of our lives: A conversation with Margo Okazawa-Rey

Patricia Purtschert

After a long day of talking and listening to other feminist scholars at the gender studies summer school "Doing research otherwise" in Basel, Margo and I eat ice-cream on the river Rhine. It is an early fall evening, mild and pleasant. While people are strolling along the river, we sit on a bench and start discussing the history of feminist thought.

Patricia Purtschert: Margo, can you remember your first encounter with the term "gender"? When did the term pop up in your life?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think the first term that popped up was "sex." At that time, it was binary, men and women. The concept of gender and its social constructions came much later, in the early 1980s, and was popularized in the 1990s. I cannot remember exactly what the turning point was when people started using "gender" to say who we are. And the term really started incorporating the socio-political and cultural parts that dealt with socialization and gender roles. I would say that happened in the early 1980s.

Can you remember which texts you read at the time? How did this term come into your life, why did it suddenly make sense to use it?

At that time, I do not remember us learning about that from a text. "Gender" seemed just to have appeared and was around more; we were talking about its social construction. But we started talking not just by itself but in relation to race and class and sexuality, those were the other categories. I do not think "sexuality" gets even used that much anymore, does it?

I think in queer theory it does.

Well, at that point, sexuality was a really important category that was associated with gender. But then it meant your sexual orientation. Who were you lovers with and who did you have sex with? Not in the broad sense of sexuality, that includes straight people too. So there was kind of a conflation with gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, all muddled up together at the time. And then things became more disaggregated and more specific about what these things meant. Always, though, there was an understanding of gender, you cannot talk about gender, or you cannot talk about sex, without talking about race. Less class, not at all the category of nation at that point, but race. For us as Black feminists the two things always went together, the race and the gender.

So for you there never was a separation of these two.

Never. That was not possible.

Unlike in white feminism, where you oftentimes first learn about gender and then realize there is an interconnection with race.

I first learned about being a girl as a child, a difference between boys and girls, and then I started learning about race, and then there was more emphasis on race. And then a kind of re-emphasis on gender. So, at one point, the emphasis was on race, on being Black. And then going back to being a Black woman, or Black girl. There was a kind of tethering back and forth for a little bit. Once I personally settled on both gender as a concept and race as a concept, they were never separable. And that is what we did in the Combahee River Collective—to put all those things together and think about them not as separable things, but as really deeply linked. Of course, after Combahee, I also claimed very fundamentally my being Japanese as well.

You were saying that first there was this self-recognition as a girl, and then race came in. At what point would you say that something like a feminist perspective came into your life? I am not talking necessarily about a theoretical perspective here, but about a realization that you want or need to look at things from a feminist point of view, from a point of view of justice. Can you remember that?

I remember hearing my mom, when she would talk about her history of marrying my father. Why they got married, why she was even attracted to him; she would say more than once, "You know in our family, the men always got the best of everything." "They got to take the bath first, they were fed first," she said—and she hated that, she thought it was so unfair. And then, when she met my dad and these other Americans, they would say things like "Ladies first"—and she thought, "Oh, America must be an amazing place, that ladies get to go first." Her impression was, well, a little bit simplistic and untrue, but she instilled in me the ways in which women and men are treated unequally. It was early on in my childhood, very early on.

Your mother played an important role then in turning you into a feminist?

Oh, absolutely. She gave me what we would call feminist ideas now. She taught me about getting a good education, being independent: "You cannot ever depend on a man to take care of you. You always have to be able to take care of yourself, as a woman." Implied in that, of course, is a kind of vulnerability as a woman. If you just depend on men to be the caretaker, or the breadwinner, you are fucked. Of course, she did not use that word, but that is what she meant.

Where did she get that kind of knowledge?

That is a good question. I am not sure where she got it. For one thing, she was always independent. She did not really conform to conventional gender roles for what it meant to be

a Japanese woman of that generation. She was born in 1925, during the first phase of Japan opening up to outside influences, and lived in Kobe, a port city, which was always a hub of internationalism. Part of her was very traditional, but there was this other part of her, I do not know how she got that. Also, she was an athlete, she was an amazing swimmer, she skied. And she was very independent, always.

So she was not only a feminist role model, but there was also something gender nonconforming in her?

No and yes. Not in the sense we might think of that concept now. She did not conform to traditional Japanese cultural roles and expectations. She and my auntie Yoko, her younger sister, told me stories of how my mom never really cared that much about physical appearance or fashion, or being *jouhin* (conventionally feminine). She cared very much about neat and clean appearance; her style was simple, nothing showy or flashy; hardly any makeup.

Which might have been helpful for a queer kid to relate to …?

I was not and did not think of myself as a queer kid. I thought of myself as somebody who is different from the other girls. I liked to play with the boys, I did all these so-called boy things, sports, I was just very independent, go on my bike and come back when it is time for meals, go on adventures. I hated wearing dresses and playing with dolls. It is like those things just did not make sense to me. I wanted to move my body. All the girl stuff seemed just so passive. I was a tomboy but also attracted to boys. My mom was fine with that because she herself was very athletic and independent. In that sense, we both were aligned.

