The many futures of gender
Oral histories of feminist theory (2025), 9, 1–20
www.oralhistoriesoffeministtheory.com

Curating radical communities is key to my theoretical practice

A conversation with Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Patricia Purtschert and Sushila Mesquita

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.

Corresponding author
Patricia Purtschert, Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies, University of Bern
patricia.purtschert@unibe.ch

Cite this article
Purtschert, P., and Mesquita, S. (2025). Curating radical communities is key to my theoretical practice: A conversation with Chandra Talpade Mohanty. The many futures of gender: Oral histories of feminist theory, 9, 1–20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.48620/85629

Curating radical communities is key to my theoretical practice: A conversation with Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Patricia Purtschert and Sushila Mesquita

Interviewing Chandra Mohanty for this project was an idea that Sushila Mesquita and I had discussed for a while. Chandra had taught a workshop on decolonizing feminist praxis at the University of Basel and spent some time in Vienna, where Sushi invited her to discuss feminist solidarity across at a spontaneous BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community gathering at WE-DEY x space. Sushi and I were both deeply impressed by the ways in which Chandra brought theory, activism, and transnational collaborations together and into conversations with different generations. We were eager to find out more about the history of her engagement with feminist and antiracist issues and communities. When we approached Chandra with the idea of a conversation, she agreed immediately. We met online between New York City, Berlin, and Bern.

Patricia Purtschert (PP): Chandra, can you remember when you had your first encounter with feminism, either with "feminism" as a term or with something that in hindsight you would call an early feminist experience?

Chandra Talpade Mohanty: Growing up in India, in Mumbai, I was very aware of what it meant to be a girl and be told that you can do some things and not do others. Now when I look back, there was on one hand a very clear consciousness around hierarchies of gender. On the other hand, I also grew up in a family where, in the small community that I am from, women were essentially the movers and shakers in the entire community and in my family. They did everything from managing finances to figuring out who was going to eat what every day. Literally, my mother would decide on the meal and my father would fall in line, and everybody else too. I also grew up around grandaunts. I have written about this before[1]—I had two grandaunts who were both six foot tall, which is unheard of, we are talking 1920s, 1930s here. Neither of them married, and both had careers of their own. At that time, one was the principal of a high school, and the other was a sort of administrative or personal assistant for one of the big textile magnates in India. In other words, they had real jobs that made them financially independent. And they were just these women you could have all kinds of conversations with—from Shakespeare to male/female relationships. So, in terms of my consciousness around gender, there was a clear sense that there were things that I wanted to do that I was told were not appropriate for a "dutiful" girl or daughter. And then on the other hand, I grew up around women who went against the grain and did pretty much a lot of what they wanted to do. Those contradictions were present and visible to me always.

In terms of feminism itself, I was a reader. I read a lot of literature. And my background in India is in literary studies. There was Virginia Woolf, and George Eliot, we all studied British

1 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2003), p. 263.

literature. There was no such thing as regional literature at that time. That is why I would distinguish between gender consciousness and an active commitment to feminism. And I would say that the commitment to feminism came through during my graduate days in the US when I was in the company of many women from the Global South and women of color from the US. We had our own study groups, and I especially remember a Marxist-feminist reading group; we were reading, and we were talking. I was very aware of numerous experiences of gender discrimination and harassment, combined with racial prejudice, both as an undergraduate in Delhi and then as a graduate student in the US. Between growing up in India and being a graduate student in the US, I went to Nigeria for one year. I was in Lagos, teaching at a girls' high school. That was a really important space for me to become even more conscious of intersectionality—of race, gender, and class—because I was teaching working-class girls. I was supposed to be teaching them British literature for their A levels and their O levels, and they had no connection to any of this literature. I was asking myself: "How are they going to respond to this?" One of the things I did then, which I have always felt good about and realized it was in some ways instinctive for me as an educator, is that I read a lot of Nigerian literature myself, and I began teaching them African literature.

I taught them the work of Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mariama Bâ, and then we went from there to English literature, Shakespeare or Keats and Shelley and so on, so that they could make some connections. The only way I could get them to start talking to me, initially, was via a game I played with them where I started a story and somebody else picked it up and added something. That was very useful to me because I learned so much about them, in the form of a story. I would say, "I grew up in a small village called . . ." and then somebody else would pick it up. And I would just point to people, and then they were interested in each other because they got to participate in the game. And I said, "There are no boundaries, you can tell us whatever you want." And so things came out . . . sexual abuse, poverty, many things, which then, of course, we had to talk about and deal with. Which we did. And maybe that is what got me into women's studies. This idea that the personal is political was so prominent then, but I did not have the language for it. It was just: This is the life of girls and women in a particular context. And for them to thrive, you have to find the hook, you have to find a way to get them to become aware of some of these aspects of their lives that they clearly felt a lot of pain but also anger about. There was a level, I think for me, of feminist consciousness that did not have the name "feminism" attached to it until I was in the US and reading specifically feminist work.

