

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: U.S.A.**

**Transcript of thematic film**

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## Acknowledgments

*Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship* was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

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Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdamona Rios, and Ying Zhang.

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## US thematic film

Voice of Marta Ojeda: I just want to say that it's not about egos, it's not about heroes, it's not about one person. It's about people.

On-screen text: the United States Site of the Global Feminisms Project conducted ten interviews with scholar-activists around the nation. Their work spans the major social movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

The University of Michigan

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender

The Global Feminisms Project US site

present

US feminisms

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives” Audre Lorde

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest  
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes  
We who believe in freedom cannot rest  
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes<sup>1</sup>*

*On-screen text:*

- ∞ Grace Lee Boggs Activist, writer, speaker. With her husband James, Grace Lee Boggs's 60 years of political involvement encompasses the major US social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Labor, civil rights, Black power, Asian American, women's and environmental justice.
- ∞ Holly Hughes Performance Artist. An Associate Professor of Theatre and Drama at the University of Michigan, Holly Hughes's work has focused on issues of sexuality, identity, and freedom of expression.
- ∞ Martha Ojeda Attorney and labor activist. Martha Ojeda coordinated the Maquiladora Worker Empowerment Project educating workers on labor law, health and safety, sexual harassment and women's leadership development.
- ∞ Andrea Smith Anti-violence activist. An anti-violence and Native American scholar-activist, Andy Smith co-founded the national organization Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. She is also an Assistant Professor in Women's Studies and American culture at the University of Michigan.

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<sup>1</sup> These lyrics from “Ella's Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

- ∞ Cathy Cohen is a Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago. Her work challenges identity-based movements to recognize and act on the diversity within their membership. She also focuses on HIV and black communities.
- ∞ Loira Limbal & Verónica Giménez (Sista II Sista). Sista II Sista is a collective of working class, young and adult, Black and Latina women working with younger women to develop personal, spiritual and collective power.
- ∞ Marion Kramer and Maureen Taylor Welfare rights activists. Marion Kramer and Maureen Taylor aim to end poverty in America by empowering the poor, especially women, as leaders. They have organized poor people's movements and housing takeovers by people without homes.
- ∞ Rabab Abdulhadi University of Michigan-Dearborn. Rabab Abdulhadi is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She is also co-founder of the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in North America
- ∞ Loretta Ross Human Rights and reproductive Freedom. Loretta Ross is a founder and the National coordinator of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, composed of 70 women of color organizations across the country. She is also the founder of the National Center for Human Rights Education, a training and resource center for grassroots activists.
- ∞ Adrienne Asch Yeshiva University. Adrienne Asch is a professor in Biology, Ethics, and the Politics of Human Reproduction at Yeshiva University She has also worked for rights for people with disabilities.

*Narrator: By focusing on the work of ten activists, this project highlights how US feminism intersects with other social movements aiming to end oppression based on race, class, sexuality and disability, This aspect of US feminism has often been overlooked.*

*On-screen text: The history of the U.S. women's movement is usually discussed in terms of waves.*

Michele Mitchell (Historian, University of Michigan): Generally speaking the first wave can be dated from the Seneca Fall Convention in 1848. That women who were [ ] connected with the anti-slavery movement decided to launch this convention at Seneca Falls. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an integral figure to talk about women's rights. Women in the anti-slavery movement realized that they were really important—that their reforms efforts were central to what was going on in terms of raising people's consciousness about what they felt were sort of the moral wrongs of slavery and how it compromised the nation. Women's efforts were absolutely central.

*On-screen text: In 1848, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized Seneca Falls convention*

Michele Mitchell: The women who came together at Seneca Falls came together to really sort of articulate woman's rights. But the first wave of feminism I think is sort of typically dated 1848 and having sort of grown out of the abolition impetus in this

country. During the Civil War and after the Civil War when there is an opening up of the discussion about citizenship rights in terms of slaves. What's going to happen after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863? What's going to happen in terms of making citizens out of former slaves? And so, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolishes slavery, 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment really made it very very clear that citizenship rights, voting rights, were going to be extended to men. Those are some of the highlights of the first wave, the first and then of course pushing for women's suffrage throughout the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Being linked in some cases to the temperance movement other reforms initiatives and sort of more and more and more radical approaches to try and secure the right of women to vote up until the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

*On-screen text:* The second wave of feminism mainly focused on equal political and economic rights for women but also included a broader analysis of gender inequality

Michele Mitchell: the second wave of feminism would be probably linked publication of post-World War II text, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Even Simon DeBeauvoir's *The Second Sex*. And another highlight of the second wave would be the National Organization of Women in the late '60s. I believe its 1967 or 1968. and the sort of bubbling up of feminists sentiment again, some of which historians have connected to the issues that came out of the Civil Rights movement.