And you know, one thing about her that I have to give her credit around gender is: She would say the perfunctory things that mothers are supposed to say, like “Make sure you are tidy, make sure you take care of your hair.” Being stylish and girly was not such a big deal for her. She would say it, *jouhin ni shite* (be more feminine), but she did not really push it. I could feel that because I was looking at her, and I took the hidden text of it, which was basically “do what you think is right.” That was really an important lesson. She also said all these things about getting educated: “You have to get your first degree, then get your master’s, and do not even think about getting married.” She taught me these important lessons about being independent in different ways. I will never forget the day I graduated with my master’s. She came to my graduation and that same day she said to me, “So, when are you getting married?” I said, “I am never getting married, mom.” “Why?” she says. I said, “Because I am lesbian.” She said, “Oh” like that and added, “I know two homosexuals, they are very nice.” And that was the end of the conversation.

Wow!

She was talking about two men whom she knew, I have no idea who they were. But it was not a problem for her.

It was her message …

… that she was okay. Maybe she said one more time "Are you sure you are not going to get married?" "Yes, I am sure," I answered. So, even her idea of gender was really fluid, it was not conventional. "You need to get married, have kids, I want my grandkids," none of that ever entered my ears.

That implies a huge freedom.

It was huge.

Do you think it had to do with her crossing national and racial boundaries when she married your father?

Yes, I think it had everything to do with it. She was an upper-middle-class woman, and she was supposed to marry this guy who had already been arranged. And she said no, she was not doing that. In that sense she understood that crossing boundaries was a big deal, but not anything to prevent your kid from doing. Which is really extraordinary, especially in that time, in the 1950s and 60s. There were lots of things I did not like about how she related to me as her daughter; we had tensions. But *that* freedom was such a core practice for her. She gave me so much space, never hovering around trying to control me. She never conformed to any of those gender expectations. She was incredible, I have to say. And the older I am, the more I realize the parallels. What I learned from my mom about what it meant to be a woman is my legacy, is part of my genealogy, my feminism. She was courageous, absolutely. Imagine what she did. It was a really important foundation of my life, of my trajectory, there is no question about that.

Thank you so much for sharing these memories of your mother and how she helped turning you into the feminist you are. That is really touching. Earlier on, you mentioned the Combahee River Collective. You were a cofounder, right?

Yes, I was one of the original members and was there when we became the Combahee River Collective at a retreat in Wellfleet, Massachusetts.

What made you found the collective? Why did you set it up?

Well, the context for me was that I was just really fully coming into my being lesbian and a Black woman. And at that point, most of the people I was surrounded by were white women, white lesbians.

"Surrounded" means … in the feminist community, or in the workplace?

In the women's community. In those days, work and personal life were really separate if you were lesbian. We did not really talk about personal life at work. We had a whole double life.

You were a social worker at that time?

Yes, I was a newly graduated social worker working with "bad boys," "juvenile delinquents," who I adored. But things were really separated. So we did not talk about personal life in the professional area.

Because it was too dangerous?

Nobody was out-out at the time. We were having to use the other pronoun when we were talking about relationships: "Him," "my boyfriend, him," when she was really a "she." People were getting beaten up for being homosexual even in a place like Boston, which was one of the more progressive places. The women's movement was just going full-blown. We are talking 1972, when I was just starting to come out. I moved to Boston in that year. The women's movement was really kicking off, and then all the stuff around lesbians in the women's movement happened, the lesbian menace, the "lavender menace," all of that. In this time, my first encounters were with white lesbians. Because that was the most visible formation, the white lesbian community.

And "community" refers to a political community or to a "party community" …?

It was both, it was not separated. Tuesday nights used to be when all the meetings seemed to happen. The rape crisis center meetings, battered women's shelter, housing advocacy, anti-racism education, sterilization abuse, socialist feminism, and much more. And then after the meetings, we would all go to this bar in Boston. It was called "The Saints," a lesbian bar at night and a businessmen's club during the day in the financial district. Before that were other bars, but this one really became the place where feminists gathered after meetings to party. It expanded into a lesbian bar on weekends.

During this time, I was thinking a lot about race and wanting to meet other Black women, other Black lesbian women. The term "queer" was not acceptable back then, by the way. It was a very derogatory term. We never used it, we said lesbian, or gay or bisexual. There were these three categories. Then I heard about this group of Black lesbians meeting, I cannot remember who told me about it and how I connected with them. I got myself to those meetings, it took place in someone's living room. And it was this incredible moment of finding myself in this room with all these Black women who were also lesbians. Except at that point, I think, Helen described herself as bisexual. But she actually became lesbian. There were six of us, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Helen L. Stewart, Demita Frazier, my friend Mercedes Tompkins, and I. And then sometimes this college student at Wellesley College would come, who now is the wife of the former mayor of New York, Chirlane McCray.