At the time, I was reading texts by US and British women of color and women from the Global South who were writing about feminism and nationalism. This gave me the point of entry into starting to think about my own history and identity and how I located myself. Also, when I was a graduate student, I was very politically active. It was the late 70s and early 80s, and I got involved with Palestine politics after the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon. That brought a whole other level of consciousness of Zionism, anti-Arab racism, and anti-Semitism. Some of my colleagues then, people I worked with as a graduate assistant, were from Israel, and we were on opposite sides of this issue. It is really important to have conversations with people on the opposite side, because it clarifies where you stand, but also it humanizes the other person. And we all have, in many ways, experiences, depending on where we grow up,

what we are exposed to, who we are exposed to, and so on. So my consciousness of feminism really came about through interactions with communities of women, specifically when I was a student. I was then in my 20s; I started graduate school when I was 22. So it was during that period that feminism came into my life. And then it was unstoppable! It just made sense of the world around me.

And because right from off the bat, it was clearly—now the word is "intersectional," we did not have that word then—but it was clearly about the combination of colonial histories, racial capitalism, imperial projects, and sexism, heterosexism, misogyny. Because all those things were very much a part of the narratives that I was exposed to, it felt like it was a point of entry to make sense of the world around me.

PP: When you were 22 and came to the US, did you find yourself from the start in a group of people, women, feminists of color who had similar views and helped you collectively to develop this analysis? Or were you all by yourself at first?

No, I do not think I was by myself at all. I was in a group of women from the Global South primarily. And our connections were around what we experienced as graduate students, the discrimination we experienced as non-white, non-US young women. This is a funny story, but it is very telling: One of my teachers approached somebody I knew who was South Asian and was a faculty member in the school of education at Illinois where I was. I had a nose ring. It was not a stud, it was a ring. He, a white older guy, asked this friend of mine: "Is Chandra like a wild woman who had to be tamed? And so there's a ring in her nose?" This level of grossness! And of course, she was furious, and then she told me. I said, "Well, you know, it's all a learning experience."

This reminds me of when I was interviewed as a student to teach in the English department. And you know, in India, we grow up learning English when we are five, especially if you go to the "English medium" public schools. I walk in and this person who interviewed me looks at me and then goes, "Speak." I said, "Do you have a question?" He says, "No, I just want to hear you speak." It was this level of objectification that I did not experience before. I was aware of caste as an intellectual and political issue, but I was not discriminated against because of caste. But honestly this level of objectification I had never faced. That experience and the connections and conversations with friends who were from Iran and from Afghanistan and from Colombia and Ecuador. And of course, from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. That was the community initially that made the most sense because we could share experiences and realize that this form of objectification was not individual in any way. This was the way white supremacist, racist culture saw us.

My first feminist teachers were all white women. In graduate school, I only took one feminist theory class. It was the first feminist theory class that was team-taught during the last year of my PhD coursework. There were no courses before that. I had studied Marxist theory, philosophy, and critical theory, but no feminism as such in my classwork. I was in this seminar, it was 1981, and we read books that had come out that year. I had read Angela Davis before, but bell hooks's *Ain't I a woman*? And *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and nationalism*

in the Third World, Nawal El Saadawi's *The hidden face of Eve*, and later on, the British collection *Charting the journey: Writings by Black and Third World women* (1988).[2] These were important texts for me because they addressed a lot of common differences, and conflicts in Black and white feminist perspectives. All these books were published in the early 80s. That as well as our little reading circles energized us. My three teachers at the time were white, they were very well intentioned, and they had different political positionings. They also were from different departments. But that was also a place where it became very clear, as we were reading women of color and texts dealing with racism in the women's movement, that this was a difficult thing for my teachers to teach. It was almost like they assigned the books and then signaled, "You do what you want with it, because we don't really know what to do with it, but we want you to be exposed to it. But then if you ask me questions, I'm not prepared for those questions! And I don't want to be answering them. Excuse me." That led my colleague Ann Russo, a white lesbian feminist from the Midwest, and me organizing this conference called "Common differences: Third World women and feminist perspectives" in 1983. We organized this as graduate students. And I would say that is the moment that led me to the work I have done my entire life. It led to my first edited book, *Third World women and the politics of feminism*,[3] and it was extraordinary because we invited people from different nations and places. I do not know how we raised money because our teachers were not going to give us any. The departments would not either, they were like, "This is not a field." When the conference was done we tried to get published from the Feminist Press, which was a really big independent feminist publisher in the US run by Florence Howe. We wrote her and she wrote back and said, "This is interesting, but there's no such field as Third World feminism." These are interesting stories where you start understanding that when people say "no" really firmly, you are on to something!

It is the same experience I had with "Under Western eyes." People were not into publishing it. I said, "Okay, I'm on to something then!" But again, I would not have survived a lot of this without my community. It is only because I have always had comrades and colleagues and sisters, throughout my political, intellectual, and pedagogical development, that it was possible to survive and not feel like you are going crazy at many moments because people are telling you that this field does not exist. You want to bring people from Africa and Bangladesh, and you want to bring African American women who are talking about racism. And no one is going to give you money for this. And still we were able to do it in 1983!

Sushila Mesquita (SM): Can I jump in at this point because I was wondering how you were navigating academia in the early 80s! What you are saying sounds quite familiar to me, all these struggles. And I am amazed that you found your community so quickly. I was wondering how you were able to build this infrastructure that you have described, getting together, building networks, exchanging knowledge, and supporting each other. How did you do it, and without Internet? Because I guess all of this did not happen in Urbana-Champaign, right?

---

2 Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis, and Pratibha Parmar (Eds.), *Charting the journey: Writings by Black and Third World women* (1988).

3 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World women and the politics of feminism* (1991).

