

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

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

**Transcript of Cathy Cohen  
Interviewer: Elizabeth Cole**

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**Cathy Cohen**, born in 1962, is the former co-chair and a founding board member of the Audre Lorde Project in New York, an organization committed to progressive organizing around queer issues across communities of color. She served on the board of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY. Cohen was a founding member of Black AIDS Mobilization, also known as BAM, and a core organizer of the international conference, Black Nations Queer Nations. Cohen has also served as an active member in many organizations, such as the Black Radical Congress, African-American Women in Defense of Ourselves, and the United Coalition Against Racism. Cohen is the author of *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* and the co-editor, with Kathleen Jones and Joan Tronto, of *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*. Cohen, the third African-American woman to receive tenure at Yale, is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

**Elizabeth Cole** is Associate Professor in the Women's Studies Program and Department of Psychology, the field in which she was trained, affiliated with the new Personality and Social Contexts Area. Her research works to understand the social construction of categories like gender, race and social class. Feminist theorists have long argued that these categories are not natural or essential, but instead derive meaning from specific social and cultural practices and beliefs that vary in different times and places. Cole's research explores questions such as: How do the categories mutually construct each other and work together to shape outcomes such as well being or political attitudes? How do people experience these social categories as parts of their identities? How do members of different groups perceive these categories of difference, and how are these perceptions related to prejudice? To address these questions, she use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Past projects have explored topics such as: political participation among women who graduated from college during the late 1960s, the role of social class identity in women's attitudes towards abortion, and the processes through which race and gender consciousness develop among college students. Currently, she's particularly interested in the concept of intersectionality: how do individuals simultaneously experience racial, class and/or gender identities?

**Transcript of Cathy Cohen**

[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>

**Liz Cole: Hi, I'm Liz Cole, and welcome to another in our series of interviews for the Global Feminisms project. And today, I'm delighted that we're interviewing Cathy Cohen. Welcome, Cathy.**

Cathy Cohen: Thank you.

**Liz: We're going to talk for about an hour, and then at that point we will open it up to questions from the audience. Um, so I thought we could start by talking a little bit about what your life path has been like to lead you to the place where you are today. And I know that's a really broad question, but maybe you could talk a little bit about where you grew up, if there were formative experience or role models that shaped your life?**

Cathy: Sure. Well, I want to start by thanking you again for the invitation to participate in this really important project, and recognizing all the kind of incredible women of color and feminists and feminists of color who are doing just exceptional work to change the world, and so I just feel honored to be a part of this project. But if I kind of think back to where this, I guess maybe all began, at some level, my politics, I would undoubtedly come to locate my early political learning in my family. And not necessarily because there were kind of explicit political lessons taught—you will do this, your politics will be this—but it really was about kind of who my parents were, and what they personified in terms of their political commitments. My father was a letter-carrier, and was deeply committed to labor politics. I used to, I always actually tell this story, that, I remember him coming home one day, and, you know, my sister and brother, we were upstairs, but listening like we often did. And he was talking to my mom, and he said, “Oh, they’ve asked me to become management,” and you know everybody, we had enough labor talk in our house that we knew what management meant—more money. And we were like, “Oh, we’re going to get new tennis shoes, it’s going to be really great” and then I heard him say, “I can’t do that,” right. That his commitment to kind of the labor union, his commitment to working-class struggle, was much more important than kind of the advancement that would happen by becoming management in the postal service. And it was those types of lessons that we were kind of taught over and over and over again. The same with my mom, who was totally committed to her community, doing work both in the church and in the schools, always kind of providing a listening ear in the community that kind of taught a lesson that you always have a commitment to folks, you know, not only your family, but folks in your neighborhood, folks who you identify with racially. So, long before I ever knew what a feminist was, heard the word feminist, I think I kind

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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.

of started to develop feminist politics from my mother and my father and my sister and my brother. It's not surprising to me now that my brother's a second grade teacher and actively involved in the union in the Toledo public schools. My sister works in a factory and has really struggled with folks in the factory to establish a union there. That unfortunately is now kind of taken over by white leadership that is very hostile to workers of color. But I think we all were taught repeatedly, you must have a commitment to community, and you must kind of work to kind of transform people's lives including your own life. So for me I kind of start that political learning back in Toledo. You . . . I can go further. You know and I think, through the years, you are very kind of blessed and fortunate to be in places where there are people who can teach you other lessons, or teach you more lessons. One of those wonderful experiences actually came here at the University of Michigan when I was a graduate student, and my involvement in an organization called the United Coalition Against Racism. It was my first year of graduate school, I think in 1986, and there was this incredible group of largely black women and some black men and some other folks of color and some white comrades who mobilized around kind of explicitly racist expressions on campus, but also the fact that there weren't enough folks of color, students of color, there weren't enough faculty of color, and the University didn't talk explicitly about how they were going to address those issues. And, you know, we did things like take over buildings and sit on committees and negotiate, and, I just, I learned so many lessons about, again, commitment to community. I also learned lessons about divisions in community, because there were times when, in fact, other black students kind of attacked us for in fact working in collaboration with whites. There were certain students on campus that attacked us for having women leadership, for addressing issues of lesbian gay and bisexual and transgender concerns in terms of student body. So, you know, you learn from both kind of the victories that you have and the battles that you engage in and its for me kind of a continuous process of kind of adding to my politics. So maybe I start with racial and labor or class politics, and it was really in under-grad and then in graduate school that I started to have what I think is a feminist analysis that talks about power and oppression and kind of multiple sites. But it had been those types of experiences, those types of interactions, that I think has kind of complicated my thinking, and hopefully my work.

**Liz: Well, I would like to talk a little bit more about UCAR because I was here at that time as you know also, and one of the things I remember is that UCAR was really a departure from other kinds of student groups that worked on issues of race on campus at that time in terms of its inclusivity. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about how UCAR came to have that more inclusive focus and what the outcome of that was.**

Cathy: Well in many ways you know I could name individuals, there were people like Barbara Ransby and Tracy Matthew and Kim Smith or David Moraz who had, I think, broad political commitments, hopefully we all had broad political commitments. But I think its also really an example of what black feminist scholars talk about when they talk about intersectionality, that its hard to be a black woman and not understand both gender dynamics and gender oppression, and also racial oppression, and also if you come from a

working-class family, class politics and class oppression. And I think it was significant that within UCAR, there were a group of black women who embodied kind of the intersection of all those struggles, myself included. And also that we began to really struggle with and think through, how do we begin to talk about sexual orientation and sexuality as also a system of oppression that we have to pay attention to. So I think, you know, it stems from who's in leadership, who can construct an agenda, how to people kind of understand their position and their status in the world, that allowed or kind of dictated a more inclusive framework for UCAR. And I think also, as I just said a moment ago, kind of bearing the brunt of attacks, you really have to kind of sharpen your analysis to defend why you're committed to making sure that there are white comrades involved in the struggle, that we have to understand kind of the manifestations of white supremacy, even on institutions, educational institutions, and the responsibility of whites to take control—not to take control—to take responsibility for dealing with systems of oppression and institutions that preference and provide more power for white students and white faculty. So I think it, you know, was a moment of the leadership, it was the moment of a kind of positioning of working class Black women, Black lesbians, Black feminists, that really kind of dictated the inclusive nature of UCAR.

