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"We care about feminist notions of genuine security"

A Conversation with Margo Okazawa-Rey. By Katrin Meyer.

Margo Okazawa-Rey is Professor Emerita at San Francisco State University. Her research develops an understanding of security from an intersectional, transnational, and activist perspective. She examines the connections between militarism, economic globalization and the impacts on local and migrant women in East Asia, as well as the role of feminist research in activism, women's empowerment and policy change. She was a founding member of the Combahee River Collective, which articulated a theory of intersectionality in the 1970s.

The following interview with Margo Okazawa-Rey took place on September 24, 2019 by video call.

Katrin Meyer: *You have contributed with crucial analyses and texts to the Black feminist movements since the late 1970s, including your participation in the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective. For many years now, your intellectual and political work has been devoted to issues around security and militarization, mainly in Africa and Asia. How come? Why did this topic become so important for you?*

Margo Okazawa-Rey: That is an excellent question. The Combahee River Collective gave me a very important foundation for understanding the world around me. We first started getting together around 1975 and then the manifesto, as you call it, "The Combahee River Collective. A Black Feminist Statement" came out, I believe it was in 1978 or something like that.[1] But we'd been doing work before then and all of us in the Collective were doing various kinds of organizing. Some people were doing work around sterilization abuse of Puerto Rican women, for example. I was doing work around ending violence related to public school desegregation in Boston. We really understood the way that race, class, gender, nation, capitalism, and imperialism work together. We thought substantively about what is so popularly known as intersectionality, the term that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, but the thinking was long before the published word. So my foundation is very much rooted in thinking intersectionally. Just as a matter of course. I am a sociologist by training and I am also an educator. All those ways of looking at the world that were so integral to our work as the Combahee River Collective were almost by nature and by training 'who I am' – and I am still like that.

This question of security has come up in different contexts. I start with an important turning point in my own intellectual-political development that real-

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ly set me off in a transnational direction. In the early 1990s in the US, there was a lot of tension between Korean immigrant merchants who had shops and various kinds of stores, from grocery stores to wig shops, in predominantly African-American communities. There were a lot of racial and, I would say, class tensions, and tensions around immigrants versus people in the US – anyway, lots of tension. There were notable violent incidents in New York, called the Red Apple incident, then later in L.A. In New York, there was a big boycott of Korean merchants by African-American community people, because of the mistreatment and the violence. In L.A., 15-year-old Latasha Harlins was shot in the head by a Korean immigrant woman who was running the convenience store. So, I wanted to understand more what those tensions were about. I wanted to go to South Korea to find out what South Korean people learned and what they were taught and believed about African-American people before they came to the US. I couldn't believe that – poof! – they arrived in the US and suddenly they had racist ideas and opinions about African-Americans. I wrote a Fulbright application, I was awarded that, I went. Lo and behold, I ended up answering that question, but not in a straightforward way.

What happened was that when I arrived in Korea, I noticed there were all these US military bases. I had no idea that, at that point, there were about a hundred installations, from small ones like little electronic things to full-blown bases. One of those was right in the middle of Seoul, the capital of the country, and there were about 37,000 US troops at that point. I just couldn't believe that. And I learned about the violence against local women by military personal, the destruction of the environment because of base operations, and I really began to see the harmful impacts in Korea of this institution that is supposed to represent the interest of the 'American people'. That is on the one hand. On the other hand, I also – because I can speak Japanese, but I don't speak Korean – could communicate with the older generation of Korean people who had lived under Japanese colonization. So imagine, I'm in the middle of Seoul, talking to older Koreans in Japanese, while being attached to the state whose bases are occupying Korea, under the purported reason of 'security.'