No, not at all. It began at the University of Illinois, with what I got from being a student there, but also from being part of the student community. The conference in 1983 specifically led to networks of feminists that I maintained my entire life. That was where bell hooks and I became friends. That was where I became friends with Barbara Smith. There were a lot of different people that I met and stayed in contact with, Nawal El Saadawi for example, because it was very clear to me that the networks I needed would not be in the same geographical location that I was in. And I did not know where I would end up in the future. And then I left Urbana and went to Ithaca, New York. And that was a whole other story too. Again, new people, not really knowing what my place was. But it was because of those infrastructures that I built as a young part-time lecturer that I would be able to pick up the phone and call somebody and say, "Hey, this just happened. What do you think?" Also, I had a very supportive partner who also was smart about racism and feminism, and who also had been going through a whole bunch of racist experiences in the English department at Cornell. We were able to have these larger conversations, and that was also extremely important.

And honestly, Sushi, that has stayed with me, so that when I had a more permanent teaching position, and especially after I got tenure, I ended up creating these infrastructures for young scholars because it was very clear to me that without that, we would not have survived. My generation is the generation that did not have women of color or people of color teachers. We really did not have them, they were not in the academy. My generation is the first one where we are in the academy in some numbers, not a lot, but in some numbers. And then the next two or three generations, there are more and more. But even now in the classroom, I am very aware of why it is important to figure out the creation of spaces and communities for students of different levels. I participated in the Future Minority Studies Project, which was one of the things my partner Satya was involved in and had a Mellon grant for at Cornell. This ended up being a very large project, and I was part of it. We taught summer institutes for untenured faculty, part-time faculty, and advanced graduate students. I think it was six or eight years that we did that. It was our attempt to create communities that could sustain each other, primarily people of color and antiracist white people, where people could connect and do collaborations, because it was clear that people were isolated in their institutions. And the only response to that kind of isolation, especially if you want to do intellectually and politically risky work, is that you find spaces where you are supported and sustained. And senior scholars who will support and sustain you. And that is what the Future Minority Studies Project began for me.

When I moved to Syracuse in 2004 we started something called the Democratizing Knowledge Project, which was the second stage of the project of curating dissident communities for me.[4] For that we got some soft funding from our chancellor then, who was very progressive. That was, again, a project where we had summer institutes, we had semester-long postdocs, where junior faculty, untenured and often precarious, could apply and come to work with senior scholars at Syracuse. I think there were about 13 such postdocs, almost all people of color, not just from the US, but also from abroad. I mean, this is what is missing in our academic spaces, right? We do not have senior faculty who will do this kind of work. And if we do, we have one person whose health is compromised and dies early because there is too much that this person

4 https://democratizingknowledge.syr.edu

is doing. And then after that, my third long-term project, which also draws on the earlier ones, is the *Feminist freedom warriors* video archive, which is very much about intergenerational communication around histories and commitments and personal politics around feminism, activism, theory, and so on.[5] I have always had projects like this, that were organizing projects, pedagogical projects, activist projects *in* the academy. And I think without that, it is hard to sustain scholarship of the kind we want to sustain. Now we are dealing with a serious backlash around critical race theory. We are not supposed to teach critical race or ethnic studies—I am thinking of all these laws in the US that the conservatives and the right are trying to get in place. And all the stuff around trans laws. There are 300-plus school districts in the US trying to put in place laws against teaching and talking about trans lives and trans experiences. These are difficult times to live in. These are difficult times, but honestly, as I keep thinking, the lines of power are much clearer now. The way power works, the way abuse works, the way violence works, in the academy especially, which is used to hiding all these things. But I have a position where I can do what I want in the classroom. If they fire me, they fire me, but if they fire me, it will be a big deal, because I bring a certain recognition to the university. This is a very privileged position from which I can make certain things happen, which I will continue to do until I retire—which I am hoping will be soon because I am tired of all the neoliberal and white supremacist shifts in the academy.

But to answer your question, Sushi: It is really about the creation of communities. And it is about being an organizer in the academy. It is the only way to think about it, not just being a teacher or a scholar, you have to be an organizer. By that I mean, you have to build collectives and collaborative communities that can sustain you.

PP: I would like to talk about "Under Western eyes" for a moment, an article that was first published in 1984.[6] *In it, you develop a rigorous critique of the ways in which monolithic images of "Third World women" are constructed by Western, and particularly white, feminists who see themselves as progressive and emancipated in contrast to these others. Your analysis of this colonial logic within feminism is brilliant, and it hit a nerve. It was widely taken up and is very influential up to this day. Listening to what you have just shared with us, I get a sense of how much this text might be grounded in the collective work that you have done with others around racism, nationalism, and sexism in academia and beyond. Could you tell us a little more of how you came about to write this article and how it was enabled by the collectives you were in at the time?*

Sure. I wrote it when I was finishing my PhD. I had not graduated yet, and I had a part-time lectureship at Cornell in women's studies. That means that you have a precarious job where you are paid for the course you teach. I got $2,000 or $3,000 for a whole semester of teaching. But you do it because you get your foot into an institution, and it is a teaching experience. The courses I taught were the ones that they did not have faculty to cover. I taught

5 Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Linda E. Carty, *Feminist freedom warriors* video archive (2015).