**Liz: And how did UCAR respond to those attacks when they came?**

Cathy: Well, there's a wide range of responses. Some of them I'll talk about here, some of them I won't. You know, I think one of the things I just said is that I think it meant that we really had to kind of debate and talk about what was the importance of having a broad and inclusive agenda. It meant going back and reading things that we hadn't read. It meant inviting Black feminists to campus to help us think. I remember when we invited Angela Davis<sup>2</sup> to campus, and she actually sat for a couple of hours with us to help us think through the strategies and the analysis that supported the kind of framework and the institution that we had developed.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: It...it meant also I think being mad and angry and confronting people. It meant deciding where your political loyalties were, not just your racial loyalties. And so I think it was also kind of a moment of development for many of us about kind of how we would structure our politics.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: It wasn't about kind of running away in any way from race, because we are all kind of strong proud Black women. But it also meant understanding that just because

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<sup>2</sup> *Angela Davis* is a radical Black American activist who worked with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement. She is well known for her arrest as a conspirator in the prison beak of George Jackson on August 7, 1970 and making it onto the FBI's Most Wanted List. She is currently a professor in the University of California system although then Governor Reagan had claimed she would never work in the system again after she had been fired for her openly communist views.

someone shared a racial identity with us didn't mean that they also shared a political identity with us.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: And it was kind of an important and growing moment in understanding the distinction between the two. I'm sure young people today can hopefully understand the distinction between me and Condoleeza Rice<sup>3</sup>. We might share gender and race, but I don't think—God help me—that we share a similar politics. So, yeah.

**Liz: That's great. Well, one of the things that this project is really interested in...**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Liz: ...is the relationship between scholarship and activism.**

Cathy: Hm.

**Liz: And that's one reason that the answer you just gave was so fascinating to me, because it seems like your response to this practical mobilization problem was to respond by studying...**

Cathy: Hm.

**Liz: ...or bringing other scholars here...**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: ...to talk with you.**

Cathy: Right, I don't think it was just studying, so I don't want to represent it in that sense. Um, I mean, part of it was the kind of day-to-day work of being an activist and being hopefully an organizer.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: So it meant not only did you kind of fine-tune your analysis, but it meant you kind of sharpened your analysis, not only through books but through conversation.

**Liz: Hm.**

Cathy: Through the process of organizing people.

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<sup>3</sup> *Condoleezza Rice* is the first African-American woman to be the U.S. Secretary of State. She was appointed by Republican President George W. Bush in 2005, after Colin Powell, the first African American to hold the post resigned.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: So if you're trying to bring someone into your organization and they ask that question, you better be able to kind of respond to them in an accurate and I think effective way that explains to people why it's important in certain cases to work with white comrades.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Why it's important for an organization entitled "United Coalition Against Racism" to think about questions of sexuality.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Right. And who's included. You know, to have that debate about who's included even within Black communities.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Who as students or who as a represent as a rep—organization are we representing.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: So it wasn't just about kind of book learning, and I want to kind of reject that dichotomy anyway...

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: ...between there's scholarship and then there's activism.

**Liz: Right.**

Cathy: And sometimes there is. There's a clear distinction. But sometimes in fact we would hope that scholarship informs the work that we do as activists and organizers and vice versa. That the work that we do as organizers and activists hopefully has to inform the scholarship that we pursue.

**Liz: Very well put. Um, well, that's a great segue into what I'd like to ask you about next, which is, I'd like to talk a little bit about your book, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, both to understand this dynamic of the relationship between scholarship and activism.**

Cathy: Hm.

**Liz: Because it's a book that's won scholarly honors, but at the same time it appears to have grown out of your political involvements.**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: And I've also...I also understand that you've received criticism about the effect that the book could have on Black communities. So I thought maybe to start, for those who aren't familiar with the book, could you summarize it a little bit and tell us about how you came to write it?**

Cathy: Definitely. I laugh when you say summarize it. Remember, it started as a dissertation that was like 600 pages long, and so the idea of summarizing it, it could be difficult, but I'll try to do it. The work is really focused on understanding the political response to HIV and AIDS, by primarily traditional Black leaders in organizations, newspapers, magazines, and Black elected officials. You know, there was a puzzle for me when I started this work, which was in late 1980's. It was really kind of the emergence of AIDS on a national scale where we had already experienced Rock Hudson, people were talking about HIV and AIDS. And I knew from a personal...on a personal level, that it was impacting Black communities because I was integrated and rooted in Black-Lesbian-Gay communities. So I had friends who were HIV positive. I had, you know, groups of friends and networks that were talking about these issues. And when I looked to kind of AIDS coverage on television in magazines, what I primarily saw was white, gay and lesbian folks demanding that in fact the country, the government, the public officials pay attention to this. And so it was the puzzle for me of...of understanding that this was a disease impacting Black communities. And I probably even at that moment didn't know how much...

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: ...it was impacting Black communities. And the lack of mobilization I saw around this issue, especially from a community that had a history of mobilizing around racism, injustice and white supremacy. So the book was really kind of an attempt to really understand why the lack of mobilization. And as I often say, I think there was probably more mobilization than I knew, so once I started researching, I found in particular that Black gay men were doing a lot of work in certain Black communities, in urban Black communities, like in New York and in Los Angeles. But that traditional leadership, whether it be in the Black church, be Black elected officials, be the editors of the *Amsterdam News* or *Essence* magazine<sup>4</sup> really kind of wanted to shy away and deny that this was a significant issue for Black communities. And so part of what the book tries to do is to put that in a historical context, to understand that it's...while clearly a lot of that is driven by homophobia, that it's not just homophobia, that there's a history of marginalization that the Black community has experienced, where they've been defined as outsiders or secondary, and that through that process, there's a real reluctance to kind of engage your own stigmatized issues.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

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<sup>4</sup> *Amsterdam News* is an African American newspaper; *Essence* is an African American women's magazine.

Cathy: And that many...for many Black traditional organizations, they've chosen what many people have called a kind of politics of respectability.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Where we attempt to kind of prove ourselves to be good enough, to be normal, to be upstanding, with the hope that maybe if we're good enough, you'll include us in the American Dream, the American fabric. The problem is, is that if in fact we're going to articulate this idea of community, then it means we take all of the diversity of that community, and that we also have to kind of really explore to what degree we're willing to join a kind of normative structure, a society that says you have to behave in certain ways, you have to be normalized in certain ways, and you have to have certain types of identities whether they be heterosexual or proper Black women. And so the book really tries to kind of struggle with the question of respectability and crisis and...and difference in Black communities.

**Liz: And so what kind of responses have you gotten both from inside and outside...**

Cathy: Inside and outside.

**Liz: ...the academy?**

Cathy: Well, you know, I've learned the lesson that books take a while as we say to trickle down.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: So the first couple years, the book was really kind of read by other academics. And I think I was very pleased and overwhelmed that most people I think thought the book contributed to our understanding and thinking around Black politics. That it tried to give voice in particular to the diversity and the contestation around politics and identity that we find in Black communities. That it didn't present a homogenous Black community where we all share the same politics and all have the same kind of racial agenda. And in particular for feminist scholars, for folks interested in lesbian-gay politics, for individuals interested in social movements, who are always kind of interested in non-traditional extra-systemic ways in which people engage politically, I think the book was very well received. There are always [laughs], there...And I would hope that in fact there'd be at times negative response, because if you don't get some response, negative response, it means that you probably haven't said enough.

