



Interview with Margo Okazawa-Rey: Politics of Difference as Politics of Connection

Andrea Zimmermann

1. Introduction

In her conversation with Andrea Zimmermann Margo Okazawa-Rey addresses genealogies and challenges of transnational feminist politics of difference. As a founding member of the Combahee River Collective and activist scholar, she reflects on intersectionality from the perspective of personal experience. The starting point is the question how being different becomes a problem only in power regimes that organize social inequality according to differences. Difference as part of power regimes then affects structural and interpersonal relations. Furthermore, Margo Okazawa-Rey stresses the need for a special awareness for the analytical category of the nation in order to elaborate on a revised idea of collectivity. As a thinker, teacher and committed activist, Margo Okazawa-Rey highlights the necessity to build strong coalitions of transnational feminism nowadays beyond politics of identity and struggles of classification. These coalitions should give attention to the following question: to whom are we responsible and accountable?

Margo Okazawa-Rey is a feminist activist scholar working on issues of intersectionality, armed conflict, militarism and violence against women and she has published extensively on these topics. She teaches in various contexts worldwide and is a regular visiting scholar in the PhD program Gender Studies CH. As part of her academic work, Margo Okazawa-Rey is also strongly committed to activism in South Korea and Palestine. She is Professor Emerita at San Francisco State University.

2. Interview with Margo Okazawa-Rey

AZ: When we look back to the feminist movement of the 1970s, ‘Politics of Difference’—as it’s the title of our chapter—were a big issue. Could you describe which experiences or which topics or events were important to you?

MOR: Politics of difference: I think what’s important about that framing is that difference didn’t make a difference until there were inequalities structured around the difference. Difference simply meant, for example, “apples” and

“oranges.” Then the colonizers originally but later dominant powers decided apples are better than oranges and imbued them institutionally with special access, power, status, and so forth That’s where the politics is—it’s about power and structural and interpersonal relations that are affected by the structural parts of difference.

If we say you’re this person and you’re that person and you’re somebody else without all the structural and cultural pieces connected to regimes of power it wouldn’t be a problem obviously.

So, on the one hand, differences are made a problem and become a justification for discrimination and inequality, because of cultural and structural meanings that are given to them. Not because humans are being different from each other.

On the other hand, being made different as less-than—minoritized, racialized, and so on—required us to start with those identities as basis on which we could reframe our existence as valuable, beautiful beings then to organize. In this sense, it was important to embrace difference as a starting place, in a specific historical moment. Since then, identities have become both starting and ending points. Forty years later that is depressing, because what it’s gotten to is just politics based on identities and struggles around classification and inclusion. Those are political questions, questions about societal and interpersonal power, but not very inspiring questions. Questions about the socially constructed, categorical identities do not help us excavate and understand the foundational forces threatening the existence of human and natural life on our planet. They point to specific groups’ experiences (and there always will be new identity groups emerging as human consciousness develops) but not necessarily the whole ecology of life on this planet. Where things are in the world right now with the Corona pandemic, which is demonstrating “ultimate contingency as human beings,” and the global uprisings sparked by the US-based Movement for Black Lives, which is inspiring other marginalized peoples to re-examine their own conditions, demands that we think more deeply, especially questioning previous assumptions and to imagine more audaciously about possibilities.

Identity politics, like wars and armed conflicts, is also fundamentally a struggle about resources, material for sure. Within the academy and within wider society, the struggle is material. I think it’s also a struggle about what’s understood or experienced as not enough attention: struggle over attention and recognition. So we end up with “I’m more oppressed or my group is more oppressed than” or “my group doesn’t have any voice and you know the

only place the voice can come from is this other group who we're horizontally situated in very similar locations". So the question now is: How do we think about organizing ourselves in such a way that is really more fundamentally about vision, about what we're trying to create? How will we need to understand and address "difference" in that creative process? For example, we are engaging in creating our vision of a new world. As we are doing so, differences emerge, such as race and gender, political perspectives, differences in culture, differences in worldview. Because we are trying collectively to create a vision of a new world, there's a real context for the struggle and real need for it. In a sense we would be practicing core values of the new world: inclusion, diversity, principled struggle, for instance. It's not just "my group" who is needing and wanting attention. We would be sharing personal and collective histories and stories; we would be asking, what do we need to think about and to do, so as not to recreate what we are trying to change?