*Onscreen-text:* Goals of the second wave included gaining reproductive rights, and ending sexual and economic exploitation and violence against women

*Narrator:* One problem with the wave model is that it suggests that something rises, falls away, and then is gone. And that's not the way the feminist movement has occurred. It's occurred with different people in different places doing their work at different times. Another problem with the wave model is that it highlights white women's activism when in fact women of color have been involved with all the different aspects of US feminism.

*On-screen text:* During the second wave, differences among women became key

*Narrator:* The contributions, theories, and activism of women of color are rarely mentioned in the way that the history of US feminism is told. Instead, many Black women and other women of color felt that despite their contributions, movements to win civil rights often did not consider gender and organizations that fought sexism did not consider race.

*On-screen text:* This project focuses on activists who work at the intersection between the feminist movement and other forms of oppression. *SLIDE:* Some activists discussed their complicated relationships with the communities they considered home.

Loretta Ross: I started doing feminist work in like 1972, '73. But it wasn't until 1985 that I actually chose the word "feminist" for myself. 'Cause I used to say, "I'm not a feminist," but, yeah "I'm not a feminist, but this is wrong, you know. Violence against Black women in the Black community is wrong. But I'm not a feminist, but I think this is

wrong, kind of thing.” And that was my mantra for so many years. But when I took the job at NOW, the question was called. Because a lot of people thought that I had sold out my Black credentials by taking the job at NOW. And I had actually women leave other organizations that I had been a part of that were women of color organizations and Black organizations because they thought I’d sold out to the white women.

Rabab Abdulhadi: What you are is you are- your actions are informed by *everything* that you are. Not by one thing as opposed to the other.

*On-screen text:* Experiences like these led to the concept of intersectionality, an analysis that considers the combined effects of multiple of social group membership.

*On-screen text:* We...find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression that is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g. the history of rape of black women by white men as weapon of political repression. - Combahee River Collective, 1977

*Narrator:* We conducted ten interviews with activists who work at the intersections between the feminist movement and other forms of oppression such as race, sexual orientation, social class and disability. Their activism and scholarship helps us to understand how the idea of intersectionality can be used to organize diverse groups for social change.

Cathy Cohen: what Black feminism does or what radical feminism does, is to say, things that seem like they’re like just “sexuality issues” have huge...you know, have a huge impact on how people get to live their lives, right? How we think about questions of sexuality and women engaged in kind of the enterprise of sexual, you know, exchange of sex for money, if we don’t begin to understand those as both class and sex and usually gender and race issues, then I think we really miss the analysis in trying to intervene in a kind of effective way to kind of transform the life conditions of those women. So, you know, I guess...I guess my plea is that we, again, kind of go back to intersectionality and really struggle with where are these intersections. Because it’s not only just what kind of analysis and scholarship, but kind of the moment of intersection is really the moment of building a broader movement, at least to me, right? If you can find those places where people may not agree in terms of racial identification or sexual identification, but where they in fact suffer from state regulation or some “system of oppression,” where they share that experience. It seems to me if we can find those spaces, those are also the spaces for shared mobilization.

*Narrator:* These activists used their experiences as members of two or more subordinated groups to think in new ways about how different kinds of discrimination intersect and support each other.

Andrea Smith: If you put woc in the center of analysis, you start to see how sexism is a tool of racism and colonialism and visa versa to the two need to be addressed simultaneously

Maureen Taylor and Marion Kramer: And so as I became more involved it became clear to me that there's a class component to all these fights that are going on.

Adrienne Asch: What we tried to do was figure out women with disabilities had been discriminated against in ways resembles or differed from other women's discrimination or than other men with disabilities. And what we found was that women with disabilities were in some ways double discriminated against. They didn't have, as Michelle Fine so wonderfully described, the pedestal of other women and they did have all the other discrimination women had.

Cathy Cohen: . But I think we have a power...a political agenda quite often in Black communities and communities of color and even in feminist politics that is usually defined by the experiences of those with greater resources.

Rabab Abdulhadi: you cannot have gender liberation when you have...when you continue to have class oppression, when you con—when you have racial oppression, when you have sexual oppression. When you have all these systems of domination that exist.

*Narrator: some activists used their experiences as members of multiple groups that face discrimination to rethink what the categories like "race" and "gender" mean.*

Cathy Cohen: I'm always concerned with the question of identity and who belongs and who doesn't belong and what is that membership based on? Just because someone shared a racial identity with us didn't mean that they also shared a political identity with us.