That was one of those cognitive dissonant moments, emotionally dissonant moments, thinking 'oh my goodness, I'm connected to these two imperial states'. I could say in the US, that 'yes, I am a woman of color, marginalized, bla bla', but I realized in that context and then subsequently that the category of nation and states' definition of security has really shaped the geopolitics in the East Asia and Pacific region. While there, I ended up doing my research on the mixed-race children who have been abandoned by US military personnel.[2] But that is not where I started. I wanted to find out what Korean people learned about Black people in Korea. Well I did – they learned through experiences with African-Americans and perhaps more deeply, the media and popular culture in South Korea. The movies, TV shows, music imported from the US, part of the Hollywood popular culture industry, all were filled with and reinforced stereotypes. This was because many of the films and images that were shown and the music at that time, before K-Pop really became popular, was very racialized and rooted in anti-black ways of thinking and perceiving.

Discovering the massive presence in South Korea catapulted me into thinking about the US military not just there, but in Okinawa, in Japan, the Philippines, that whole region that is completely dominated by US military presence.

That was 1994. And in 1995 there was the rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by three US military personnel, which just exploded among the women in Okinawa, revitalizing the anti-bases-movement. This happened just as they were at the Beijing Women's Conference – the NGO forum which is such an important landmark – and ready to come home. In my new awareness, all these forces came together and I became one of the founders of a network. It used to be the "East Asia-US Women's Network against Militarism". And that's where my antimilitarist work really began. It started with my deep concern and thinking about African-American people's experiences in the US, and then after going abroad, I found a much bigger story about race, about gender, about imperialism and militarization. That initial experience and awakening in South Korea gave me the foundation and I've now been working on the issues of militarism, militarization, and violence against women for a long time.

What is important about our network is it started as an East-Asia-US women's network and, as our consciousness and understandings about the issues and interconnections were growing, we expanded to include Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, the places in the Pacific and the US that have been affected severely by US militarism and US bases. We then became the International Women's Network against Militarism.

Another important thing is that, back home, US-based Network members began to make the connection between the US bases and US forces abroad and the militarization in the US itself – not just bases, but for example the prison-industrial-complex, the private security-system, guards in malls and so many places. And we realized that this is an absolutely militarized state – even though it may not look like it.

The third important thing about the Network is that we really began to think that it is not good enough just to critique the dominant ideas and practices about security which is state-based, relying on relationships of domination and subordination, and is absolutely masculinist, relying on violence, and the good guys/bad guys, us/them, relying on identifying an enemy that you have to contain, that a state has to contain, so that people can be lured into believing falsely that they are 'secure' and ‚protected'. We then began turning security into a verb and asking ourselves the question: Who is securing what, for whom, for what purposes?

When we did so, that disentangled the capitalist militarized religious-fundamentalist system, which is all intertwined to really benefit the elites in all the locations, and we also realized that the elites lock arms. So you can say global North and global South for example, but the elites in both locations have elites' interests at heart – capital accumulation, power, and control. We came to see that the global South in the North and global North in the South were very important processes that we must understand and theorize. And finally, we started asking the question in 1997 at our first international meeting: What is genuine security?

***KM**: That is exactly what I wanted to ask you.*

MOR: What is genuine security and what does that mean particularly for the most vulnerable people of the world? And not just for people but for the environment? So, we began to think not just about human-centered security, but about a holistic idea of security, of people and environment, both needing to be secure. We now see more and more how the two obviously are interconnected.

***KM**: So would you still hold on to the notion of security as an important concept? Don't you think that even the word has already been totally instrumentalized by right-wing politics?*

MOR: We don't care about that. We care about feminist notions of genuine security. We are not tied to pushing up against the national security paradigm. What we are saying is that we are generating our ideas of security and that is what we are going for.

***KM**: I think this is important because there is an emotional connection to security for a lot of people and it would be wrong, I personally believe, to give up this notion and concede it to be a militarized concept only.*