6 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses (1984).

courses like "women in international development," because at that time they would not let you do anything that sounded more radical than that. Then I also taught a course on the "sociology of race and gender in education." And you know, at Cornell, it was a completely white department. There were senior white feminist faculty. By "senior" I mean people who were full professors, historians, sociologists, literary scholars, all of whom treated me like this young, brown, non-American graduate student. They were nice enough, but there was not much of an intellectual give and take. At that time, I was friends with Biddy Martin, who is a queer working-class lesbian from the South, from Lynchburg, Virginia. She got a job in women's studies, a full-time job, at the same time as I we moved there. We became friends, because we were both complete outsiders.

"Under Western eyes" specifically came from my experience of reading feminist theory and sitting in classes on feminist theory. It felt alienating to me seeing that here was feminist theory in one corner, and here was "women in development" as the space where we talk about the Third World and about Black and brown women and non-American women from the Global South. And it was so clear to me as I participated in discussions and conferences at Cornell and elsewhere that there was this incredible strange division that did not make sense to me because I did not fit into either side. Because the "women in development" people were basically said to be poor women, women who "we" have to help by sending aid, women who are traditional. I did not fit there. And I did not fit into the feminist theory folks because they had no clue that they were all white and they were talking about whiteness and about Americanness and Britishness in a very clear way to me. There was no understanding of the salience of "nation" and national identity in the feminist theory that I was being exposed to and told to read. That disjuncture where I was constantly searching for a community or a place within the scholarship led me to think about the question: What is the problem here? What is the contradiction that I need to look at?

Most of my work is like that—when I become aware of contradictions that I cannot explain, I go after them, reading stuff, talking to comrades, thinking through stuff, making sense of stuff, making connections between things. That is how, for me, theory works. It means to literally face a contradiction that cannot be answered by the state of knowledge we have or that is seen as hegemonic but does not actually address it. And then you start unraveling it. I think that is where "Under Western eyes" came from. I first presented it as a conference paper. It was a very low-key thing.

PP: What conference was it?

I do not remember . . . I think it was a conference on decolonizing education in the mid-1980s, organized by the New Jersey Project at Montclair State University. I was a graduate student then, I did not have the identity of faculty. So I was giving this paper. What was extraordinary was that suddenly, there were all these immigrant women, women of color, women from the Third World, saying: "This makes so much sense." The first thing that happened was interacting with people I did not know, who just came up to me and said, "Wow, this is making sense of my entire bloody life in this country, and the problems I'm having." That was the most energizing thing for me. That is why I said, "Okay, I'd better write this as

a proper paper." And the other thing was, when I presented the ideas to my senior colleagues, their reaction was completely different. It was very much like, "Oh, this is so interesting. It must speak to a lot of people like you." Things like that. And then the publication journey of the essay was really instructive as well, because of course, I sent it to *Signs* first, where one person thought it was really interesting. She did a very good and solid reading, the kind of constructive reading that you want somebody to do. And then there were two others. One review was two lines and it said, "Why did you make me waste my time reading this paper? It is of no value whatsoever." That was it. Then they had sent it to a third person. Because if you send it to two and you have diametrically opposed views, then you send it to a third person. The third person said pretty much the same thing, that it is an interesting topic, but there is not enough material here. It made me really upset because this was my first essay, and I was sending it out to a feminist journal that I respected.

It was clear to me that I needed to get this article out, because it was timely in some sense. And so the place where I ended up publishing it was a left humanities journal with a very limited circulation that came out of SUNY at Binghamton called *boundary 2*. They had a special issue on critique of the humanities. That is where it got placed. And then people in Germany and the Netherlands picked it up and it got translated into Dutch and German feminist spaces. Then Avtar Brah wrote to me and said, "Can we re-publish this article, it is really important. We need to have it in *Feminist Review.*" And of course I said yes. It comes out in *Feminist Review* in 1988.[7] Then people see it in *Feminist Review* and start reading it in classes. Suddenly this piece that I am writing in the US gets a life of its own in Europe, and through that finds its way back to the US. This tells you something about how work travels and what intellectual communities are open at what historical moments to particular ideas. The other language it got translated into pretty quickly is Korean.

PP: I remember reading the German translation. It was published in Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis *in 1988 and was widely read and discussed in the German-speaking context.*[8] *But I had no idea that translation played this crucial role for the dissemination of the piece transnationally.*

The German translation was one of the first ones. And there is a French translation that came out three or four years ago. The French decided now it is time to publish this as well!

All of this is very interesting to me. It is interesting to track the story of its translation and who reads it. In 2013, I published an article[9] in the issue on intersectionality that Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sumi Cho, and Leslie McCall edited.[10] I am mentioning it because it is connected to "Under Western eyes."

---

7 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses (1988).

8 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Aus westlicher Sicht: Feministische Theorie und koloniale Diskurse (1988).

9 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique (2013).

10 Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (Eds.), Intersectionality: Theorizing power, empowering theory (2013).

PP: Meaning that Signs *finally published your work . . .*

Yes! *Signs* published "'Under Western eyes' revisited" in 2003.[11] That was because Sandra Harding, who was the editor at the time, heard me give it as a talk and said, we have to have this in *Signs*. By that time, I was in a different place. I had a voice. People were reading what I was writing. But it was also Sandra Harding. It depends on the leadership, what their politics are, and so on.

But I have this second piece in *Signs* that I mentioned. It is called "Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique." What I have done in that piece is look at how my work, especially "Under Western eyes" and "'Under Western eyes' revisited," has traveled through different geographical locations. I analyze the way it is read in three places, Sweden, Mexico, and Palestine. And I do it through conversations with feminist scholars in those places. I track how the work travels, and what people get from it. What is the focus that they find that they then can utilize given their own political, intellectual, and feminist spaces? I am always curious about how people read and how people understand.