**Liz: Hm.**

Cathy: You haven't said anything maybe important. Um, and I think there have been others that would suggest that the...you know, there's the old argument you shouldn't air dirty laundry. So, you know, you shouldn't necessarily talk about different parts and the

struggles that happen within Black communities. I think other individuals would say that, wow, studying HIV and AIDS is an important issue. It may not be the most important issue when thinking about, for example, the political agenda of Black communities. But overall, most people have been, or most academics have been very receptive. What I think I find more rewarding even, not that I don't appreciate the response in the academic community. What I found more rewarding is that in a couple...a kind of...after a couple of years of the book being in the academic community, it started to in fact find its way to activists who were often, say, on the front line of providing services, struggling around funding for HIV and AIDS in communities of color. And so over the last two or three years I've been asked to come and present the book, the ideas in the book to, you know, national AIDS organizations or state-based AIDS organizations -- individuals who don't in any way have a relationship to the academy, but who think that there were things in the book that would be important to informing the work that they do on a daily basis. And that really has been very rewarding. I feel good about that work. And I have learned a tremendous amount from kind of talking to people about the practicality of thinking through these kind of divisions, and the practicality and the dynamics of kind of people's struggle around identity within their communities and within their neighborhoods and within their schools. So, it's been good.

**Liz: Well, it's clear that this book is probably your largest academic endeavor to date.**

Cathy: Yeah.

**Liz: Although it's also clear that the themes in the book are something that resonate throughout the other work, scholarly work that you've done.**

Cathy: Sure.

**Liz: But I'm wondering if there is an organizational experience that you've had that you think of as sort of defining of your work in a similar way?**

Cathy: Hm. That's a great question. It might be the work that I've done with the Audre Lorde Project in New York<sup>5</sup>. I think of the Audre Lorde Project as just an outstanding organization. It is...it was started as a lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender organization servicing and advocating and struggling for people of color, queer people of color. Queer meaning in this case kind of those engaged in what are traditionally understood to be kind of non-normative sexual behaviors. But again, because of who we all were in terms of folks around the table, we understood that our lives weren't just defined by kind of sexual oppression.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: And that for many people, they would say that the primary basis of the discrimination, inequality, oppression that they experience came from race or came from

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<sup>5</sup> *Audre Lorde* (1934-1992) was an African-American lesbian poet and feminist theorist.

the interaction of race and gender or class. And it real—and so the Audre Lorde Project I think exemplifies both the politics and the writings of Audre Lorde, but also kind of the more complicated understanding of struggle and community that the folks around those initial tables that were planning this organization also understood from their lived experience. So the Audre Lorde Project is an organization that's based in a Black community in Brooklyn, New York, in Fort Green, with the mission of advocating and struggling for queer folks of color as well as communities of color.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: So the Audre Lorde Project has been, for example, very active around some of the police brutality cases in New York, even though those cases wouldn't traditionally be defined as kind of, you know, issues around sexuality. The idea behind the Audre Lorde Project is to kind of begin to make those links, to understand kind of the ways in which the state regulates all sorts of behaviors and all sorts of identities, and the...if you don't begin to kind of connect those dots, let's say, then you can kind of fight on one realm or one dimension and miss, in fact, the ways in which the state regulates those you care about in all sorts of other dimensions. So, for example, if we talked about gay marriage, there is a movement afoot, I guess, for some, to want access to the institution of marriage. I think there are some progressive lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender folks—I put myself in that category—who understand the history of marriage, the way in which the institution was used to kind of signify who was a citizen and who wasn't, who was proper and who wasn't, who worry about kind of what happens when we begin to again solidify those good lesbian and gay people who marry and those who don't, who understand and worry about what happens to heterosexual people who don't marry or who don't marry and have children “out of wedlock.” And so understand kind of marriage as an institution of regulation. So if we understand the impact of marriage in all those different realms, maybe not directly on me, but the people that I love, and the people who I live with, then I have a responsibility, because, you know, that's my interest also to protect them and to fight for them, as well as to fight for myself. To oppose marriage, even though it might seem like it's just a basic equality issue...

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: ...to me, it just, you can't think of marriage and you can't think of politics along that dimension.

**Liz: So that's something else that the Audre Lorde Project has been working on?**

Cathy: Um-hum. Yeah. The Audre Lorde Project works on, I mean, issues like marriage. It works on issues around police brutality.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: It works on issues around welfare reform, when in fact very few organizations wanted to talk about welfare reform as a devastating issue on Black communities, as an

attack on Black women and women of color and their children. So the kind of significance of the Audre Lorde Project is it really is an organization I think that provided me with an outlet for kind of thinking broadly about politics. And kind of the multiple realms and multiple dimensions where we have to fight. Yeah.

**Liz: Um, great. Well that anticipated my next question.**

Cathy: Oh, that's good.

**Liz: So let me ask you, you've done a great job of summarizing some of the key ideas of your book in a very short time, but that sort of brings to me to want to know, so what are the kind of questions that are...**

Cathy: Hm.

**Liz: ...animating your work now.**

Cathy: Right. Um, you know, I'm always concerned with the question of identity and who belongs and who doesn't belong.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: I mean, in the book, one of the major themes -- I probably didn't talk about it -- is this question of how do we understand membership, and who is a member and who isn't a member and what is that membership based on. One of my concerns in the book was, when we talked about Black communities, and being committed to a Black political agenda, that were all sorts of ways in which Blackness was contested. And so it wasn't just kind of phenotypic, you know, if you looked like you were Black, but that there were also normative standards for what Blackness was. The example I often give is, I was teaching a course I think at Yale<sup>6</sup> on Black politics, and we were talking about the Supreme Court<sup>7</sup> or something and talking about Clarence Thomas<sup>8</sup>. And, you know, the room had...I think half the students were African American and maybe five were...so ten were African-American and ten were...five were white and five were Latino. And there was a kind of heated argument between one young African-American man and one young African-American woman about Clarence Thomas. And at one point she said, "Well, he's not Black anyway," right. And I noticed that the white students were like, wait a minute, you know, like I saw him on TV, you look Black to me [laughter]. And at that moment, you know, what was happening was she wasn't talking about phenotypic description. But she was talking about kind of a normative understanding of what Black people do in certain situations...

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<sup>6</sup> Yale: Ivy League University in New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> The *Supreme Court* of the United States is the highest judicial body in the United States and leads the [judicial branch](#) of the United States federal government.

