

## **Editor's Interview with Chandra Talpade Mohanty\***

**ED:** It is not a stretch to say that the graduate students of my generation inherited an IR that you radically transformed with what was not only a powerful indictment of white, western feminism's homogenization of 'third world women', but also a way of identifying and enacting difference in fruitful, transformative ways. I have always felt there was a subtle, careful anger – an exasperation – in your 1984 piece, 'Under Western Eyes'.<sup>1</sup> In that piece, you relentlessly challenged the claim that gender is simply the origin of oppression and, in so doing, you opened the space for historical analysis through which particular women and their relations to structures of power could be understood. In the process, you demonstrated the importance of specificity and difference among and between women (and men) and the ways in which gender roles are produced through social and economic relations. To say that this work was groundbreaking would be to vastly understate the case, as that single essay has weathered 30 years of scrutiny – generations of study – and still retains a critical place in the firmament of IR theory. So, I want to start by asking you to talk about the genesis of 'Under Western Eyes'. What was going on for you when you wrote this piece?

**CTM:** I began working on 'Under Western Eyes' when I was writing my dissertation and teaching part-time in the (then) Women's Studies Program at Cornell University. As a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, I had been centrally involved in organizing one of the first (if not *the* first) conference in 1983 that brought 'third world' feminists from the global South and North (US women of color) together under the framework 'Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives.' This conference brought over 2000 people as speakers and participants to Urbana for five days of passionate dialogues, debates, and disagreements about our 'common differences' as transnational feminists of color. It was the intellectual framework of deep dialogue, political commitment, and solidarity between feminists of color and anti-racist white feminists emerging from that 1983 conference that has marked my own intellectual/political journey as a feminist scholar-activist. And it was encountering an almost total absence of these feminist of color genealogies in an all-white women's studies and feminist theory establishment at Cornell that led to my initial thinking about 'Under Western Eyes.' As a part time lecturer and then a Mellon Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities, I

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<sup>1</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' *Feminist Review*, 30, 1988, pp. 61-88.

taught courses in race, gender, and the sociology of education and on ‘women in international development.’ Thus, I was reading and teaching theoretical texts that rarely reflected the history and vision of radical, transnational feminists of color (we called ourselves ‘third world feminists’ then) that I knew was real, and I had experienced as a collective feminist project.

On the other hand, the state of the field of ‘international women’s studies’ or ‘women in development studies’ was quite clearly framed within an ‘us and them’ paradigm that colonized the experiences and histories of struggle of ‘third world’ women. In fact, I remember trying out the kernel of the argument in ‘Under Western Eyes’ on a panel at Cornell in which the other senior, white feminist historians interpreted ‘colonial’ as referring to colonial US history! At that time in the mid-1980s, my calling for a decolonization of cross-cultural feminist knowledge production was interpreted as nonsensical and aggressive within the white feminist establishment. What eventually propelled me to write ‘Under Western Eyes’ was both the colonial legacies so clearly evident in feminist scholarship AND the colonized institutionalized spaces of women’s studies that I experienced at Cornell and in my travels to other academic spaces in the US. As I said in my 2013 essay in *Signs* reflecting on the writing of ‘Under Western Eyes’:

*UWE is an intervention explicitly addressing the colonizing gestures of feminist scholarship about women in the third world. It was written from within the context of a vibrant political and scholarly community of radical anti-racist, transnational U.S. women of color and a large and growing body of critical work by feminists from the Global South. The essay was anchored in the experience of marginalization (and colonization) of the knowledges and intellectual agency of immigrant women of color in the USA. It was intended both as a critique of the universalizing and colonizing tendencies of feminist theorizing and as a methodological intervention arguing for historicizing and contextualizing feminist scholarship. UWE had a clear political purpose and was written in collective solidarity with anti-racist, cross cultural feminist activist projects in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus, ‘Under Western Eyes’ was written in the context of a collective anti-racist politics of radical critique and solidarity as well as rage against a feminist theoretical establishment that saw no harm in erasing the voices and histories of immigrant women of color and third world women like myself.