PP: You said before that your white colleagues did not react very openly to "Under Western eyes," that they signaled that it had not much to do with them. This is striking since one of the crucial points of this piece is to address the dynamics of othering within feminism. You write, "Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history" (1984 version, p. 351), while women from the Global South and women of color are frozen in an ahistorical and objectified status. Obviously, one question would be why they did not see this point that addressed them and their work directly. And then following up on that, whether you think that this critique is better understood and taken up today, some decades later.

It was read as a real pushback to white feminist theory when it first came out in the mid-1980s. We had all these texts by Black and brown women challenging racism in feminist theory. And then you had people like me and others challenging not just the racism but nationalism as well. I am pointing this out because part of what it means to do transnational postcolonial and decolonial work is to pay attention to the nation as a category of analysis, which is something feminist theory historically in the US had not done. I think that there was this feeling of "We do not want to be challenged in this way. And who are you?" I mean, I had no status. And here I am trying to play with the big girls. And I am a very "small, brown" girl in their imagination. I was not being a dutiful daughter. But that is what they wanted. They wanted a dutiful daughter who they could mentor and who they could create in their own image. And I was not that. So there was resistance at that point, and it was not just interpersonal or in the immediate community, as you saw with the *Signs* response. Feminist journal responses tell you a lot about what the field is attentive to and what it does not want to pay attention to.

I think it has changed, though. First of all, it was not just me doing this work. There were many of us doing that work. A lot of my colleagues were challenging the thinking around race, nation, and empire at that time. That became impossible to ignore. In other words, my work

11 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western eyes" revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles (2003).

has had an impact, but I would never say that one person's work changes a field. It has to be multiple people working in concert, saying the same things from different places that then cannot be put aside or ignored any longer. And the presence of many of us now in the academy made a difference. Here we were, we actually had classrooms where we were teaching these insights, so it was not possible for younger generations to ignore it because it meant they were out of date if they did so and they were challenged quite directly in classrooms. It has changed, but I also think that a neoliberal sort of cultural hegemony in academic spaces has blunted the radical edge of the critique. It is as if people can just cite me and go on to do their own thing. Thus, I would say yes, the field has changed, but it also remains the same in some spaces.

And I also think that the scholarly spaces have changed, but the interpersonal spaces have not changed as dramatically as they should have. Our departments and our academic communities have not been decolonized in the ways that they should be. People can talk a very good game around decolonization and cite lots of people, but interpersonal interactions do not change unless you have a critical mass of people in a department that you cannot ignore any more. For instance, my department is very unusual. It is small, but it is primarily transnational, primarily queer, and primarily Black and brown. And that makes a huge difference to the culture of the department. We are not having struggles with our white colleagues, because our white colleagues are in the room with us and there are many of us in the room, and they would not be in our room if they were not antiracist as well. These changes take a while and have not happened in the ways that they should happen.

PP: What you say about neoliberalism and the changes that it brought about seems very important to me since it is shaping the conditions of our current work. What does it mean that different sorts of critique have become more sayable in the past decades while they tend to become incorporated into a logic of branding and commodification?

Exactly. We are very much part of the consumption of theory in very specific ways. And in some ways, when I think about the work I have done, it is not ever the case that all the important work is at the scholarly level. It is not that at all for me. Writing is one part of my work, teaching is another part, and organizing is a further part in the academy and outside. Curating radical communities is key to my theoretical practice.

For instance, I am involved in two scholarly projects, both forthcoming from Duke University Press. One is a co-edited collection with my Palestinian feminist colleague Dana Olwan, who is in my department. The book is on transnational feminist solidarity at the present moment, and the title is *Transnational solidarities and feminist futures*. We have amazing people from all over the world in it. We are trying to work on an introduction that frames what it means to talk about solidarity right now, given the historical moment, given all the different fissures we see. And then I have a book coming out which gathers things I have published before and some new stuff. This one is called *Insurgent visions: Feminism, justice, solidarity*,[12] and should be out in fall 2025. I just sent it in. It is exciting.

12 Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Ed.), *Insurgent visions: Feminism, justice, solidarity* (in press).

PP: Congrats!

Thank you. A lot of this work maps my journey from "Under Western eyes" onward. And a lot of what I have been preoccupied with has been around difference and solidarity as well as power and solidarity, which feel very crucial to me right now because of how splintered everything is. Even the lowest-common-denominator identity politics is about "This is my identity, you can't understand me, I don't understand you. The most authentic way that you can understand is if I speak about myself and you speak about yourself." That was never something that those of us who started talking about identity and the politics of identity ever had in mind. It was never our idea that identity belongs to people. Yes, it is embodied in us. Those of us who embody things can potentially do better than others and know better than others. But that does not mean that no conversations are possible. That does not mean that you cannot have common differences that you can organize around. Creating communities, collectivities, and solidarities is the real radical work. Not this stuff about celebrity culture and consumerism, which is rampant around me.

These are the conversations I have with my 26-year-old daughter, who is very political, but she is part of this generation that is coming out of the pandemic, and everything is online. Online, incredible things are possible, but if you do not have the physical communities, the people that you can hang out with, the people that you can talk to, there is something really missing. You do not get the sense of connection and community that I feel is so important to be courageous in the face of power.