MOR: Yes, absolutely. And one of the questions we've been asking ourselves at our meetings and gatherings and I certainly do when I'm giving talks is: How do you know when you are actually secure? Security isn't a thing, and there are material aspects to it, obviously. Livelihood, which is more than just a job and more than just economics, is a way of relating to work that is both materially sustaining and also emotionally and intellectually and spiritually fulfilling. We have to think about not just economics and work, but livelihoods. What keeps us alive in the fullest sense of the word? So, security means ensuring livelihood for everyone. Another point about security is that it refers to dignity, cultural identity, personal identities, these emotional, spiritual aspects of our experience and the connections between ourselves and connections to nature. And a third aspect of security that we think is really crucial is protection from avoidable harm. For sure there are things that are completely out of our control, things sometimes that can't be avoided. But, for example, since we are talking about climate change these days, climate change can be avoided and could have been avoided a long time ago. Or: there will always be natural disasters, but the force with which they occur has really altered along with the changing climate. And part of avoidable harm is also constructing buildings in a way that there is not an inequality. The distribution of harm reflects inequalities. The poor are going to experience more harm and devastation than better-off people, who enjoy certain kinds of protection. That is another example of protecting ourselves from avoidable harm. The fourth part of our idea of genuine security has to do with the environment. Protecting the environment, seeing the connections between humans and the natural world as central. All four parts go together for creating genuine security.

***KM**: Your concept of security is very important and inspiring. How would you specify the role of gender analysis in that approach? How do you integrate gender?*

MOR: I think we have to integrate an intersectional analysis. We are gendered, we are raced, we are classed, we are attached to nations or not attached to nations, which is as important as attachment in some ways. When we think about security in this intersectional, transnational way, one of the things that particularly you and I, connected to countries of the global North, have to think about is: What does it mean to be connected to these countries? What are our responsibilities, looking through the lenses of gender, race, class, nation? And to whom are we accountable, to whom should we be accountable for what our states do in our name … in the name of the Swiss people, the German people, the American people, etc. All this mess happens ostensibly to benefit us, and that is part of the discourse. So how do we push up against that? How do we say that 'no, we are in solidarity with the most vulnerable people in the world', and that we are not just 'helping those people,' but recognizing that we share a common destiny? Our destinies are inextricably linked. This involves a kind of radical self-interest, if you like. A feminist theologian, Carter Heyward, uses a wonderful metaphor about radical self-interest. She says: 'Imagine a burning house. All your loved ones are in the house and you're standing outside looking at the house burning. So your inclination is to go in and rescue people out of that house.' But, she says: 'Imagine yourself, you're in the house too. What do you have to do to make sure that everybody, including you, everybody gets out?' The house is the world for me. The world is burning, literally and figuratively, right now, as we speak. So, genuine security and peace imply the questions: How can we avoid the fire in the first place? And if there is a fire, how can all of us get out? Does this make sense?

***KM**: I think it makes a lot of sense because that analogy challenges the concept of 'us and them' which makes us look at people from a distance, turning those who are exposed to harm and violence into mere objects of knowledge or care. For me, it resonates with what you describe in your research as activist scholarship.[3] So I wonder if you have thought about what we could rely on, as researchers in the global North, to act in this spirit you describe? How is it possible to take responsibility without objectifying people who are more vulnerable than ourselves?*

MOR: I think that is an excellent question. Something I have been thinking over for some years now is, first of all: why are we even in the academy? Why are we doing the research we do, why those topics, what is the purpose of the research? Ultimately what are the purposes that we are aspiring to fulfill through our research? And that is suggesting first of all: What are our relational practices with people with whom we are doing research or on whose behalf we're doing research or we're doing research on? In each of those cases what are the guiding principles of our relational practices in relation to those people? And ultimately, again going back to my earlier point: to whom are we accountable and to whom should we be responsible? And what are our responsibilities? It follows that we

all live with contradictions. On the one hand, we are very committed to liberation and the empowerment of marginalized peoples and seeing ourselves as, though in some ways privileged, also part of that group. On the other hand, we are also institutionally affiliated for the most part and we have certain mandates from the institution that we have to fulfill. Or even the people whom we are trying to relate to sometimes don't trust us, and ask 'who are you, what are you doing here, what are your intentions?' And so, irrespective of our individual good intentions, we find ourselves in these contradictory positions. Neither here nor there, because many of us are not hundred percent loyal to the university – that is not our home base, so to speak – or ultimately we are connected to communities. But the communities often see us as the academy. And the academy doesn't necessarily trust us either, because we are too radical or too much engaged with the communities. So we are in this kind of in-between-space. But I think those in-between-spaces are absolutely spaces of radical possibilities, seeing opportunities where we think no opportunities exist.