Oh really, she was part of the group?

Yes, she was part of that group. She was at the first autonomous retreat we had. But between my entering Helen's living room and the autonomous retreat, there were series of gatherings that happened in Western Massachusetts usually, at Barbara Smith's former professor's house,

about 80 miles away from Boston. Her name was Jean Grossholtz, and she was a political science professor of Mount Holyoke. She was a lesbian, and would let us use her house. She was white, and the other lesbians, including former students, other academics, and feminist activists in the "Five Colleges" area of Amherst and South Hadley, that is, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Amherst, Hampshire, and University of Massachusetts, were white but then we came and brought Black women from Boston, Cambridge, New York, and other nearby cities to the scene.

Was Audre Lorde part of the collective?

She was not part of the collective, but she came to one or two of the retreats. Of course, she was a critical influence, role model. Different people were doing different kinds of organizing work. But the collective itself was really a series of about eight retreats. The horrific murders of the 11 Black women in Boston, known as "the Stride Rite murders" because the dismembered bodies of the early victims were found near the Stride Rite shoe factory, catapulted Combahee River members into organizing and joining a group called the Coalition for Women's Safety that organized around the murders. Otherwise, it was truly a set of retreats. For me, it was this incredible thing of being in this room with these Black women who identified as lesbian. We were critiquing white separatism, lesbian separatism, and saying that this was not going to work for us, we are not going to separate from the men in our community, this is just not going to happen. Although we had complicated relationships with them for obvious reasons of patriarchy and at times misogyny.

You all agreed on this instantly?

Yes! We were not going to be separatist. That does not make sense. We are in this as a community. And we are a subset of that community, and there is homophobia against us. Nonetheless, we are Black people. And I think the Combahee statement[1] says that really clearly: We are not separatists. And so it was this moment of finding a kind of home with these other Black women. It is important to talk about class here as well. Because there was also a separation between us and others. We may have been working class, but we were educated and moving up towards middle class. And then there were these other Black lesbians who are what we talked about as "old school." They were into roles, butch-femme and all that stuff. We were not into it, because we were feminists. But that was really about class as well. Those women did not come to our meetings, but we saw them in the bars. They would not think of themselves as feminists, and we did not think about ourselves as Black butches or femmes. We were so against the roles of butch and femme.

1 "Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race ..." Combahee River Collective statement (1978, p. 365).

You were against those roles?

Absolutely. We were not having that. We understood roles as extensions or patriarchal and masculinist system, institutions, cultures we were trying to change. So why would we enact them?

And not enacting these roles was one way in which class played out between you?

Yes, but we did not talk about it so much as a unit of analysis. Some of us may have said, "I come from a working-class family, my mother was a domestic." But it was more in a historical sense, that was our class background. We did not really talk about what class meant now in that moment, not in our personal histories. Two people were getting their PhDs at that point. I had just finished my master's. The other thing that was really important about the Combahee River Collective was that it was never a community organizing group, it was more a think tank in some ways. People in the group organized in various ways but not the group itself as a purpose.

When you met you discussed and analyzed?

Yes, that was very exclusive. I would explain it as we were trying to explain our lives and the ways societal institutions and systems had shaped us … What did it mean that we were Black lesbians at a time when most people were in the closet? Except the white gay men maybe and some white women. It was a really dangerous time to be out and then even more dangerous to be out as Black gays and lesbians. That would really jeopardize our relationship to Black communities. So, we were in this interesting …

… almost impossible space …

Yes.

I think that is really helpful, because the statement states how nobody ever helps you as Black women to free yourself. You have to do it yourself.[2] *And what you describe makes me realize once again how much you spoke from an impossible place. Not impossible in the sense that you lived your lives—but discursively, it was not an existent place. So you created the place, you helped create it.*

It was not just discourse though. It was lived experience, what it means to be during the day passing as straight Black women, doing whatever work we were doing, and then by night, going to meetings where we were talking about being Black and lesbian. And anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. Also, there were no textbooks. So our textbooks were novels, written by people like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larson. Toni Morrison was a big influence. At that point, she had two books out, one was *The bluest eye*[3] and the other was *Sula*.[4] Alice Walker had a

2 "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us." Combahee River Collective statement (1978, p. 365).

3 Toni Morrison, *The bluest eye* (1970).

4 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973).

collection of poetry and fiction; Mary Helen Washington had a whole anthology called *Black-eyed Susans*,[5] short stories written by and about Black women. And there was Angela Davis's essay "Black woman's role in the community of slaves,"[6] a foundational reading, but there were no Black women studies. So we had to think about how to think about our lives by reading and studying, as well as using our own experiences as the empirical data, as they were.

You needed to find a language that made it possible to speak about your lives.