AZ: Is this what you mean when you say we should not start with "difference" but rather with more fundamental questions of existence?

MOR: Yes. If we start with creating a vision as a starting point, and we work out the differences in that context,—I don't know this for sure because it doesn't happen too often—I can imagine us in very real ways dealing with differences and as we're doing it we're coming up with a truly liberatory vision because we are working out old struggles based on bodies and understanding and moving through the struggle in new ways.

That's what I envision, that's what I hope for at this historic moment 2020. Remember too that we're not at 1970 where recognizing differences mattered in some ways much more, because we then really had much of a politics around that. I think if we don't move away from just starting with politics of difference, we'll always have people who will say, "well my group is not recognized, is marginalized, is invisible" because there are always new identities emerging as people's consciousnesses develop.

For example, 10 years ago transgender was an emerging concept and category, and only beginning in some places. Now the trans movement is becoming a really important force. An aspect of the current transgender people's struggle is emerging in the same way as other group's struggles: exclusion by dominant group, in this case genders. So trans-people are saying (as people before, we want our identities to be recognized and acknowledged; we want to have our say and practice self-determination. Creating the vision and addressing

differences will be intertwined, interdependent processes that I believe could more likely result in a vision grounded in principles and values that will create very inviting boundaries. In that way, newly emerging groups can enter easily and, once there, we collectively can think about how to improve our situations together. And have openings for new emerging groups to join together. We will be able consistently to re-conceptualize the “we” and hold firm on our values simultaneously.

AZ: When you think about the concept of collectivity of the 1970s and the related struggles then, and you think about the current conditions, what does collectivity mean to you?

MOR: The 1970s in the US was a very interesting time because many groups were talking about collectives, you know there were even car-repair collectives. So this idea of collectivization and becoming a collective was really important, very exciting. This is revolutionary in the US where individualism is *the* underlying value. The collectivism I remember was a difficult practice to be honest. Many groups who called themselves “collective” were not a real collective. It was a term that we used but there were real clear markers and distributions of power that were not collective. The idea of collective is even more important now than it was then. It’s the less used term—I think we need to reclaim that term and this time actually really understand what it means to be a collective and how to live collective values and ethics and relational practices, not just a collective structure.

AZ: Let’s look back to the experience that you had in the Combahee River Collective. Since those days, you have been playing a very active role in current feminist discussions and debates. How do those past experiences shape your current politics? What have you kept and what have you let go? What of those experiences, and formative experiences we all have, do you think needs to stay with us? Why is it important to reflect on this genealogy of feminist work and feminist theory and theory of intersectionality?

MOR: I think that’s a really wonderful question and it’s a complex question, because the answer is both/and: So you’re asking, what are the important political, theoretical, and methodological strands that are the continuities, that can, and perhaps in some ways must, be carried forward. Then the follow-up question is, how can that strand(s) inspire us to deal creatively and imaginatively with what we are facing now? I would say the continuity absolutely has to do with our analyses and practices being framed by and rooted in feminisms.

The Combahee River Collective started with a small group of African American women living in the Boston area in the mid-1970s. We were feminists and part of the larger Boston women's liberation movement. Around the same time, there was a notional gathering of Black feminists in Chicago organized by the National Black Feminist Organization. Several of us who had attended that meeting were deeply disappointed by the liberal perspective and the agenda, homophobia, and classism embedded in that convening. When those sisters returned from the conference they started meeting more intentionally and purposefully to articulate a more radical understanding of Black feminism. This perspective was articulated in 'A Black Feminist Statement', which has become an essential reading to understand both the genealogy of Black feminism and intersectional feminism. We stated then, as Black and intersectional feminists, we have to understand that the conditions we face are global and international, that it transcends nation-states. The conditions—therefore, the struggles—are worldwide. Also, we know that it's very much connected to our struggles with our respective states, the states that govern our various people. The feminisms that need to be carried through, and I think the new, additional part of this is that we, specifically feminists in the Global North, need to take much more seriously the analytic category of nation and come to understand more deeply what it means to be connected to these states and corporations that are *leaders* of the world, many times said to be leading in our name: in the name of German people or Swiss people or American people, etcetera. We can't simply ignore this. Even though we consider ourselves radical and we're not agreeing to state policies, we still have to *own* that we are a part of that state and we structurally benefit. Even though we are distancing ourselves from it.