Rabab Abdulhadi: Who are the members? Are the members Palestinians? Or Palestinian identified? And what is Palestinian identified? But what's Palestinian? Is Palestinian a Palestin—a woman of Palestinian parents? Half? One parent Palestinian or not? Married to a Palestinian? What do we do with the women who have Palestinian women partners?

Grace Lee Boggs: I guess I don't believe in getting stuck .in any one identity...it's so easy to become fragmented because we live in a fragmented...fragmenting society.

*Narrator: Activists working at the intersection between feminism and other social movements challenged U.S. feminism to rethink some familiar issues. For example both these activists problematized the idea of reproductive rights.*

Loretta Ross: reproductive oppression is economic violence. It's, you know, immigration raids, it's violence against women, it's removal of children from foster...into foster care. It's all of those things...The lack of affordable housing. The lack of child care. All of these things form that...that quilt called reproductive oppression. And the only way to address reproductive oppression is through organizing people to protect their human

rights...And the full panoply of human rights, not just gender rights or sexual rights, but the full...the right to have a job paying a living wage or the right to receive services in a language other than English. I mean, all of these are human rights.

Adrienne Asch: for the same reason that I think women and feminism critique the notion that women in Western countries or other countries choose to abort female fetuses, as...for the same reason that feminism is skeptical of that act, it may tolerate it, but it is skeptical of it...I think feminism should be skeptical of the act of aborting fetuses because of particular characteristics, whether they're sex or Down Syndrome... I think abortion has to be available to women as long as women are the pregnant people who bear children. If they don't want to be going through gestation, they shouldn't have to. But I think they should think about, well, if they did want to be pregnant, why don't they want to be pregnant with a fetus that has this particular characteristic? Isn't that a kind of discrimination and stereotyping that they don't like in their own lives?

*On-screen text:* How do these activists view feminism?

Loretta Ross: I got into feminist work through my body. You know, it was not an intellectual thing for me. I didn't...there were no Women's Studies courses at the time, or...anything like that. There were people who were pissed off about what had happened to us and we were kind of committed to it not happening to others. I mean, I'd already had the child sexual abuse, the sterilization abuse and I didn't necessarily see myself as anybody's victim. I saw myself as a woman who was pissed off and was pretty much going to fight to make sure that what happened to me didn't happen to other women.

Grace Lee Boggs: I had known from very early that I was not going to live that way. I was not going to do the equivalent of sitting on my husband's lap and tucking him under the...the chin to get something for myself. That was not my life.

*On-screen text:* Some talked about the importance of changing feminism

Andrea Smith: since I could talk I was a feminist. I mean, I just, that's...I've always been a feminist and I'm more so now because I get so annoyed with how feminism gets defined in these very white terms...And I, and I feel that women of color should claim the term and define it, and not assume kind of the usual white history of feminism

Loretta Ross:...I had the job of going around to all these women of color organizations and talk about abortion rights. And a couple of them kept asking me, "Well, are you a feminist?" and at that point, "I'm not a feminist, but" wasn't making sense anymore. How can I organize women to participate in a movement I'm afraid of claiming? For me you have to fight the baggage, you have to...if you're going to get the benefits, then you have the responsibility of fighting the baggage.

*On-screen text:* Some said the term feminism was irrelevant to their work:

Maureen Taylor: So to the degree that we're women, and...and sometimes we feminine women, you know, we wear little cute stuff every now and then, but that is *not* the focus. The focus primarily is to talk about the international relief of this question of poverty. And we can't do that if we section off a part of the group.

Verónica Gimenez: Well, I personally don't use the word feminist to describe my work or myself...that's not me. And I don't relate to that history.

Loira Limbal: Yeah, I'm not no feminist, you know... For me, like all this work, I don't really name it nothing. You know, it's just like, it's just what I have to do.

Grace Lee Boggs: if I were to characterize myself as something particular, I would say I'm old. [Laughter]

*On-Screen text:* Many work to redefine feminism, making the term more inclusive

Rabab Abdulhadi: on one hand, you want to talk about women's liberation, you want to talk about women's feminism and so on. At the same time, you know that if...if you are part of an oppressed community, it's not only women who are oppressed.

Cathy Cohen: hopefully feminism is also in transformation. Maybe not, but I hope it is. And it means that if you take into account other factors, or the intersection of race, then you have to kind of really think through a position on...not a position on patriarchy, but the ways and the contours, the nuances of patriarchy

Holly Hughes: I had a lot of disputes with feminist and lesbian and gay critics who saw my artwork as kind of a response to feminist and gay theory as it was being lived out at that time.