<sup>8</sup> *Clarence Thomas* is a conservative African-American justice on the Supreme Court, who before his confirmation was accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, an African-American woman who had worked for him previously.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: ...to advance other Black people. Or to advance a kind of progressive agenda. And so what the book tries to do is to kind of really question not only kind of phenotypic Blackness, but how do we decide who's Black enough for the community to mobilize around. And oftentimes, when thinking about HIV and AIDS, those who are most at risk, Black gay men, Black men who sleep with men, Black injection drug users, Black women exchange...engaged in kind of sexual exchange for money, are not always considered Black enough, right? That somehow their behavior questions their authenticity. And so I was hoping in the book to kind of really push through what categories mean, like membership and identity. And I'm hoping that the new work that I'm doing now also tries to push through kind of questions of, or concepts like, in this case deviance and agency and resistance. I have a new piece out in *The Du Bois Review*<sup>9</sup> where I'm trying to figure out how do we begin to take a different approach to behaviors that traditionally have been pathologized within Black communities. And when I say within Black communities, meaning behaviors that have been pathologized, not only by whites towards Black communities, but that often have been pathologized by white scholars. So if you go back to Dubois or if you read William Julius Wilson<sup>10</sup> or any number of other books, you will find things like unwed mothers being pathologized, as having kind of a different set of norms or values, a whole discussion of the underclass. And I'm asking scholars who are committed to those communities to maybe step back. And it's very hard because people get very upset with me about this. To step back and figure out if there's something of really significance and value in people making non-normative choices. And what I mean is...the easy case, for example is, what is it...what should we learn when people who have very few resources—young Black lesbians, right?—who have very few resources, who don't have the protection of being middle class and a professor, so I can talk about being out and things of that sort, when they come out.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Like what is...you know, is that an act of deviance or an act of defiance. And if it's an act of defiance, how do we begin to link that ability and that agency, as limited as it is, to like larger resistance struggle...struggles? How do we begin to re-conceptualize resistance? So that I think, for some people is the easy case. The harder case where people take issue is, how do we understand, or should we understand, for example, young people who engage in sexual relationships that don't...or intimate relationships, that don't fit some norm? That in the past, researcher after researcher has demonized as these kind of bad things. And in certain ways there are detrimental consequences. You know, there are detrimental consequences from pregnancy if you don't have enough resources. But is

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<sup>9</sup> *The Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* is a journal focused on social science research on racial issues, and is edited by two Harvard professors.

<sup>10</sup> *William Julius Wilson* is the Director of Harvard's Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, he has written extensively about urban poverty, urban race and class relations, and social inequality in cross-cultural perspective.

there something that we need to try to figure out or try to learn from when people make choices in pursuit of desire, in pursuit of happiness, that contradict messages that are strongly enforced, for example, by the state, by their communities? I mean, there is a level of defiance there that I think you can write off very easily as pathological, or we can try to understand and understand it possibly as having...at least exerting some level of agency, if we don't call it resistance. And if we begin to understand the exertion of kind of limited agency, constrained agency, is there a way to kind of learn from that as we build political movements and social movements? My concern is that quite often when we look for politics, we look for politics in very traditional places, right? So if you go to a union hall and join a union, then you're political. If you protest the war and go onto the street, then you're political. Even if you vote, some people would say you're political, at least exerting some type of politics. And I'm not suggesting that engaging in "non-normative behavior" is politics. I, in fact, don't want to do that. But I do want to suggest it is about some level of agency that I think we can use and we can think about that might help us understand how to get young people, for example, into politics, into a place where they can work to transform their neighborhoods and their states and their country.

**Liz: What do you think it would take to help them convert that kind of agency into a political agency?**

Cathy: Well, I think first and foremost, one of the things we'd have to do is actually have a political agenda that spoke to where they were and what they were interested in. You know, I worry that we have kind of a politics that's defined around as...nothing against the middle class, because...I've experienced social mobility from the working class and the middle class. 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. And so it can often be about kind of middle class issues, about a certain type of access that other people will never experience. And so if we could figure out—and I say this in the paper and I think other organizers will tell you—it seems to me the first thing we have to do is listen to folks. Like what are they concerned with? What drives their desires and their hopes and their dreams? And also their fears and their hatred at times, and alienation for, you know, whether it be traditional institutions, the state, or...or the academy. So I think that seems to me the first thing is to kind of actually listen. And the second thing I think is to get into a position where we can help kind of organize—and I don't mean impose, but I mean provide resources to organize folks in communities of color and in resource poor communities, so that they can then take their articulation of the political agenda and push it forward. And, you know, that's a different way of thinking about invest—investing in poor communities. I mean, one model is also...is a social service provision.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: And we always want to kind of deal with and respect people's basic needs. But I think another basic needs is kind of political efficacy and political power. And so in addition to social services what else can we provide to communities of color and to poor

communities to help with the kind of process of political empowerment. And I think hopefully that's another direction that we can really begin to kind of pay attention to.

**Liz: Well, I feel like the whole conversation we've been having is sort of skating around this next question that I would like to ask you but...**

Cathy: Okay.

**Liz: ...when I first contacted you about doing the interview, you expressed some reservations about whether you were an appropriate person and that...**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: ...maybe you were more of a scholar than an activist, and did you belong in this group?**

Cathy: Right, right.

**Liz: Um, I feel like you've been making these connections between political work and academic work. But I wonder if you could speak to that a little bit more directly. How do you see those interacting either in your own career or more...**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: ...generally. Because a lot of students we work with often sort of talk about it in terms of a dichotomy. You know, "I don't want to be an academic, I want to be an activist." Or...**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: ... "I don't want to be in that ivory tower," so...**

Cathy: [laughs] Me either, that's right. Um, you know, it's a hard thing to try to bridge. And I'm not sure I would...you know, this was what we were talking about when you called. I'm not sure I've figured out how to be both an activist and a scholar at the same time. You know, I have a real skepticism for academics who say, "Oh, I do my political work in the classroom." Which we undoubtedly do political work in the classroom, but to me that can't be the extent of your political work. And that's not to deny kind of the importance of ideas, to kind of animating all of the work that we do at...in terms of politics. But it seems to me that 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. It's...I mean, part of... a big kind of connecting point for me is this question of accountability .

**Liz: Hm.**

Cathy: Like who do you answer to? Um, and, you know, there's a clear power dynamic in classrooms between the professor and the student, so you don't really answer to students. So the question for me becomes, really, how do I construct a kind of life, not just scholarship or activism, that's about kind of political activism and social transformation? And I don't think I always get it right. My guess is I don't get it right a lot of the time. But I...I do think that—and we were talking about this earlier—that part of my motivation for the work that I do is about kind of practical concerns. So I'm starting a new project on African American youth and their politics and their sexuality. Now a lot of the reason I'm doing this work is because I love my nephew and niece, and I worry that Black people, we're losing a generation of young Black people. And I wish I could say, oh, there's a bigger motivation, and it is. I mean, commitment to Black communities. But that's in the abstract. I mean, it's because I see, for example, if I watch BET<sup>11</sup> and I see the images of young Black women, I don't want my niece to understand that that's what's portrayed to her through popular culture in terms of who she is. And when I kind of look at my nephew who I love, I love them both, I spoil them both, but, who's older now. I remember when Terry was born. He's now 28 and has—you know, he and I have talked about this publicly, so I'm not revealing anything—has had encounters with the criminal justice system. I feel like I need to do something, both in terms of my scholarship and in terms of my activism, of course on a personal level, to kind of not only provide him with resources so he can navigate that, but to really kind of change those institutions, because if I help him navigate it, there's some other kid that may not have someone with those types of resources that can help them navigate it. And so to me it's about kind of what are the tools that I have at hand to do that type of work? And one of the major tools that I have is the ability to kind of write and have the time to think, and to talk to people and to gather data, that might help in a process of changing those institutions. Now, you know, my worry is that places where we would expect to find scholar-activists or more scholar activism, 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. And I'm not...and so this goes back to my skepticism about kind of scholar-activism, because I think quite often people assume that because they're in those more marginalized spaces on academic campuses, that being there is just a...is their politics.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: Um, and I want to suggest that those institutions and those spots, while marginalized clearly, are still professionalized, they're still part of academic institutions and that there's still an absence of accountability to the folks just kind of, as I often talk about, just outside those gated communities we call universities, right?, to hold us accountable for the things that we write and things that we say. So when you called and said, we're doing this great project on global feminism, and you started telling me the names of people who were going to be interviewed, I thought, well, those are exceptional people who spend kind of their daily lives, day in and day out, you know, I keep talking about on the kind of front line of engagement in neighborhoods and communities, where