So one of the questions right now is: What's our struggle as feminists with the state that addresses not just domestic issues, but connecting the domestic with the foreign issues. How do we think about domestic policies and foreign policies as really going together, the interlinkages? As feminists, how do we need to think about these questions when we consider the centrality of gender that is all classed, raced, ethnicized, and so on, because all nation-states are patriarchal, heterosexist, and racialized/ethnicized.

And related to that is a really critical question for us. In that context of challenging our states and recognizing our dominance even in global feminist politics, to whom are we responsible and accountable? And for what?

AZ: How does this play into your vision of being an activist scholar that you have been teaching in all the different contexts? I think there is a strong link to this concept of yours. Would you explain maybe concisely how being an activist scholar in these times could make a difference?

MOR: Yes, something about the way I've been operating the last 25 years is really trying to be in more places, trying to be in more than one place. So obviously I'm rooted in the US and I've tried very deliberately, purposefully to maintain my relationships with feminists in South Korea in particular for the last 26 years and, more recently the last 15, 16 years, in Palestine. So those are the two places where I really dedicated my energies, my commitment, time and everything. What that has meant as an activist scholar is teaching about those places and what is happening there and particularly the roles the US state and corporations play in both places: buttressing the Israeli occupation in Palestine, and the US military occupying South Korea and dominating the entire Pacific region (not to mention globally). So one action is teaching about it. My teaching of US-based students and writing about those places is very much informed by my relationships to the people there alongside my relationship to the issues of militarism or Zionism or Zionist occupation. I focus on what I'm learning about everyday life in both places: what are the people, to whom I am deeply connected and who are directly experiencing impacts and forces of occupation, saying about *their* experiences about the phenomenon of what I'm trying to write about? How do *they* talk about it? How do they themselves get to speak about it? So the task is not how I will speak/write/represent their experiences. The most important, and the trickiest part, is their voices. And how to put those up front in a particular way and at particular moments and where my voice should kind of be amplified. It is a fundamental question of amplification of voices. The third point is: I can't just be an armchair activist, just sit at my desk or in front of a class and talk about this. I have to have my feet planted somewhere in South Korea and in Palestine. How do I do that except through relationships that are deeply binding? Where I get to travel with my comrades/families/friends in both locations and where I am learning from them all the time. What I am learning is not just about the struggle and not just about the political analysis of the situation, but what it means to live under those conditions, how everyday life is both interrupted by and carried on regardless of what's happening—the thing about “life goes on no matter how bad things are”. I have been thinking about both things, how to tell both stories. I'm right now leaning more towards telling and writing

short stories about Palestine, especially about everyday life as it's affected by the occupation and militarism and also about how people carry on: How the weddings are celebrated, how the people who have died are remembered and honored, graduations, going to the supermarket, just the granular daily life—and putting those stories in a political context somehow. People who know at all, know a lot about Palestine in some ways, but they only know the political analysis, that's what they mostly know. I am committed not only to know but also to understand contours and textures and meanings of daily life. The same with South Korea: what is daily life like around the US military bases, for example?

The activist scholarship I am committed to practicing, is fundamentally deepening relationships and putting to use not just my own analytic frameworks but “local” or “daily” “lived” analytic frameworks, how people analyze and theorize. Here I'm talking even about my 12-year-old teacher Yasmin: trying to document how she understands the world, not just the other academics. Or Anas, who just started his first year at university. I want to help put out into the world their theorizing and understandings.

AZ: Could we name what you've been describing as a transnational feminist practice of transformation then? A transnational feminist practice that both recognizes differences and takes into account the everyday practices and feelings. Learning from each other and the contexts people live in and, as a researcher and activists, whatever one's role, both to be transformed by and to transform. Then sharing multiple stories of the learnings, observations, and processes with people in the wider world?

MOR: Yes. And, because I'm connected to the US state, being specifically mindful of that social location and asking always and consistently the question, to whom I am accountable and for what I am responsible? The questions are always there and impel me to be much more mindful of my social location, therefore my responsibilities. I am firmly committed to being part of the work to hold the US government accountable, specifically the US military, for damages it is causing in South Korea, for example. It is also my responsibility to teach “my people” about what they do not see about global impacts. Third, I want to be among feminist activist/scholars in the North collectively deepening our knowledge and understanding about the global impacts of our countries on peoples of the South.