Yes, we had to explain ourselves to ourselves, first of all. And then, somehow, articulate and assert ourselves that we do exist. We were good, we were not aberrations, we were not "white people's disease"—you know those were the ways homosexuality was looked at in the Black community at the time, as a white man's disease, referring mostly to men, but it applied to anybody who was "homosexual." So, I mean that was the moment. That was an historic moment.

And when did you decide to write the famous statement? And how did you write it collectively?

Three people wrote it, Demita Frazier, Barbara Smith, and Beverley Smith. The piece was commissioned by Zillah Eisenstein, who was putting together an edited collection, *Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism*.[7] Of course, a lot of it came from our conversations, but the three women actually wrote the essay. Now, the statement could have just died in that book. And this is where it is really important for us as members of the Combahee River Collective to give credit to the professors, especially to the women's studies professors, who assigned the readings.

I remember getting to know the text in the early 2000s while studying in Berkeley. Professor Trinh Minh-ha had it on her syllabus in women's studies.

That is the typical way that people were introduced to it—in these classes. And it resonated obviously with the students, and they kept assigning it. Sociology professors took it up as well. The academy enlivened that text, gave it life. By now, several generations of students have read it. And it still resonates, that is the other thing. It was not just deconstruction; it was real substantive anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. It was materialist, as well as intersectional and structural, so it has really held up over time. It was not some fluffy piece where we were just talking about our personal stories and identities in one moment in time.

I think what is so strong about the piece is how the personal aspect of your analysis, that you were all trying to figure out your place in the world as Black lesbians, was combined with an analysis of structural issues, with the big structures.

5 Mary Helen Washington, *Black-eyed Susans* (1975).
6 Angela Davis, Reflections on the Black woman's role in the community of slaves (1981).
7 Zillah Eisenstein (Ed.), *Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism* (1978).

Yes, it was both personal and structural. There are two parts of it that are misread though, and I think it is really important to clarify this. I do not know what the other members of the collective would think, but this is what I think. One is, we were not talking about multiple identities. Absolutely not. We were not saying we are this and this and this and wrap these up and you have intersectionality. By identity politics, we were not talking about identities in the essentialist way. There is a line in this that says "when Black women are free, all women will be free."[8] With this, we were not saying that we were the most oppressed, and like in a trickle-down theory, if we are liberated, everybody else will be liberated. We rather said, for us to be free, we would have to transform the institutions and the structures. And if you do that, everything changes. And there are possibilities of other women being free as well, because it is about the same systems, same structures, same values, and the same norms, just spoken about differently depending on your group. That is what we meant by "if Black women were free, all women would be free." Again, not that we were the most oppressed, we did not think that.

The other point concerns intersectionality. Our idea of intersectionality is about oppression, it is about power, it is about structures and institutions. It really was not about multiple identities. Of course, Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with that concept.

This touches upon one of the questions I have: How much sense does it make to compare your analysis to what Kimberlé Crenshaw does? Her notion of intersectionality grows out of an analysis of the juridical system, and the way the US anti-discrimination law works and especially where it fails.[9] I wonder whether you were on the same level of analysis when you addressed what you called an "interlocking system of oppression."

It was a serious structural analysis of the oppressions that we in our case, as Black women, faced. It was not just the social categories adding up together producing certain negative outcomes. It was a deep structural analysis. And yes, our two conceptualizations are often conflated. People say, "Combahee came up with the concept first, and Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term," but what you are saying is right, it was not the same concept. It is really different. Now that I am thinking this through, they are not the same. It is also important to acknowledge that Combahee was not the first generation of Black women to think intersectionally.

The conflation seems too simple. Because Crenshaw was working within a certain system, the liberal legal system and its attempts to deal with discrimination, and you were looking at this more from an outside view.

We were not just looking at one system—we were looking at the whole society and a little bit beyond, to explain the ways in which various social categories created a set, the relationships between all these institutionally backed categories created certain experiences of

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8 "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." Combahee River Collective statement (1978, p. 368).

9 Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color (1991).

marginalization and oppression. That is more accurate than to say we came first and then the term was coined. There are overlapping things but it is not the same. I am glad you are helping me think this through.

When I listen to you, I find it ironic how the term "identity politics" is currently used, as a politics that is based on a self-centered and entirely closed idea of identity. It is often mentioned that the statement is one of the first places or maybe the first one ever that made use of this term.

Yes. And we did not mean it in the way that it is talked about now. It is really worlds apart.

Recently you said that we should stop talking about identity politics and talk about politics of identity. Can you say more about that shift?

When we talked about identity politics, we were talking about how we construct our identities is always political. It is about power relations. It is not about these essential ways of thinking about "I am Black because XYZ." We were not talking about essentialism and essentialist identities. We were talking about Blackness and femaleness, back in the day, that those things were absolutely about power relations in the wider society. And that we would use our identities as a source of power, a source of affirmation to do the political work that needed to get done, so we could all be free. Not that, again, not that we were the most oppressed, or only thinking about ourselves, to be this little "us" in a vacuum, separated from other women of color and even white women. Now "identity politics" used by both the right and the left is "oh, you are only thinking about your own people." But that was not the case. We started with our own experience, like other feminist epistemologies, and were then making sense of that, and affirming our identities as Black, feminist, socialist, lesbians, and then using that as a foundation to take off and do something in the world that gives us strength. Never that we were the most oppressed, and never that we are only going to think about us.