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<sup>11</sup> *BET* is an acronym for Black Entertainment Television network.

they are held accountable and they're in organizations, where the democratic process, and...that's different I think than the work of...my work. Even though I try as much as I can on a daily basis to make sure that I'm located in institutions where I can be held accountable.

**Liz: But you were telling me at lunch that one of the missions of the institute that you're directing now is to make those kind of connections outside of the University. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.**

Cathy: Sure. Sure. I have the privilege of directing the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago. And there are many goals of the center. One is about kind of producing, you know, important intellectual work from largely a comparative race framework that understands the intersection of race with other identities and ideologies around gender and sexuality and class. We're also quite interested at the Center in supporting the work of both undergraduates and graduate students by engaging in the curriculum and helping to redefine the curriculum. But the thing I think that the Center is most engaged—oh, I'm using engaged—most committed to that I'm proud of, is this idea of producing engaged scholarship. And the idea is that we want to produce scholarship that holds to the rigor of the academy, of course. But that we also want to produce scholarship that is relevant and applicable and accessible to folks who may not be located in the academy. We want to produce scholarship that will help people transform their own lives, with the recognition that people are already doing, you know, really important work outside the academy. So it's not like they're waiting on us to tell them the truth. It's really kind of how to do you work in a principled way in partnership with institutions, with neighborhoods, with communities that aren't a part of the university. And how do you do that, when oftentimes, those neighborhoods and communities are very suspicious to say the least, of what happens within the university. Universities where they generally don't feel like they can, you know...they want to send their kids, universities where they don't feel they can walk on campus without the police harassing them. Universities that have engaged in urban development and kind of wiped out neighborhoods. And so it's...the challenge I think for us is to kind of think of this as a long-term project, and the idea isn't when we talk about engaged scholarship to go out and study a community and write a book, and then maybe come back and present the book at the library one Saturday. But how do you really build principled relationships and partnerships where there's going to be some negotiation, where you have to figure out ways to share power, where there has to be the acknowledgement that we come with more resources, but they may come with more knowledge about neighborhoods and communities. And it really is not easy work. You know, I think it's one thing to say that's what you want to do. And I think unfortunately far too many research institutes don't even say that. Or if they say that, what they mean is "We'll open up our seminar room if some community group wants to come to campus and have a meeting." But we're really trying to figure out how do you promote this type of scholarship? How do you promote that type of scholarship also in institutions where the incentive structure is not to go outside the university, right? So if you're a junior faculty member trying to get tenure, and we're suggesting you go outside and build long-term relationships and your tenure clock is running, what are the choices that you're going to make? And by the time that

you get tenure, you usually already have a research agenda, so now we're suggesting that you change your research agenda or you open it up a bit. It becomes very difficult. So even to do something like engaged scholarship through the Center, it means that the Center has to be engaged in a political process within the university to try to change some of the incentive structures there.

**Liz: Well, as we're getting towards the end, I would like to ask you some more general questions. And one question that we try to ask everyone is, would you use the term feminist to describe yourself or your work?**

Cathy: Oh, definitely. Yes.

**Liz: Uh-huh.**

Cathy: Um, and I know there's a controversy—well, not a controversy—I know that there are a number of Black women who, where we would probably describe politics in the same way, and the analysis of power and understanding patriarchy and patriarchy's intersection with race. And concerns about misogyny. We might all kind of start down that road and go down that road. And then if you ask what would be the label?, I would say feminist and a number of Black women in particular would say womanist. A number of Black women think of feminism as a primarily white identified and controlled and occupied term. And I understand and I would even say respect that position. But for me it's about reclaiming. It's about kind of the numerous Black women that engage in what I would argue are feminist politics. And claiming their histories and who they are, whether it be Ida B. Wells, or Ana Julia Cooper—I mean, you know, you can go down that list. And so that's important for me. It's important for me also to not kind of give over the term feminist to white women only. And I'm not...you know, not saying white women are saying, "This is our term." You know, it's also important for me to kind of use that term in the same way I use progressive or radical, and the same way I talk about white supremacy. It to...kind of...to me a kind of political and historical accuracy so that people understand the politics and the analysis that I'm engaged in. And it's, you know, it's also important to use the word feminism for me to just begin a dialogue.

**Liz: Um-hum.**

Cathy: I know when I use the word feminist in my classes, there are a lot of young women who are just like, "God, not you too!" And so...and, you know, they're thinking, second wave feminist, don't like sex, don't laugh. I hope that's not me. So...and so to even struggle around and to kind of educate ourselves around the ways in which ideas and terms and labels change over time, from first wave to second wave and now third wave feminists. So for me it's important to kind of take on that title, take on that label, to combine it with Black, so that I'm a Black feminist, to combine it with progressive or radical. To make sure that it's embedded in a whole, you know, whole kind of configuration of labels and politics, that I think changes what feminism means for me, from what maybe others might mean, how they might use it.

**Liz: Well, while we're talking about terms, I wonder if you could also talk about what you mean when you say progressive, because this tape will be viewed by people from all over the world.**

Cathy: Right.

**Liz: And that might not mean the same thing to them.**

Cathy: I'm sure it doesn't mean the same thing. I'm a big believer in kind of historical specificity. When I'm talking about progressive, I'm talking about a political analysis that understands the intersection of—let's see, it's too academic—multiple systems of oppression and that the commitment isn't just to gain some level of equality within the status quo. So to be able to marry, because I'm a lesbian, or be able to marry even though I'm a lesbian. But to really kind of think about progressively transforming the institutions, the state regulation that defines our politics today. I think, you know, we have to think about new ways and new structures in terms of the distribution of resources in this society. I mean, we didn't really have a chance to talk about class politics, but, you know, there is an increasingly smaller and smaller group, even within the United States, not to mention the United States, that controls most of the resources of the world. And so how do you not begin to talk about and have an analysis about changing that? It's not that...And I'm lucky to have lots of resources now, but, I...you know, I was talking to my partner, Beth Ritchie, last night, and I said, we were saying, it's we almost feel guilty. And notice almost [laughs], um, but we do feel guilty. It's like why do we get more resources than other people? And so there...I think there has to be discussions about kind of, not how to...how do we...how do we get a few more people into those categories, but how do we really redistribute resources. And then that takes us to kind of other terms that people don't want to discuss anymore, like socialism. So for me, in terms of progressive, it just means not only kind of recognizing the inequality, but also recognizing kind of the status quo and making a commitment to changing both the inequality by changing the status quo.