PP: "Solidarity" has been a term that you used from the very start. In Feminism without borders*, you write that solidarity is not necessarily grounded on mutual experiences of oppression, but it allows people to enter a common struggle against oppression.*[13] *It is interesting that the term is so key to your work and at the same time the conditions to establish and foster solidarity have changed so much as you have just described it, through social media especially. Do you think that people need to go back to old ways of organizing, meet in person, meet physically, get away from social media, or do we have to reinvent our ways of organizing under these different conditions?*

I think the second. There are new ways of organizing that are happening that younger generations invent. And I do not want to put it in an "either-or" because, for instance, I think of groups like the Black Youth Project in Chicago.[14] Their members identify as Black queer feminists. These are young people in their 20s, and they have learned a lot from all of us who came before. Their form of organizing is very theoretically sophisticated, it is very much utilizing social media. But it also is committed to creating in-person communities. They are doing all of these things together.

One thing that I have always known is that we really have to look far and wide for examples of organizing and examples of solidarity. If you think about women in Mexico and women

13 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2003), p. 7.

14 http://blackyouthproject.com

in Argentina, and the mass movements that they created, there is something to learn from that. Think about what happened in India around the Citizenship Amendment Bill and all the farmers' marches. This is where my co-edited book with Dana is headed: We have people from Latin America, we have people from South Asia, we have people from Africa writing in it. People who talk about how they create connections, collectivities, and solidarities to fight sexism, racism, heterosexism, transphobia. There are a lot of lessons in the work of people that you do not read about all the time. Because if we stay within our US-European frame, we tend to see things that remain outside of it as not significant. But I think they are.

And the way we organize has changed. It has changed in ways that many of us can learn from younger people. And then I also think that younger people need to know a little bit more of the history of the generations who came before them.

SM: That is the perfect slide to my question that I have for both of you, because I am amazed about the platforms you are creating to distribute this knowledge with the Feminist freedom warriors *archive, Chandra, but also with* The many futures of gender, *Pat. Both are pre-pandemic projects, and now in the pandemic, they make even more sense. I am so happy that you created these websites, so that people can educate themselves, learn more about different feminist histories, learn more about the context. And I think this is extremely important when you think about slow scholarships and what kind of scholars we want to be, and what kind of knowledge we as teachers want students to have access to. Thank you for that. Can you both tell me a little bit more about how and why you started the platforms? What were your motives?*

Yeah, sure. Patricia, do you want to go first?

PP: Oh, what a nice change to be interviewed as an interviewer . . . this is a special moment also, because, Chandra, my project relates to you. You would not know this, but when you were in Basel in 2017 for a workshop and a public lecture, you sparked the idea of creating an oral history of feminist theory project. Because afterwards at dinner, we sat next to each other. It was a nice summer day, we were sitting outside, and we had an intense and, for me, very insightful conversation. We talked about the history of feminist theory, the struggles around race, migration, nationalism, and how you dealt with them in your work. It was one of these moments when I thought, gosh, this is so inspiring, how can I hold on to these insights and pass them on to others? That is why talking to you, Chandra, was one of the experiences that made me want to realize this project.

Also, I teach young students, and some of the feminist texts that we read have turned into classics over the past decades. These students get in touch with texts that to them, are always already canonized, and are often far removed from their specific context. That is why I started to ask myself: Is there a way of recording and archiving such conversations like the one you and I had in Basel, and handing them over to next generations? As a means to counter the danger that feminist theory could become sterile and detached from its history. And then I thought, if I have the chance to talk to people who wrote these texts and they tell me more about their background and the circumstances that enabled their writing and thinking, there is a chance to bring them alive again. And give younger feminists access to these stories.

But to be frank and honest: I also just love to have these conversations with feminists whose work I love and cherish. They made me who I am, as a feminist thinker and activist. Which means that the project is also an attempt to honor the work that you do and that many feminists in your generation have done because without you—I do not know how you see that, Sushi—without feminist thinkers like you, I do not know where I would be.

SM: I second that. Thank you both so much for your work. And Chandra, I love how you make concepts sweaty again, as Sara Ahmed termed it: They are not abstract at all. They are tools of transformation that emerged from collective thinking and activism. I think this is crucial and gets lost way too often. It is so important to have scholar-activist-teachers like you that keep doing the work!

Well, the origin story of *our* platform is that my colleague Linda Carty and I have worked closely together at Syracuse University for 20 years. She has just retired. So I am bereft. She lives now back at her home in Nevis in the Caribbean, which I envy a lot, also because she is away from all the shenanigans of the university. She and I have worked together for a long time. We wrote an essay[15] for an Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements that Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt edited.[16] For that essay, we did a survey of feminists from around the world. We interviewed some of them around their own thinking, their entry into feminism and anticapitalist politics. We wrote this academic piece and then realized that it would be very important if we were able to have these conversations in a much more approachable forum. We were aware that our students are reading less and less. They are online a lot, but they do not read as much.