In the statement, you also refer to women in the South, Third World women, and how important it is to build coalitions across the planet. It is ALL there.

It is very much there, from the beginning. And it is interesting what gets taken out and told as "this is what the Combahee River Collective said." The other thing about the statement is: Yes, it is still very salient and relevant. But what would a group of Black feminists or any feminists write today, what would be the 2021 version? What would need to be included to actually fit the even more complex situation that we live in today? When we think about the environment, for example. When we think about indigeneity, what is the statement that needs to get written? I do not want us to get reified, the statement had been written 40 years ago.

You probably never wrote that statement to make it a historical source for the next century.

No, not at all. We wrote to say, "This is what we believe in," it is a Black feminist manifesto. We had no idea that 40-plus years later, people would be referring to it.

There is another passage that I came across when I looked at the statement again. It says, "Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community."[10] *And I found that interesting, because love is a concept that is crucial for your recent work, and at the same time something that people do not speak much about when they speak about the statement.*

I know! That never gets mentioned. Is that not curious?

Many people seem to be afraid of the word "love." You are not! So I wanted to know whether you can trace the way you work with love as a concept back to these days?

The passage on love that you mentioned is in the Combahee River Collective statement, but I wonder how we actually practiced this. It was there. We cooked together, we had these retreats, we laughed and played together as a group. But also, we really loved being Black women. My using the word "love," as you have heard and my trying to live it and be it, is more recent. I cannot trace it back to the Combahee River Collective. Because for a long time, I thought like many other people: What a silly word, or I was just thinking about it in very narrow ways, like romantic love.

That is why I like your use of the term so much, because it goes way beyond the idea of any heteronormative-inspired marriage, blah-blah. In your writing and teaching, it is worldly love, it is political love.

It is, it is. And that is the meaning of how I am using it now. In the last seven or eight years, I have really embraced love and come to understand love as just so foundational to life on this planet. Sometimes I get mixed up, this big feeling I have of love, and then I meet somebody, a single person I have feelings for, and it is confusing me. But I know that at the end of the day, what I am really talking about is the big love. About loving life, fundamentally. And loving being alive.

And also as something that we share, right? Since loving life and being alive is not something that you can do individually, just for yourself.

No. When I feel those connections with people, like in the summer school class or it could be anywhere, talking to a shop clerk, there is no one specific context. There is just this feeling of connection. It is a feeling of being connected, irrespective of the setting or the demographic of the person. And I used to think that, and this is popular psychology, that you cannot love other people until you love yourself. I was told so, by therapists or whomever. But I have come to the conclusion that you come to love yourself because you love other people. It is circular, and I think we start by being external and trying to see people and listen to people.

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10 "Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work." Combahee River Collective statement (1978, p 365).

One problem people would have with the term "love" is the question of how it relates to power.

Love is not a naive concept. It is a deep concept. People think love is this fluffy thing, it gets used in any way and there is no core to it, there is no politics to it. For me, it is a deeply rooted concept. It is about being grateful for life, being grateful for being alive, and that is a powerful place to be in the world. Loving life has made me know that life is not static, that it grows. And that I am standing on something that I am convinced of. I feel a confidence I never felt, in the core of me. It still happens that I think, "Oh today, they are going to think I am an idiot" for this workshop, but those little insecurities do not shake my core belief about life, about why it is important to stay connected if we are really going to create the kinds of changes we need to create.

And that goes beyond human beings …

Right.

If we think about the ecologies, the way we have to relate differently, even to the water or the earth …

… and all our ancestors because we are not the only beings around. You know that, I know that. And I think other people know it too. But I am not sure they want to know it.

… that takes us far from a conversation within the usual academic context.

Yes, and I think it needs to be brought back. That is what we need to be brought back to, to remember. If you talk about decoloniality, you have to talk about indigeneity. You cannot talk about decoloniality as some political concept without infusing the thinking and believing with the world, the natural world, life. It cannot just be between people. And that is radical for us academics. It is not radical for indigenous people who have not gone the way of the dominant paradigm of separations, and from indigenous worldviews.

It is radical and at the same time, it is a place we need to return to.

We do. We have moved away from it, we do not want to act like it is there, but it is. And that is how we have gotten into trouble. That separation of nature and human, of body, mind, spirit, has not done us any good, in the grand scheme of things. That is what I mean by love. It means reconnecting the parts that have been separated. And at some point, the question is how we actually rehumanize ourselves. Our worlds have dehumanized us in ways that we do not even recognize. We need to ask how that could become part of the work we do as professors, researchers, educators in a more general sense.