**Liz: Um...So it sounds like you see your work as being an extension of or even continuous with certain traditions within mainstream feminism, or...how would you characterize that relationship?**

Cathy: Well, I think it would depend right on first how we were defining mainstream feminism. Um, like there are probably many mainstream feminisms. There's a mainstream feminism within Black feminism that might look different than mainstream feminism in other places. You know, I think that in fact there are things...there is an analysis that comes with the feminist label, let's say; a concern around gender inequality, a concern around the dominance of patriarchy, I mean, the existence and the dominance of patriarchy; misogyny and hatred of women; and the ways in which those, we might even call assumptions get structured into the kind of production of a society. As well as kind of the closeness to how we understand normal sexuality, hetero-normativity to function in the world and in the society. So in that sense, sure, if those are kind of the basics and the assumptions of feminism, that's definitely a part of what I would say my

politics are committed to and my analysis is a part of. But I think 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. How do we understand, for example, Black men's male privilege within a white supremacist or racist society. So can they be allies with Black women on certain fronts, and when in fact do they participate possibly more effectively than white men in the destruction and demonization of Black women. One of the things we were talking about is, you know, I'm obsessed these days with this Nelly<sup>12</sup> video. You all know [laughs], um, "Tip Drill." Um, because to me I can't...I mean, if...for the audience who hasn't seen the video, it really is just the most degrading representation of Black women that I've seen in a very, very, very long time. And the commercialization of Black women's bodies. And it's done by a Black rapper, Nelly. And so, you know, to understand Nelly's position within a corporate structure, the music structure, where at some level he has very little power to make "final" decisions. But to also understand his power to make a video like that, and the kind of concerns and the representation that he puts forth about how he thinks about and I think communicates how other Black men should think about Black women, Black women's bodies, Black women's agency, and their significance in the world. And so...so, you know, feminism informs that. Black feminist analysis I think is more instructive for me in thinking through the Nellies of the world. Because, you know, I think we've...we have a clear sense of kind of the larger macro structures. I think it becomes...it's kind of time for many of us to really define and pay attention to, not that Black feminists haven't done this already, the contours and nuances of power and contestation within our own communities and to take a political stance against those issues also.

**Liz: Well, let me ask you sort of the biggest question then. Which is how do you see your work intersecting with work going on in other parts of the world...**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Liz: ...either through professional relationships that you've had or...?**

Cathy: Hm. It's...if there is one major disappointment, I'm sure there are many areas of disappointment, but if there is one major area of disappointment in terms of my political work, it's that it has had very little international connection. I feel like I've learned a great deal from kind of transnational movements. But I haven't really kind of traveled to be engaged either in political struggles in other parts of the world or to visit activists in other parts of the world to learn from that. You know, part of that is working class background, even though that's where you just didn't travel out of the country and so you didn't think past, oftentimes, the country, outside of this country. Part of it is just, um...I think at times it's American exceptionalism, even in progressive movements, where we too often I think, think the work that we do here can't be informed by the work that's being done in other parts of the world. Ev— and that's, when we have a level of consciousness, that the work that we're doing here is actually happening in other places.

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<sup>12</sup> Cornell "Nelly" Haynes Jr. is a rapper/hip-hop artist from St. Louis, Missouri.

And usually happening in more progressive and sometimes effective ways. And so for example the work I've done around HIV and AIDS I feel has been incredibly beneficial to my learning process, but hopefully beneficial to the work here in the U.S. But I've had very little contact with folks, for example, in the Caribbean and South Africa and Southeast Asia who are also engaged in many of the same struggles, you know, whether it be around, you know, securing drugs for people, or the demonization of women in the process of thinking about HIV and AIDS. I had the opportunity to meet Zaki Akmad<sup>13</sup> from South Africa a few years ago when we were doing "Black Nations, Queer Nations" and that was really an incredible learning experience, to talk about the relationship between the struggle around HIV and AIDS, in particular in Black communities here, and the struggle around HIV and AIDS in South Africa. And so one of the things I would hope for as, you know, as you grow and get older, is an opportunity to have more of those transnational/international conversations to learn more both about the exception and the rule in terms of the ways in which people are structuring their politics and their political struggles. And to think creatively outside of kind of American capitalism about how...things we might ask for, ways to mobilize people, even ways to engage in kind of educational campaigns so...it's...it's been missing and I'm hoping that it will appear in the future.

**Liz: Well, I would like to thank you because this has been just wonderful.**

Cathy: Well, thank you.

**Liz: And now I would like to give some other people some chances to ask some questions. So at this point maybe we could go to our audience and see if there's something they would like to ask you.**

Cathy: Absolutely.

**Audience 1: Well, I'll begin. Cathy, it's such a pleasure to see you again.**

Cathy: Hi, Dale.

**Audience 1: Whether or not you realize it, I think that your work is having an international affect, and I...I had the opportunity to meet Nesha Haniff<sup>14</sup> last week, who I think you may or may not recall from your days here at Michigan.**

Cathy: Absolutely.

**Audience 1: She and I were on a picket line last week because she's one of many of the lecturers who are without job security and benefits at the university, but that's a further aside that we don't need to explore. But we should explore but maybe not in this venue.**

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<sup>13</sup> Zaki Akmad is head of Treatment Action Campaign for HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

<sup>14</sup> Nesha Haniff is a lecturer in Women's Studies at the University of Michigan.

Cathy: Right.

**Audience 1: Nesha wanted to know if you could draw some comparisons between student activism on campuses and in communities today, and the way that it was done in -- she called it “the good old days.” Right?**

Cathy: [laughs]

**Audience 1: I...I take her to mean her days...the days back when you and Barbara Ransby and other women of color were working UCAR and at the Ella Baker Center.**

Cathy: Right. Well, of course I remember Nesha. And I, you know, please tell her I said hello. Thank you for the question. I have to say I'm a little reluctant to take on these...”the good old days.” Because, you know, they were the good old days, because we were young and skipping classes and, you know, and hopefully making a significant change on this campus and also joining with people who were making changes on other campuses. And I think that happens in other places today also. I've seen students mobilize at Columbia<sup>15</sup> and at Brown<sup>16</sup>, and, you know, sometimes at University of Chicago, but not as much as I would like. And you were on a picket line just last week. So I don't want to suggest that students today don't do anything. I do think that the political environment has changed drastically. I think we have a con—to say the least conservative political environment where patriotism is running very high. Where to stand on a picket line is somehow to question, you know, your allegiance to the country, to democratic processes, which in fact, standing on a picket line really should exemplify your commitment to democratic processes. So I think that there are kind of higher standards possibly. And I'm not sure of that, but it's...it's hard to mobilize young people in this political environment. You know, there's also the reality that always exists, back then, it existed now, about how many folks you could mobilize also because lots of people feel like look, this is my chance at mobility. I have to be here because, you know what?, I need to get a job. I need to kind of figure out a way to help not only myself but my families. And I think sometimes we can see politics as something that's outside of that process. The other thing, you know, I'll say again, it's not just students, but also faculty. You know, I keep preaching this line about the kind of professionalization and specialization of the academy, as well as places where in fact we need faculty to stand up and provide a different kind of oppositional analysis, but also oppositional practice. And so I'm not sure you have as many faculty members, you know, full...not lecturers but faculty members willing to stand on picket lines today. Or willing to refuse to cross a picket line, or willing to go with students when they take over a building. In 1986 when we took over a building, there weren't a lot of faculty there, but I remember Ernie Wilson, I remember Alden Morris, who brought donuts and orange juice. Neither one are here today so maybe that tells us something. But they were very supportive. And so I think that there are a number of factors that have come together. You know, and the other thing that I think, you know, I don't want to go into lots of detail, because we don't have

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<sup>15</sup> *Columbia*: An Ivy League University in New York City.