**ED:** In that essay in *Signs*, you also talk about erasure and disappearance – perhaps the second generation of erasure and disappearance. Specifically, you analyze the ways in which the changing intellectual conditions in the academy (specifically the shift into what you call ‘posteverything’) also produce a horizon of disappearance. You argue that poststructuralism’s wholesale dismissal of located, institutional analysis coupled with the neoliberal ‘knowledge economy’ results in an obfuscation of power relations. You demonstrate this with an example that lies close to the heart of narrative approaches to IR – that the solidaristic feminist origins of ‘the personal is political’ have been reduced to an economy of individual experience that is relegated to the private sphere. To put it plainly, you are saying that identity politics has been

<sup>2</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” *Signs*, 28:2, 2003, pp. 499-535.

carved away from the political economy and its structural power relations. And with disastrous results for an academy that has replaced its focus on the conjuncture between gender, race, and power as reflections of political hierarchy with a ‘niche market’ that has erased its own history of violence under the banner of equal differences. Where do you see (if you can see at all) the promises for challenging this pervasive neoliberal culture of the academy?

**CTM:** Not only do I think there are ways to challenge this pervasive neoliberal culture, I think we must do so. I have always believed that radical intellectual projects require thinking expansively and making connections between multiple histories and processes of domination and liberation, but that challenges to the status quo (in this case a pervasive neoliberal culture of the academy) in fact have to be contextual, place-based, and attentive to the nuances of the way power works within the structure and culture of our diverse institutional spaces. So, for instance, student resistance and mobilization in a private, highly corporatized university setting often appears (and has to be) very different from similar mobilizations at public universities (I am thinking of the contrast between student movements at CUNY and at Syracuse University in 2015). So, for example, while graduate students at CUNY made demands as a labor collective—in the sense that they spoke within the context of a labor union, students at Syracuse (see <http://thegeneralbody.org>) worked through building coalitions with faculty and staff. In a private institution like Syracuse University, graduate students and faculty are seen as part of the ‘management’ and cannot unionize.

Challenging or contesting normative culture has to be a collective project so in case of a hegemonic neoliberal academy, those of us who labor in it need to organize; to develop sustained critiques and counter-hegemonic movements that recover and produce the very politicized knowledges that have been ‘disappeared’ or recast as privatized. As I travel through academic spaces in the USA, Europe, and India, I see evidence of such challenges everywhere. In student movements, in unionization movements led by graduate students and adjunct or casualized labor, in new interdisciplinary projects at the margins of disciplines that focus on ‘decolonizing knowledge,’ and in coalitions of academic workers and social movement activists engaged in larger social justice struggles around racism, migrants and refugees, incarceration, denial of civil rights, nationalist xenophobia, etc. Some examples include the work of the Deco[K]now collective at the University of Naples ([decoknow.net](http://decoknow.net)), the massive transnational mobilization and university-wide strike against charges of ‘sedition’ leveled at the leader of the Jawarhalal Nehru University student union, Kanhaiya Kumar, and the criminalization of student democracy and dissent by the fascist Modi government in India (2016), and on a much smaller scale the work of the democratizing knowledge collective that I am a part of at Syracuse University ([democratizingknowledge.syr.edu](http://democratizingknowledge.syr.edu)). There are many more examples of such radical challenges to the neoliberal academy, but what they all have in common I think is an *analysis* of the concrete, place-based, AND transnational reach of neoliberal, corporate, carceral, privatized academic cultures and the need for a collective, organized response contesting the variegated exercise of power by State managers and academic administrators.

**ED:** What do you think accounts for your own attentiveness to silence and erasure as an academic? I mean, with respect to the places of dissent among the student groups you identify, for example, what leads you as a professor to seek to nurture these spaces of resistance? Many of our colleagues – and many in our own departments – do not feel this pervasive sense of injustice.