The other thing is, I think we would be really miserable and ineffective, if we didn't have our own cohort of allies with whom we are working: a group of people committed to staying together and being together as researchers, based on these principles of feminist activist scholarship. On that basis, we envision, for example, possibilities of security in a particular way. As a group, we want to work together, irrespective of the fact that we might be working in different areas. We want to build a sort of a community, where we can support each other, keep each other accountable and say, 'wait a minute, you're going off here in the wrong direction' because we know that we trust each other, we're going to be trusting each other, building the trust over time.

***KM**: Would this cooperation always have to be transnational?*

MOR: Absolutely.

***KM**: Or could it be, that, depending on where one is located, one would say, 'let's build safe spaces or build our community first'? Is it indispensable to build transnational cooperation with people from the South, if one wants to take responsibility as being part of the global North? How do you view these different ways of building communities?*

MOR: I think we need to do both. Something that we haven't done as people in the global North is really interrogate our position.

***KM**: Yes.*

MOR: We always want to be with the people in the global South, to be in solidarity. Though that is important, I think both things have to happen. I can imagine for example having a gathering where activist scholars from the global North get together to talk about what it means to be attached to these Northern countries, given all the ways in which militaries, corporations, states are involved in

wreaking havoc globally. What does it mean for us to live in such a contradictory position, as engaged, conscious, growing academic activists? In other words, we have to do some of our own work, while at the same time engaging with our counterparts in the global South. We haven't done that work, thinking about what it means to be firmly entrenched in these Northern countries. That is one of my dreams in the next couple of years, that we would have such a gathering where we bring together people from various countries in Europe, the US, Japan, for example, really to talk about what all that means, in practice, not just theoretically. What are the contradictions, what are the challenges we face? How do we feel when our good intentions are not met, all these kinds of emotional things that we're also caught up in as well, because we have good intentions, but our intentions don't necessarily produce good outcomes.

***KM**: Is the "International Women's Network against Militarism" close to such a form of cooperation or gathering, which you imagine, or is this something different?*

MOR: No, I think it is very much connected. Many of the things I am talking about today are connected to what I've learned through the Network. In the very first meeting in 1997 in Okinawa, we had a big blow-up around language, translation, and interpretation. The Japanese-Okinawa people and we from the US were the two groups that had organized the meeting and invited other people. But we hadn't taken into account the importance of all the languages, Korean and Tagalog, at that time. We focused on interpreting English and Japanese. It was unconscious until the people from the Philippines said: 'Wait a minute, how can we have an international meeting unless we have good interpretation? We are educated people from the Philippines, of course we speak English because we are colonized people, but the ones without university education are not going to be able to speak English and we want everybody to be able to participate.' So, starting from that first meeting, we've had to think deeply and systematically about what it means to work together in a transnational context, looking at cultural differences.

We always had the principle that the US members of the Network were really pushing our governments and our corporations and that our main work is here in the States, not helping 'those women over there.' The related principle is that we would take direction from our colleagues in the other places according to what's needed. So a lot of our work is about solidarity action, it is a decentralized organizational form, with a core group. Recently, at our 20-year-anniversary meeting in 2017, we brought in the idea of indigeneity. It means looking at the situation of indigenous people and bringing in those perspectives. Okinawan people found that very interesting, because they are colonized people too, they are colonized by Japan, and it also resonated in people from Guam and Hawaii for example, to thinking about indigenous people and colonization very explicitly. By upgrading our thinking, we were forced to reflect on what it means to be part of the North. Japanese people, for example, had to think in relation to Okinawa, to the Philippines and Korea. So my dream is to have a gathering of feminist

activists in the global North. I've talked to my comrades in Bern, the "Peace Women across the Globe", to see if we can have such a gathering in Europe, to bring some people from the United States and to tackle this question of what it means to be connected to the North in the ways we are.