<sup>16</sup> *Brown*: An Ivy League University in Providence, Rhode Island.

enough time, but we really also have to talk about who find...you know, what types of students are on college campuses, especially research, predominantly white institutions. Oftentimes, those students are middle class students of color who may either have more resources that allow them to protest, or often have had less experience protesting and understanding alienation and systems of oppression. And so I'm just saying the kind of configuration of the population also...a student population, can also have an impact in terms of whether students are willing to protest or not. But I think the good old days are...were back then, the good old days are now. The good old days will be in the future, anytime, you know, young people decide that their futures have to be determined through their participation, whether it be voting at the national level, or whether it be organizing in the places where we exist, namely college campuses for the moment.

**Audience 2: Yes, I have a question. I want to ask a question about -- you mentioned class politics. And it was very interesting, also coming from a working class family, and I also went to a historically Black college for undergrad.**

Cathy: Hm-hm.

**Audience 2: And when I got here, like the kind of division within the African-American community itself, and it was almost really bizarre how the most...most of the marginalization I felt actually came from African American students who had...had gone to prestigious white universities and had like all kinds of misconceptions and prejudices about both working class Black people and people who attended institutions that were not sort of on par with the University of Michigan. I was wondering if you could talk about having gone through some very prestigious institutions, how you think class has impacted that process.**

Cathy: Absolutely. I mean, I would, first of all, say that I had the same experience. You know, I...I think it never occurred to me, growing up working class and in a working class community, now, you know, it was before the Huxtables<sup>17</sup>. I just assumed everybody was work—all the Black people were working class, because all the Black people I knew were working class. And it was really interesting to me, and I think it really came home in graduate school more than undergraduate, that most of my colleagues of color were middle class. And that that had defined their experience very differently. They had gone to, and I would argue, better schools, were better prepared for the rigors of the University of Michigan graduate program. At times I think felt more comfortable and knew how to do things like network and connect better than I did. And while I wouldn't say I felt alienated from them, I think I was often surprised by at times, the lack of connection, other than a racial identity that we shared. And that's not to say that many of those folks aren't some of my best friends from...from graduate school. But it is to say that the assumption somehow that...you know, and this has been kind of the

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<sup>17</sup> *The Cosby Show* was a popular TV comedy that aired from 1984 to 1992, focusing on an upper-middle-class Black family, the Huxtables. This family was unlike other Black families previously seen on television because they were solidly upper-middle-class, the father was a respected doctor, and the mother a successful attorney.

discussion that was in *The New York Times* recently, that to let in Black students is to necessarily let in working class Black students, especially at predominantly white Ivy League institutions is not the case. So if there's in fact a commitment to both race and class diversity, we probably need to pay attention to both race and class and thinking those through. And, you know, the other thing is, it means that most of the faculty at these types of institutions in terms of faculty of color, have also come from middle class backgrounds. And it...I guess we could argue it possibly shapes the way in which they approach their work. I'm not...you know, I'm an empiricist, so I'd have to like do a study to make sure that's true. It may in many ways impact their relationships and their social connectedness to some of those working class neighborhoods that usually are right around the university, or here in Ypsilanti<sup>18</sup>, in...But in, you know, I'm at University of Chicago, so just outside of Hyde Park<sup>19</sup>. They're very different neighborhoods and...and Black folk. So I think you...I think we have to pay attention to the ways in which class has an impact. It's, you know, it's interesting, since I do work on sexuality, there's always a struggle to get people to talk about questions of sexuality. I think it's just as hard to get people to talk in a "real way" about class, especially within marginal groups, and to talk about the lack of representation of poor and working class Black people on campuses. Do I think if you had more faculty from poor and working class backgrounds that it would change much of the research agenda found in for example African American Studies programs? I actually do. Um, I...you know, and, again, these are empirical questions and so I could be wrong. So, yeah, I think...I think it's hard to talk about transforming these institutions without talking about questions of class, as well as they're embedded in kind of discussions of race -- excuse me -- And I think if we allow ourselves only to kind of talk about race without talking about race in a complex way, whether it be around gender or sexuality or class, and of course, the intersection of all those, as well as nationality. You know, we haven't talked about immigrant populations and how they identify racially, that we really miss understanding kind of both different interests, different needs, different ways to mobilize people, different ways to shape effective political agendas. And if we're...you know, if our goal is really to mobilize people to transform things, I think you have to understand where people come from, their social location and...and what they think is important in terms of their identities.

**Audience 3: And I have a question about, well, as you were talking a lot about class, I thought that probably my question would fit here. I come from the former Soviet Union. And when I first started reading, doing feminist work and doing gender and women's...looking into women's issues, and started reading feminist work, I could not find the connection between what those people were writing about, like Betty Friedan<sup>20</sup> and my experience. Well, I have never seen a non-working**

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<sup>18</sup> *Ypsilanti* is a city that neighbors Ann Arbor and is smaller and less wealthy.

<sup>19</sup> *Hyde Park* is a historically wealthy neighborhood in Chicago.

<sup>20</sup> *Betty Friedan* (1921-2006) wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW); a civil-rights group dedicated to achieving equality of opportunity for women. Some credited her with sparking the "second wave" of feminism in the United States, although critics argue Friedan's book only spoke of the problem of white- middle-class, suburban housewives.

**mother and all this. And then I began reading radical feminism<sup>21</sup>, but I'm not a lesbian and there was not much connection. Then when I began reading African American feminists, that's where I found the connection to my experience, and that's how I began identifying with the feminism, and that's why I call...well, women like me, the other whiteness.**

Cathy: Hm.

**Audience 3: And women coming from this post-socialist world.**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Audience 3: And then when I came to this country, I thought...so I very much see this...the oppression of women as the issue of class. Before you have a paid maternity leave, normal paid maternity leave, what is there to discuss? Well, we should...which was the approach in the country I come from. And when I came into this country, I was expecting to see a lot of struggle in this...venue struggled for better social security, re-distribution of resources, et cetera. And I was surprised to see so much struggle around sexuality—gay-lesbian issues—which to me looks like...well, using a Marxist term, diverting people from the class struggle.**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Audience 3: Because just, you know, saying, okay, we are all accepting bisexual people, we are all for gay marriage, we are all accepting...accepting transgender people, it does not demand anything from...from you. You just say, "I'm such a fine person," and that's it and nothing in the society changes actually. So what's your pos—well, I understand, you know, all the repercussions of what I'm saying.**

Cathy: Right.