We were in a workshop together on documentary filmmaking with these two incredible filmmakers who are friends. They asked us to do an outline for a dream project. And then they said, "Look, even if you have no money, you can start." And that is how we started. We have never gotten any real funding for this project. We used our own research monies to build it. And now we have 50-plus conversations online. We began with people that were in our generation and people that we really wanted to talk to before they were gone. Two of them are now no longer with us: Minnie Bruce Pratt has just passed, and Gloria Joseph passed a few years ago. We began there, but then it became very clear that we needed to talk to a range of people. It is like you said it too, it is a project of my heart. It feels like even if I decide to stop writing, this I will continue as long as Linda and I can manage it. We do it by trying to be in the same place at the same time and then cover the expenses for students who are videographers and editors. A lot of the interviews are filmed in my house or in Linda's house or in my office, wherever we get to sit down and get a camera. It is this "seat of our pants" kind of thing. So it is like what you said, Patricia, this is for generations to come, and it is online and free. People are using it everywhere, they use it for organizing, and they use it in the classroom.

---

15 Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Mapping transnational feminist engagements: Neoliberalism and the politics of solidarity (2015).

16 Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements* (2015).

We are trying to create short videos, with clips on Black feminism, Latinx feminism, etc. that can be used in classrooms. This year, it is one of our projects to have that available, and it is really fun. You see that we enjoy it. And this work reaches a much larger audience than the scholarship per se. And so it is important to do it. And it is a way of honoring people. That is exactly it. You know, these are people whose stories we need to know. If we had money, we would re-interview many people about where they are now, and how they are thinking about what is going on in the world now, because the project is now 10 years old—and frankly, given our own life transitions we will be wrapping it up soon.

PP: Did you ever think about fundraising or was it never an issue?

No, we do not have time for this, to be honest. That has been our problem. We have applied for national humanities grants, but we do not fall neatly within their categories. We tried to get something for digital humanities, but again, so much of this depends on who reviews your project. You have gatekeeping that happens at all levels. And we do not fit in a lot of these places. We are going to try, but we do not have the wherewithal to go after big money. What we need is to be able to hire somebody who can manage the website and everything else, while we do the interviews.

Right now, we have three graduate students who work with us as co-producers and co-editors. And we have undergraduates who do work around transcription and sometimes camera work. In that sense, it has been interesting because this is also a mentoring project. A mentoring project in the academy for a group of people that are not necessarily in our classrooms. And they listen, they are in the room when we are having these conversations. And many of them will say, "OMG, I had no clue that you went through all the stuff to do this," and that I think is so interesting because it is a level of knowledge that you cannot get from a text. That is why what you are doing with the backstory of the text is so important, because people do not have any sense of whether any of this was a struggle. It is just like this old white guy mentality; you have a wife at home and you just sit and produce abstract knowledge in the library. None of us did anything like that. Could not. So this idea of the real struggle that is involved in producing radical knowledge that challenges hegemonic paradigms is so important for people to understand. And that is the personal-political connection there.

PP: When I listen to you, I feel like it is a kind of a care work that we do for the texts since they tend to be turned by academia into something you do not want them to be.

Yes.

PP: And that is of course related to the whole ambivalence in and about academia. We work in institutions that are highly problematic. Those of us who decided to be in academia try to keep turning these spaces into places that are of use for feminist, decolonial, queer purposes, which sometimes works out, and sometimes not.

Yes. And that is why you have to do other things, not just work in the academy. The other things sustain me and vice versa. But I never gave up on academia.

PP: Why?

Because I was always conscious that it was possible to curate radical political spaces. Now it is becoming less so, but it really was a space where you could explore relationships and ideas and politics in a way that I was not going to be paid for by anybody else! I stayed in the academy, and it was important to remain because I am able to build communities, the small communities that allow all of us to thrive and not just suffer in the academy.

PP: The title of our project is The many futures of gender*, which means that it is also about the history of "gender" as a term, an important term with a very complicated history and presence. I wanted to talk to you about the work you have done in the book* Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures *that you have co-edited with Jacqui Alexander.*[17] *In the introduction to this book, you describe "gender" as a term that at the time was central for the formation of women's studies in the US. But you also formulate a critique of the narrow understanding of the term and suggest writing a critical genealogy of "convergence between the way gender emerged as a primary category of analysis and the social, demographic, and class composition of those who actually theorized gender in the US academy" (p. xvi). This seems to be crucial if we look at gender and try to understand its feminist history. And I wonder whether you could say a little more about that critical genealogy and the need to decolonize our understanding of gender.*

What we write there is a complicated and precise way of talking about the troubles of white feminism. What we are saying is that the biographies and experiences of particular groups of people that become the people who talk about gender and feminism historically are important to pay attention to because they are in fact connected to the theorizing of gender. What we are calling for is that we start understanding and paying attention to the way gender seeps into everyday life in very different ways, depending on where you are, who you are, what class you are, how you identify sexually. For instance, I am thinking about the way we talk about trans now and the fact that if you look at communities in Asia and Africa that you would say are trans, the way that level of identity and everyday life is defined is probably very different from the way trans is defined in social movements in the US and Europe. So again, it is a call to decolonize the institutionalization of certain ways of understanding gender, which is connected to particular communities of scholars and activists having access to knowledge and having a voice in academic spaces and not being conscious that what they are saying is connected very deeply to who they are and where they come from.

This is a question I ask always in my graduate seminars on postcolonial feminism, decolonial feminism, or transnational feminism: Imagine you are talking about feminist theory, and you do not begin with second-wave feminism and Western feminism. You begin completely in a different place, in a whole different country, with a text from somewhere else altogether. How does your narrative about the significance of feminism and feminist theory shift? It is always a very interesting exercise to begin somewhere else. Most people in the classroom then are outsiders. They do not identify with where that is, oftentimes. It is an interesting exercise to think

17 M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Eds.), *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures* (1996).

about the inside and outside, insiders, outsiders, and how we generate theoretical categories, which are then supposed to be generalizable without paying attention to the particularities of our location.