This is a complicated question, because your idea of rehumanizing does not refer to the notion of the human as it has been created in modernity, the human as we know it.

No, not at all.

Which means that we have to transform the notion of human while we rehumanize our self.

You know, US Asian-American philosopher activist Grace Lee Boggs was a hardcore Marxist, and toward the end of her life, you know what she was talking about?—What we need to do is grow our souls. We were all so shocked when she started using the s-word because she was an analytical Marxist, diehard. But she got it.

So we have to find ways to translate that knowledge into academia without sounding esoteric or end up in some wellness talk.

I think it is both. I think we need to do that talk, too. Because we cannot talk about some of these things without using that language. And it might mean that we are going to be laughed at, and I guess if you are early in your career, you would worry about that. At the same time if we really believe that we have to live in the moment, we cannot do XYZ so that we are going to get tenure five years from now. If we really believe that we live in the moment, pay attention to what is happening, pay attention to the people around us, and act accordingly, I think those things would fall away. Because we are not promised tomorrow, we are not.

Talking about love has taken us to places … one of the questions that we lost in the conversation is the "politics of identity." You started to use this term recently; what do you mean by it?

How we talk about social location, about positionality. That is what politics of identity means to me: Where are we in the social political hierarchy? How do we need to understand that, so through that understanding we can act in ethical ways for whatever purpose?

That is how you have just described what the Combahee River Collective meant with identity politics, right? That it was not about essentializing identities, but to take your own experiences seriously as a starting point for how you want to act in the world.

Exactly. It is another way of saying "the personal is political." And yes, that is how I understand the "politics of identity." It is feminist epistemology, standpoint theory, all these approaches that say what our lived experience or experiences of life can inform and can help us understand the bigger structures.

One of the things that people often say is that with identity politics, you are reduced to your identity, you can do a certain kind of work only if you are positioned that way.

That is identity politics in the stupid way. I am talking about exactly the opposite, because for me it is like what Chandra Mohanty talks about as the common context of struggle.[11] If we are

11 Chandra Mohanty, Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism (1991).

clear about our social location and our identities, then in transnational contexts or any other context, we can ask: "Where is the point of struggle?" Charlotte Bunch said something really interesting on this point. She said transnational feminism is not missionary work. It is not people from the US going and fixing whatever needs to be fixed "outside." Take infant mortality, which is high in certain parts of the US, almost the same rates as in countries of the so-called Global South. What if we constructed alliances around that problem, where there is a joint benefit, because we see the connections, for example the same manifestations of capitalism? The common goal is to reduce infant mortality, or the goal is to birth babies who are healthy and are going to thrive; mothers who are going to survive birthing. Such an approach has to take in capitalism, and it has to take in militarism. In the US, one has to consider the military budget, two billion dollars a day for the military. Imagine! That same military commits atrocities in another country, while it takes the budget from the people here wanting to give birth to healthy babies. We need to make those connections.[12]

At the same time there are different responsibilities, because if you are a US citizen you have a different relationship to the US military as opposed to a feminist who lives under US foreign military rule. So you are not talking about being equal within this framework, you are talking about creating common goals.

There are structural inequalities between us and respective responsibilities. That is how I am beginning to think more about transnational feminism, around some shared thing that is happening in both locations. And there is another part of it, too: How do we need to be together in such a way that we can collectively construct new knowledges that will help all of us understand better what is happening? So it is not just an exchange of information but really how we come together, develop deeper understandings, and as we are doing that deepening our relationships to one another, because we are having a shared project that includes relationship building as its core. This is not just abstract. Let me take something that came out of our International Women's Network Against Militarism recently: We wrote a statement, a feminist vision of genuine security and a culture of peace.[13] Our statement came from years of us working together, learning from each other, and then finally, the different representatives from all these countries came together and wrote this statement. To me, that was an example of how coming together, learning from each other, and then coming up with something that is way bigger than any one of us. Our network has been together for 24 years this year. So it is those years of conversations, meetings, shared experiences, and realities that then enabled us to write this statement. We did not have a colonial perspective in the beginning, but when an indigenous activist from the San Francisco Bay area and sisters from Guam, Puerto Rico, and Hawai'i came, they emphasized necessarily the colonial perspective. For activists and activist scholars, the question is: Who do we need to be in conversation with to learn what we need to learn, whatever the problem is?

12 Margo Okazawa-Rey, No freedom without connection (2018).
13 International Women's Network Against Militarism, Vision and mission (2015).

Let us take this question as a link to learning and teaching, and talk for a moment about your book Women's lives: Multicultural perspectives*.*

… it has a different title now, it is now called *Gendered lives: Intersectional perspectives*.[14]

How did that change of title come about?