**Audience 3: What's your perspective on that?**

Cathy: Right. I...thank you for the question. It was beautifully articulated. I'm going to disagree with a lot of points, but my guess is you would disagree with those, some of the points you made also. So I don't want to sug—I don't want to agree for example that, claiming for example that the state recognize lesbian-gay marriages has no impact on the distribution of resources or the ways in which the state operates in terms of thinking

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<sup>21</sup> Although definitions of what *radical feminism* is have been widely disputed, the audience member is most likely referring to the lesbian-separatist vein of radical feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. This movement goes to the "root" of the oppression of women to find patriarchy at fault in all aspects of life, making feminism the most important social movement. Radical feminists wish to go beyond the institutional reform of sexism and inequality to bring about profound changes in culture and a redefinition of gender: "Radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based upon their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organize politically to destroy this sex class system" (Ann Koedt, "Politics of the Ego" from the *Manifesto of the New York Radical Feminists*, 1969.)

about who is...kind of questions of normalization, let's say. So I...if I somehow kind of suggested that, I want to take that back and try to clarify. In fact, those...those progressive people who are supporting, for example, the movement—and we can call it a movement, I guess—around gay marriage. One of the arguments is, is if you look at all the benefits that people receive from the kind of certification of marriage through the state, that it is about kind of the redistribution of resources. It's about allowing someone who has an immigrant status to have...to marry someone so that they can stay in this country. It's about being able to make health decisions for my partner. It's about kind of who's going to get tax breaks and who's going to...you know, so I in fact think it is a big issue around resources. But I also think we have to think more broadly about questions of sexuality. So questions of sexuality have to also include...first of all, our main argument before that I think when we're talking about queer sexuality. Queer sexuality for me is not lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender sexuality. Queer sexuality for me is sexuality that really challenges hetero-normative expectations and assumptions. And what I mean by that it's people who are marginalized on the basis of their sexuality. So you can undoubtedly include lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender folks in that category. I would also argue that women who are resource poor and have children are marginalized by their sexual decisions and might be considered Queer. Now, I want to be careful because a lot of people will say, "Oh, that's a nice academic argument." And I think at some level it is an academic argument. It's about kind of how do we conceptualize this category "queer". But for me it then becomes, are there political unities between these groups of people that organizers can start to think about how would you build a base for political mobilization. So, you know, so if we begin to broaden who gets included when we begin to think about questions of sexuality, then I think sexuality can have clear class implications. If we talk about, for example, women who are incarcerated, and the fact that the state, or, you know, prisons and jails have very strict rules, for example, around same sex relationships in the prisons and their unwillingness to acknowledge those rules, and the ways in which women are punished for kind of performing those relationships, then that's not just about, "Oh, I'm nice and I'm good, and there are no costs to that." If we talk about kind of same sex activity in male prisons, and the unwillingness of the criminal justice system to acknowledge that activity, and their unwillingness to provide condoms, then the consequences are the possible transmission of HIV, not because people are just saying "I'm good," but because the state is saying, to acknowledge those relationships or those...that sexual activity goes against what we're saying can happen in a prison, right?

**Liz: Hm.**

Cathy: And so it seems to me that that's part of hopefully 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? Whether it be as incar—members who are incarcerated or people who are not incarcerated. 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, whether it be Kim Crenshaw<sup>22</sup> or Deborah King<sup>23</sup> or Angela Davis or E. Frances White<sup>24</sup>--did I forget anybody? There's lots of people we could talk about—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. And I think too often our analyses, while kind of gesturing towards those moments, or even sometimes identifying those, don't take the next step and try to kind of see them implemented and kind of...and the work that organizers do and just the work that we do outside of the academy.

**Liz: I think we probably have time for one more question.**

**Audience 4: I have one question, just with regard to racism and sexism with the Black community, and you had touched on it earlier.**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Audience 4: Black women's issues have always been put on the back burner when we talk about issues of racism and how they affect the Black community. So oftentimes women, you know, one day have to decide, “Well, I'll be Black today and I'll be female tomorrow”...**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Audience 4: ...and it's like, well, what about how both affect me? And I'm just wondering if you could speak to your fear or concern in terms of the repercussions of dividing the...you know, these two issues that...that have been affecting...**

Cathy: Um-hum.

**Audience 4: ...Black people for so many years.**

Cathy: Right.

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<sup>22</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw is one of the leading theorists on the concept of “intersectionality” which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

<sup>23</sup> Deborah King's 1988 paper “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology” argues that because the experience of black women is assumed to be synonymous with that of black men or white women, it is seen as superfluous to engage in a discussion concerning them.

<sup>24</sup> E. Frances White wrote *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. Her scholarship has helped to define the role of women and work in Africa.

**Audience 4: And...and what do you think the effects are, just in terms of the whole community, as a whole.**

Cathy: Um, I'm going to reveal more and self identify more. I go to this ...I don't...I don't only go, I belong to a progressive affirming Black church, which puts me...makes me a Christian also. That's interesting...yeah, anyway, ah...And part of our mission is to be affirming in terms of lesbian and gay issues, to be progressive in terms of our politics, to engage in social justice, and to root ourselves in kind of Black communities. And one of the things that we all talk about in terms of the mission is providing space where people bring their...their entire selves, right? All of their complexity, all of their problems, all their struggles, all their victories, all their insights. And, you know, when you think about this question of division, there's clearly a political analysis that we all probably share about what does it mean when people have to choose between "being a woman one day" or making that primary, or making primary their racial identity. And usually I would argue it's not a choice, right? It's usually a situation that forces one thing instead of the other. So it's not even...we're not even going to give you the agency to choose, we're just going to make you respond based on certain things. So, you know, it's...we don't want that, and at a political level, it means, I think providing an analysis where people understand the ways in which these things intersect, the need to build kind of movements that expand beyond one single identity, whether it be race or gender. To understand that usually it's always an intersecting moment, even if it's not visible in that way. But I think, and I should defer to you, but there have to be also at an individual level real damage that happens, right?, when—at least I think, and I'm not a psych person, so you could say that's ridiculous but—when people feel like I'm...I'm this, even though I know I'm all these other things. The classic example for me is always thinking about sexuality, and, you know, it's been a big deal actually to go back into a Black church, because quite often in the past it's been...to be in a Black church meant you could be out as a feminist, you could be—maybe...you could be clearly a race woman, but you couldn't be a Black lesbian. And sometimes in some Black churches, you can't be progressive or radical, right? So, what does it mean I think to create spaces where people can bring themselves? And it seems to me that's what, you know, we're going to end here. That's what probably I think is the...one of the things that feminism should do, in any progressive analysis and movement, which is to provide space where people can be their whole selves, and can then use all of those resources that they bring to the table to create...to first envision what a great and wonderful society might look like and then to work towards that, right? I mean, my worry, for example in working with young people is that they can't even begin the process of imagining a society in which they're full members. Like what does it mean to kind of have that type of creativity, that type of imagination, that type of feeling of status and empowerment completely cut off, not from one young person, but from a generation of a whole community. And so it seems to me that part of the politics is creating that space where people can envision, do that kind of imaginary work and then bring all the resources that they have, as well as kind of combine resources with other people to really put that vision into action, and to transform the society. And hopefully, you know, the work that I do, both as a scholar and an activist and the intersection of the two, can help in that project.

**Liz: Well, that is a great place to finish up, and I want to thank you again for coming because this has been wonderful.**

Cathy: Thank you so much.

The End