AZ: There is another aspect that plays an important role in your teaching: being an activist scholar also means thinking about care, self-care and even collective self-care. Could you please briefly explain, why this is important to you and to the work you are doing?

MOR: I've been thinking about this notion of "self-care" a lot lately because it's become such a ubiquitous term that's used everywhere I go. One thing about the concept is, that we need to think through deeply this notion of self so it's not only, or even primarily, an individual particular self. Instead, when we talk about "self", going back to your question about collectivity, internalizing that there is a collective formation of self. This means that we are taking care of one another because our lives matter to other folks and our lives are both our own and not our own at the same time. It also means self-care needs to be the way we do "the work"—not just something apart from what we do. We often work intensively for a period—could be days, weeks, months—then "okay I'm going to do some self-care" This often means stepping out and stopping for a while. And I think that's important some time. But at the same time, I'm wondering though if we can think about self-care as something we also do along the way, so here is a really mundane example. Can we think about singing together and cooking together and giving each other massages, meditating together or just sitting quietly with candles—can we think about those as collective self-care as part of our meetings or as part of our retreats? And another strand of the self-care is: How do we actually practice kindness and compassion as we're organizing or as we're writing together, for example, so that the self-care—and maybe turn this English word into a verb and not a noun—self-caring or collective caring—so that's an ongoing commitment, that we are committing ourselves to as part of the work. Both caring outside of work and as part of how we work are true.

AZ: Coming back to the transnational work you are doing, you are present in so many projects all around the world. Out of your experience, if we want to bring forward gender equality, what are the big challenges that we have to face now? How can we bring forward gender equality when we take differences and complexities of contexts into account in this transnational scale?

MOR: I think there are two things: First, given, what's happening politically right now, there's the resistance part right where we have to push back against all the violence in so many forms that is coming at us. We do have to resist that. We also need to think transnationally about what principles, values, beliefs that are connected to a vision could and will bind us as a movement and that we're

willing to commit to, for the long haul. Equality certainly is one thing. Although we need that, it is so basic. We also need and deserve something grander, more visionary, moving toward utopia: What's a transnational feminist vision of genuine peace and security, for example? How do we value differences and conflicts specifically as powerful opportunities to imagine possibilities, to think about alternatives? By peace I'm talking in a very big way, not just the absence of conflicts. We often think about conflicts and difference as things that pull us apart. Let's think about difference and conflicts as spaces that we're inhabiting. In this case, we can use that space not just in the usual ways but also think about the space of opportunity and that the politics of difference absolutely can lead to the politics of hope and possibility and creativity. What I think we need the most now are hope, creativity, and imagination, a politics of possibility, a "politics of life" as my friend Vanessa Thompson says. In some ways many movements have been operating with limited imagination, because everybody is so under pressure and unabating violence coming at us. How do we form collectives where we can just really be open hearted as well as open in so many other ways so that we can think together and imagine together? Otherwise we're always attached, tied to the oppressor and oppression to the old paradigm. I think what's actually happening now is the struggle over paradigms. It's not just who's leading which country and who's struggling over what resources, and all that . . .

AZ: So we might come back to the beginning of the interview—making difference the starting point of the vision of feminism again?

MOR: Yes, but only a politics of difference fundamentally intertwined with a politics of connection. Only when we combine the two—difference and connection—can we reach a politics of generativity and a politics of life. We're then committing to recognizing and dealing with and valuing differences and committing to staying connected so we can *all* be transformed and liberated. My vision of a politics of life and generativity can only be crafted collectively. We—feminists who truly love life—must embrace the Native American value that all beings are connected and referred to as relatives, "all our relations". A foundational belief embedded in that notion is "ubuntu"—I am me because you are you—and *inlak'esch*, a Mayan belief that "I am you, and you are me". What I am really trying to articulate is a feminism of interconnectedness, of embracing the idea that all life is sacred, that we—all life forms—are relatives, of shared common destiny. That none of us is free or can thrive unless we all are free and thriving.

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