For this last edition—it will probably be our last—we were taking seriously the pushing around binary gender formations. So you will find different kinds of readings, the way we frame the sections has changed, and the language we are using is different. So of course, we had to change the title, we cannot just say "women's lives." The book first came out in 1994, that is a long time ago. It has been 27 years and seven editions. Each edition, we learned something. And it is no joke putting together a textbook. I know they are not considered academic or scholarly, but each edition required deep thinking about framing and about feminist theorizing and praxis to keep up to date on issues and ideas. Every edition was such a work of love. Love of ideas, students, learning, our feminist educator colleagues, love of our deep friendship over the decades.

Why did you initially start the project?

Because back in 1994 there was no book available that contained what we, my co-editor Gwyn Kirk and I, wanted to teach as an introduction to women's studies. In those days, the field in the US was mostly about violence against women, identities, sexualities, family, and bodies. Our book was the first one that included militarism, the environment, immigration, and activism. I will never forget the comments of the first set of reviewers. One said, "Oh, these editors must be Marxist." And the other comment was, "The environment, militarism and immigration do not really belong in an intro to women's studies textbook." And of course, Gwyn and I knew they did!

So there had to be a neat separation between women's things, probably the house, and male spheres, the political, the military …

Yes, it was the conventional divide between the private and public. I think ultimately it is for the teachers and students to say, but I will say it anyway: I think our textbook really shifted a paradigm of what should be included in an introduction to women's studies, or what was women's studies at the time. We observed that for many students of all genders, "Intro" is the only women's studies course they will ever take. We understood that as teachers. So we wanted to pack everything in, throwing in things that we really loved. We disliked the chapters on families though, and bodies. They were not our main interests but we also knew they were of great interest to students and teachers.

14 Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Gendered lives: Intersectional perspectives* (2020).

It is important to talk about families and bodies!

It is, but those were not our favorites. Gwyn and I were partners at the time. We were each working with readers, those photocopy readers, and teaching our respective courses. Then we said, there is no book out there that does what we want to do, let us create a book. And it sort of became our child. And because we were really teachers, we understood the importance of Intro books, because it lays the foundation for feminist perspectives. Introduction classes are also, and ironically, the least respected course to teach. Usually, assistant professors, part-timers, or lecturers, the lowest-ranked in the US academic hierarchy, teach Intro. Other professors teach upper division. But Gwyn and I loved that work, and we love the book. We think the newest version is the best one. And we made it to the academically respected Oxford University Press. This makes me laugh out loud!

Which means that the book is still read a lot.

In the US, it is used a lot. And we have had students say to us, “You know, your book saved my life when I was in an abusive relationship,” or “I gave my book to my dad, to have him read it” or “It’s the only book I did not sell,” you know, those kinds of comments. That is very satisfying. Because the book makes a difference in people’s lives.

That is a good moment to raise the question of activist scholarship,[15] *which is a really important notion for you.*

It is. At the core, the purpose of activist scholarship is to create knowledge, and not just information, but knowledge that helps us understand people’s lives in such a way that it is going to make a difference to them.[16] And that could be individually, like the student who said, “This book saved my life when I was in an abusive relationship,” to helping to inform people on the criminalization of immigrants. It could be very micro-individual impacts, or more macro, global kinds of impacts. The purpose is about creating change: change in people‘s lives, in addressing the suffering folks around the world experience, in creating new understandings. It is not just creating new knowledge, I am realizing even more as I am talking to you. It is creating knowledge that will help us gain a deeper understanding of human conditions and their root causes. Activist scholarship assumes that our destinies are connected. The destinies of us as scholars, so-called, and the people on whose lives we want to have an impact: We are not separated. In some ways we are, of course, looking at class differences, language, culture, nationality, and so on. But when you look at a deeper level, their wellness is going to support my wellbeing and vice versa. Our fate, our destinies, are inextricably linked. That is part of why

15 Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Activist scholarship: Antiracism, feminism, and social change* (2009).

16 See Margo Okazawa-Rey, Solidarity with Palestinian women: Notes from a Japanese Black U.S. feminist (2009).

I am doing the work. It is not just for them, but to change the conditions for us all. It is what US feminist theologian Carter Heyward describes as "radical self-interest" and "compassion."[17]

This means that knowledge becomes part of a social transformation process, which works on both ends: On the one hand, we make our knowledge usable for social transformations. On the other hand, our research needs to be impacted by the questions and insights that arise out of social transformations.

Right, and we need to ask ourselves: How am I also being transformed in the process? How am I transformed when I am listening to people's stories? Activist scholarship means that we recognize the interconnections of our lives, whether you live here or somewhere else. Our destinies are absolutely bound up together, and we see that now more than ever. This raises another question: What is my responsibility in relation to a particular situation? Sometimes, you do need to get out there and demonstrate, but that is not the only way to be an activist. We do have to take responsibility for what things are done in the name of the US, or Switzerland or Germany, especially the powerful countries of the Global North.

In a way, what you say makes research more humble, but also more powerful. It does not have that status as an outside knowledge on top of an intellectual hierarchy, that is the humbling moment. But it is also more impactful, since it is about making a difference in the world. I also like that activist scholarship is not just about demonstrating and working for an NGO. It can be done within the university, by the way you theorize, the way you teach, the way you engage with people in an academic space and beyond. There is a wide range of possibilities.