**CTM:** I think the presence of communities of radical scholar-activists in my life, and my own work to sustain and grow these communities in all the academic spaces I have traveled through is a large part of learning to be attentive to silence and erasure as an academic. And of course the commitment to NOT allow the academy to be the only space of struggle for me. I often tell my students that I can do the work I do because I have one foot planted in the academy and one foot outside!

As I mentioned earlier, as a graduate student at the University of Illinois, I was fortunate enough to collaborate with an amazing group of transnational anti-racist, feminists of color (mostly graduate students from around the world) to address the silences and erasures within even so-called progressive academic discourses, by organizing in 1983 an international conference called ‘Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives.’ I believe this was one of the first conferences (outside the UN) to bring third world feminists and US and European feminists of color together to talk about our ‘common differences.’ That was perhaps my first collaborative act of dissent in the US academy—going against the advice of my teachers who did not believe we could raise funds for such a conference and thought it would be too risky for graduate students enrolled in Ph.D. programs. I remember the joy, laughter, difficult emotional work, and deep sense of accomplishment I felt when we pulled this off—my sister-comrade Ann Russo and myself, with a community of 150 volunteers! I learned then that dissent and collective feminist work to demystify power and relations of rule within the academy was risky, but also the right thing to do, and that it led to the possibility of imagining and building community on other than the colonizing, racist, commodified terms that were normative in the academy. And I learned that silence in the face of the abuse of power did the opposite—it led to shrinking radical spaces of community and to an arrested sense of freedom. Since that time I have actively sought and built these radical spaces of dissent in the academy—with colleagues, with students, and the larger academic community. In 2009 I was a founding member of the Democratizing Knowledge Collective at Syracuse University ([democratizingknowledge@syr.edu](mailto:democratizingknowledge@syr.edu)) and I am now involved in a three year summer institute project called ‘Just Academic Spaces: Creating New Publics through Radical Literacies.’ Again, this is a long-term project where the DK Collective is working on curricula and pedagogies to nurture the spaces of resistance in the academy that you mention. What inspires me always is knowing that a commodified, neoliberal academy is predicated on erasing or co-opting those of us on the margins (racial, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.)—and that it is only by surviving and thriving within radical scholar-activist communities can we hope to speak truth to power.

**ED:** What advice might you give to the young, radical scholars emerging today in the face of these neoliberal and authoritarian predilections in the academy and elsewhere?

**CTM:** I have always believed that radical scholars are made (not born!) and that we are forged within communities and collectives that teach us how to resist the kind of individualized, neoliberal seductions and erasures that result in colonized mindsets or despair. I remember Audre Lorde saying to the 1989 graduating class at Oberlin College —‘remember that the rumor that you cannot fight city hall is started by city hall.’ So the way to combat neoliberal and authoritarian cultures and institutions is 1.) to always question what appears to be normative with our local sites and connect these spaces to larger geopolitical processes of capitalism, racism,

sexism, fascism, etc. (i.e. denaturalize and demystify power); 2.) to nurture radical communities of dissent in *and* outside the institutional spaces we occupy at any given moment (i.e. refuse the isolation that neoliberal, commodified cultures thrive on and to actively cultivate mentors, guides, and teachers who inspire us); 3.) to seek for what Angela Davis calls ‘unlikely coalitions’ that encourage us to struggle against injustice of all kinds; and 4.) to always remember that we are not the first nor the last to engage in oppositional social movements or the hard work of resistance—we stand on the shoulders of many others who came before us. Histories of decolonization, resistance, and revolution are crucial reminders that radical scholarship and activism are legacies we inherit and must *claim*. So, in that spirit of claiming our legacies, I am currently working on a feminist video archive project with my sister-comrade Linda Carty. The project documents video interviews with ‘feminist freedom warriors’ since the 1960s—scholar-activist women from around the world who have shaped the radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial projects of feminism (the history from below) that we, and future generations of radical scholar-activists inherit and honor. A Luta Continua!