SM: I am interested in hearing more about your writing process, and if it has changed or not over the years. You have worked mostly in a collaborative way. That might make thinking easier but writing maybe not? Are you using visual strategies when you come up with contradictions, or do you start with this feeling of wanting to know more about a certain thing when you start writing?

If there is something I want to write about or that feels urgent to work out in my head, what I will do is go and read a lot. I do a lot of targeted reading and take notes on the reading always. I am very old-fashioned, so everything is in notebooks.

PP: Handwritten?!

Handwritten. Then oftentimes what will happen is it will percolate in my head. And, you know, I meditate, I meditate twice a day. I have done that for the last many decades. Sometimes while I am meditating, something comes up. Like a connection. Then I will get up and write it down. And sometimes it just percolates in my head. The question I always have is: How does all of this connect? What dots are there that I need to connect in order to make sense? I will read some more. And then one day I will just sit down and write, like: Here are the three main points that I think have to be addressed in detail. And once I have the trajectory of my argument, then I go in and use research, think about quotes, I fill it in. It takes me a long time to do one substantial essay. I would say, and I tell my students this all the time, it takes me almost a year since I first conceived something to have it be final.

For instance, I just finished and sent off the introduction to my upcoming book, *Insurgent visions: Feminism, justice, solidarity*. It took a long time mainly because one of the things I was tracking was the war in Gaza and Palestine. And I could not put a full stop to anything. Things were changing rapidly. The moment I had something written, something else would happen. And then I would have to take that into account. And I was framing questions of urgencies for contemporary feminist praxis. And I had three moments that I wanted to analyze in this introduction. One was the war on Gaza, and US involvement in it. Which meant paying attention to questions of the empire, race, Arab-American relations, and feminism. The second was Dalit feminist praxis, which is important in my other home space—India. What is the moment right now for feminist struggle around Dalit feminism? That is the second moment. The third was in the US looking at the praxis of abolition feminism. Which I think is one of the key directions of current feminism. And it ties the other pieces together also, the idea of abolition and how feminist praxis in these spaces takes that up in different ways and why this is really significant for us to pay attention to. I worked out those three moments. Then I read about each. Then I worked on writing each. And then I wove the whole thing together. That is how I write. And in between, I will sometimes have conversations with people who know a lot about these issues. I talked often to Angela Davis when I was writing the abolition piece, and to

colleagues in India and from Palestine about the other issues just to clarify things. But a lot of times I do not talk to people. I will just immerse myself in the reading and the thinking. It just sits in my head for a while before it breaks.

SM: I think what you describe is important when we talk about the history of concepts, because most people struggle with writing and, as you describe, an article is not written in a day or two. Rather, it simmers for a while. It is really important for students to know . . .

. . . how much time it takes and how difficult it is if you are putting unlikely contexts together, and making a larger theoretical argument on the basis of that. It takes time to do that. And it takes just sitting with ideas for a while and listening to a lot of voices, reading lots of texts online, lots of books.

PP: We have touched upon this several times, but I want to raise it again since we always end the interview with this question: What, according to you, is the future of feminist and gender theory?

We are nowhere close to post-feminism. The world we are in is deeply problematic in terms of the questions of gender justice that we are concerned about in feminism. So there is a lot of work we have to do. And there is a lot of work people are already doing on gender and the global right, which needs to happen all over the world. And so I think the future of feminist theory is literally what we make of it. And it is completely necessary and urgent right now. But so long as we can think about feminist theory as being capacious in a way that it has not been in the early years, we will do well.

PP: Thank you so much. It is so inspiring to end our conversation with this thought.

It was a pleasure. I enjoyed talking to both of you very much.

The conversation took place online on August 12, 2024.

Acknowledgments

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

References

Alexander, M. J., & Mohantry, C. T. (Eds.). (1996). *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. Routledge.

Baksh, R., & Harcourt, W. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements*. Oxford University Press.

Carty, L. E., & Mohanty, C. T. (2015). Mapping transnational feminist engagements: Neoliberalism and the politics of solidarity. In R. Baksh & W. Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements* (pp. 85–115). Oxford University Press.

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (Eds.). (2013). Intersectionality: Theorizing power, empowering theory [Special issue]. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *38*(4). https://doi.org/10.1086/669608

Grewal, S., Kay, J., Landor, L., Lewis, G., and Parmar, P. (Eds.). (1988). *Charting the journey: Writings by Black and Third World women*. Sheba Feminist Publishers.

Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *boundary 2*, *12/13*, 333–358.

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Aus westlicher Sicht: Feministische Theorie und koloniale Diskurse. *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, *11*(23), 149–162.

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, *30*(1), 61–88.

Mohanty. C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). "Under Western eyes" revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(2), 499–535.

Mohanty, C. T. (2013). Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 38*(4), 967–991. https://doi.org/10.1086/669576

Mohanty, C. T. (Ed.) (in press). *Insurgent visions: Feminism, justice, solidarity*. Duke University Press.

Mohanty, C. T., & Carty, L. E. (2015). *Feminist freedom warriors* [Video archive]. http://feministfreedomwarriors.org

Mohanty, C. T., Russo, A., & Torres, L. (1991). *Third World women and the politics of feminism*. Indiana University Press.