Right. And where and who you choose to teach. Also this way of teaching and doing research assumes that the person with whom you are having a conversation is theorizing as well. Theorizing is basically trying to explain something and thinking about the power and limitations of a way of explaining. I believe the main difference between "ordinary people" theorizing in their individual and collective lives and in their communities and the theorizing in the academy is about production in the academy for a particular kind of consumption. This kind of consumption most often serves the interests of those in power and supports the fundamental assumptions and organizing principles of the society. In other words, as you and I know, much of the academic research and scholarship directly benefits the academics and their institutions. Indigenous folks theorizing to save their lives and communities, for example, to challenge extraction of natural resources, are judged biased and unqualified to do research and theorize about what is happening and why.

That means: Forget the fieldwork!

Yes. The prevailing idea of fieldwork, of going out into the field, is very colonial, and it is objectifying. It is extractivist. Because you are going out and taking what "they" know and then

17 Carter Heyward, *Our passion for justice: Images of power, sexuality, and liberation* (1984).

writing it in a book. This process makes the researcher the expert, not the people who live and theorize their experiences. They are made invisible, ironically, since presumably the stated goal is to make them visible and amplify their voices.

What people share with you is knowledge. It is not resources that you then purify and turn into knowledge.

Exactly. And the question is, how do we ourselves become multilingual? And how do we, the people with whom we are having these conversations, how do all of us become multilingual? Because they can learn the words too, if they want to, and if we are not just keeping them to ourselves. Language is power. If you say "intersectionality," a person may not know it, but if you describe what it is, the person might say: "Oh yeah, this is how I think about things, since I am a woman and also …" For me, activist scholarship is fundamentally about relationships. About our relationship to one another, our relationships to knowing and understanding. Even though we need to remind people that it is risky, if your orientation is as an academic careerist. Nobody is going to reward you for being transgressive, and say: "Oh you are brilliant, you are going to challenge our structures." No. And that is a decision you have to take.

And you cannot take it alone, can you? You need to be a collective.

There is no way you can do this alone. And that is part of the mythology: If you are a real academic, you should be able to do it alone, with no help from anybody else, and whatever you produce has to be new and produced only by yourself …

… and in the process, you erase all the people who helped you.

Or you mention them perfunctorily, "I want to thank this one and that one," but it is only a name. And so how do you actually truly appreciate and thank people who support you, indeed, but were integral to whatever you are doing or have accomplished? How do you let them know, really?

How do you do it?

I am there for them, in whatever ways I can be. Because I know, in my life that I have only been able to be here, talking with you, because so many people have accompanied me at different times in my life. And if anyone of them had not, I could not be here. Mutuality: Our destinies are intertwined. I know that, with every cell in my body: It is about reciprocity.

This brings me to my last question, which is about the future of feminist theory … what is it, according to you?

I have no idea. There are too many things that are unknown. It all depends on who is doing it in the future, what are the situations, what is the context, where is it going to take place.

And what about the future that you would want for feminist theory?

The future of feminist theory encompasses two fundamental elements. First, creating a feminist transnational nonaligned movement à la Bandung Conference in 1955. This includes detaching ourselves from existing states, political parties and perspectives, categories of being in the world, etc. Starting from a place that will enable us, participants, to be outside existing paradigms and boxes of political perspectives, ideas, theories, and agendas. To become creative and generative, not stuck in paradigms that no longer serve us and keep us reactive. Part of the purpose of this movement is to envision anew the worlds we want to create in which all living beings will thrive, not simply survive.

To do the above, we need a methodology that will be generated collectively. I have a starting place for bringing people together in such a way as to be able to bring us closer to creating it. We start with telling our personal political and cultural histories. Who are we? What are the historical events and "big" forces that have brought us to where we are and shaped us? How do those forces cut across identities, geography, time, etcetera? What are the values embedded in these forces and events? Which ones are life-destroying? Which support our thriving? What additional "thrival" values must be at the foundation of whatever we create? Who must we become in order to live in the ideal world, to prevent recreating what we just changed, like we have seen in so many settings: states, organizations, families?

In short, my feminist future is a collective, transnational feminist methodology, first of unaligning ourselves from what has caused so much suffering and destruction, then aligning ourselves, audaciously, compassionately, lovingly, to principles and values of a feminist utopia where all people and all living beings will thrive and figuring out how to create it. Can you imagine this?

My imagination opened up and expanded while I listened to you. Thanks for this, Margo, and thank you for our conversation.

The conversation took place in Basel, Switzerland, on September 7, 2021.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Vanessa Näf for transcription, Anukriti Dixit for proofreading and referencing, Mariem Grira for typesetting, Fiona Little for further copy-editing and referencing, and Nora Ryser for our logo and typeset template.

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