***KM**: You mentioned your comrades in Bern. Could you talk a little bit more about the way in which you are related to groups or discussions in Europe?*

MOR: In two ways. One is this NGO "Peace Women across the Globe" which was initiated by [Ruth-]Gaby Vermot. In 2003, there was a conference in Zurich called "Feminist Debates on Peace and Security", organized by cfd.[4] That was the second event that completely changed my trajectory because it got me involved with Palestine. At the conference, there was a Palestinian activist who later invited me to work at her center, but that's a whole other story.[5] Gaby's initiative was a project called "1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize", pushing definitions of peace not just to end open conflicts, but in the broadest sense, including reproductive justice and environmental justice. After the Nobel Peace Prize project we continued as "Peace Women across the Globe", a network mostly of women from all the continents and many countries of the world. I've been active with them since then. And because of my Swiss connections, I got invited to the feminist summer school of the "Swiss Network of Graduate Programs in Gender Studies" several years ago. A wonderful result is that I have been coming over to do workshops there almost every year since that time.

***KM**: I have one more question for you. What are your next projects? Are you currently working on a new research project?*

MOR: Actually I'm not. I'm going to be 70 years old in November 2019, so I'll be retiring at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. What I want to do is make myself available to be of service to any women's/feminist movements and things like that. I do want to write, and one of the things I'm really interested in writing about is not necessarily going to be research-based. I'm thinking very much about people's yearnings and longings, not just what people want and need but what the deepest aspects of one's self that shapes the kinds of decisions we make are, most of them not even conscious. This came out of knowing that 53% of white women in the US voted for Trump and that so many people who you might not expect to be Trump supporters are so, for example. But I'm not just concerned about them. If you were a Hillary Clinton supporter or whomsoever you supported in the elections or even if you didn't vote, what's the yearning, what's the longing that stopped you from voting? Or if you voted for Trump, what did you think this man and his administration would do for you that is not available otherwise? Or Clinton or whoever? Yearnings and longings are deep. Some people might start by saying 'I want to make sure that my kids are educated.' So my next question following up from that would be something like 'So what would that mean for you if your kids were fully educated?' The project would invite people to go deeper and deeper and deeper, becoming ever more

conscious of those yearnings and longings, so that we can follow those rather than more superficial ones. By superficial I mean top-layers, I don't mean frivolous desires. If there were any research, it would be research into understanding what it means to be human and what it means to be a conscious human being. What does it mean to have real agency and what enables us to act even in the direst of circumstances? Conversely, what makes people in the most privileged positions feel so afraid, preventing them from exercising their agency? Tenured full professors in the US who are so nervous about making waves – what is that all about? So those are the kinds of things I'm interested in discovering and I hope that I will have the opportunity to do that.

***KM**: Human desires and feelings might also imply feelings of fear. So is your interest in understanding deep yearnings and longings still related to issues of security?*

MOR: Absolutely. Because I think deepest yearnings and longings are at the core.

***KM**: Thank you very much for this conversation.*

Remarks

1 „A Black Feminist Statement" was first published in 1979 in Zillah Eisenstein (ed.): Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism, New York: Monthly Review Press; and republished 1979 in: Hull, Gloria T./Scott, Patricia Bell/Smith, Barbara (eds.): All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, New York: Feminist Press, pp. 13-22.

2 See Okazawa-Rey, Margo (1997): Amerasian Children of GI Town: A Legacy of U.S. Militarism in South Korea. In: Asian Journal of Women Studies 3, 1, pp. 71-102.

3 See Sudbury, Julia/Okazawa-Rey, Margo (eds.) (2009): Activist Scholarship: Anti-Racism, Feminism, and Social Change, London/New York: Routledge.

4 Cfd is a feminist peace NGO in Switzerland, available at https://www.cfd-ch.org/en/cfd-empowers-women-opens-up-perspectives-3.html (accessed 26 Feb. 2020).

5 Margo Okazawa-Rey worked for three years as the Feminist Research Consultant at the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling in Ramallah, Palestine; see Okazawa-Rey, Margo (2009): Solidarity with Palestinian Women: Notes from a Japanese Black U.S. Feminist. In: Sudbury, Julia/Okazawa-Rey, Margo (eds.): Activist Scholarship. Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 205-223.