Grace Lee Boggs: I try to think of all these various movements, not so much as isms, but as ways by which each section of our society that has been denied their humanity, is emerging to contribute their special strengths through the creation of a new society.

*On-screen text:* Building an Inclusive Movement

Adrienne Asch: Disability is still not a category that is comfortable for lots of people within feminism, or anywhere else, to think about. As a political category, it's all in this sort of category of misfortune rather than politics. So we're much more comfortable now than we were even when the feminist movement got started with sexual orientation but that same comfort of thinking about, again, disability as something that affects, say, 15 percent of the population in the United States, and maybe more worldwide, it's a large category. And the...a world that really took people with disabilities into account would look quite different in some ways from the world that we have.

*On-screen text:* Feminists working hard to end oppression—such as racism, sexism, and homophobia— recognize that men face oppression too.

Martha Ojeda: Is not one war between men and women

Maureen Taylor: feminism is a narrow point of view. We're much bigger than that. We're internationalist. Not interested in men being poor either. Ain't trying to find out how to figure out how to just free women, we want to try to figure out how everybody who is struggling to eat, eat, housing, all these kinds of issues, that they all have a way out.

Rabab Abdulhadi: But one of the things that has troubled me, especially since 9/11, is this extreme attack against men, Arab and Muslim men, specifically targeted. And the need to actually articulate a gender analysis that addresses this victimization and targeting of Arab and Muslim men. And at the same time also acknowledges, recognizes and theorizes and comes up with agendas for women's liberation.

*On-screen text:* Making social change: Organizing and collective action

Grace Lee Boggs: But I do believe that the sort of hierarchical, patriarchal way in which we're doing things has created such a mess that people to whom the more natural, informal ways of organizing around kitchen story...kitchen tables are telling stories and things like that, that that's a much more natural way of organizing as we move into trying to create something new.

Marion Taylor: We formed the National Welfare Rights Union. And we wanted it to be a union because it could not be just people on public assistance, like in the past. It had to be a unified type of thing between the employed, unemployed, organized, unorganized, folks that were facing the type of problems that poor people faced. And we had to solidify. We had to make sure that we fought for unity there. And this union was that type of thing that we wanted to form.

Andrea Smith: I think that's a lot of problems why particularly women of color get into trouble is that they think they have to do this narrow individualistic approach and they don't have a collective base to protect them to deal with the racism in the institution.

Cathy Cohen: You must have a commitment to community, and you must kind of work to kind of transform people's lives including your own life.

Martha Ojeda: So therefore we are trying to put altogether one integral...integral work, map, action plan, whatever you want to call. As I told you, it's not been easy. Someone's work...having experience from the top to the bottom leaderships. Now the leadership that we want to build is a collective that we have been building.

Holly Hughes: between the audience and myself, we're not necessarily all in agreement, but we're inspiring, challenging each other, and reminding ourselves that just because our worldview is not part of commercial culture doesn't mean that our critique's not valid.

*On-screen text:* Combining activism and scholarship

Cathy Cohen: part of what it means to be a scholar-activist is not only to kind of engage political questions in your work. But to place yourself in institutions, in organizations, where you can be held accountable for the work that you do... places like women's studies programs, gay and lesbian studies projects, African American Studies, Latino Studies, Asian American Studies programs and departments, have become more and more detached from actually the everyday lives of the people that we supposedly represent in those institutions.

Andrea Smith: Well, if you're going to go in academia and you consider yourself an activist, you shouldn't drop activism. I mean, that's just suicide, not just in terms of any global oppression, but even being academically successful.

Martha Ojeda: And we thought that the academic relationship was beyond the university, beyond the school. That it should be one, an interaction between the field, the university, the research...how your potential research can be helping not just to the academic level of all people, also how can be used for the workers?

*On-screen text:* Hope for the future

Loretta Ross: every generation has the right to define the struggle on their own terms. And it's not our right to look back or forward, to tell people what they should or should not be doing. If you are doing your job, you're trying to figure out how to best play the hand you've been dealt. And if you preoccupy yourself with that, the rest will take care of itself.

Grace Lee Boggs: each of us can choose to do something different, because we recognize that for our own humanity we have to.

Martha Ojeda: When I been going through all this process in my life I been learning so much and thanking my fellow workers every day, because they were teaching me so much. They were giving me strength. Martha is not Martha...Martha is...million of workers in the maquilas and million of womens in the world. And just together we can change this system and make a better world for us.

## CREDITS

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