Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Shose Kessi

Interviewed by Amanda Nkeramihigo
Interview conducted remotely using Zoom platform
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AN: Amanda Nkeramihigo, Interviewer
SK: Shose Kessi, Interview Participant

AN: Hello, Dr. Kessi. Thank you for agreeing to join us for this interview, and to be part of our feminist archive. Today is June 11th. So we will start with a very, very simple question. Could you please tell us where you were born, where you grew up and where you currently reside?

SK: Okay. I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, because my father was studying at the time. And I'm the last of four children from my parents. When I was 2 1/2 years old, my family moved to Geneva, Switzerland, because my father took up a position with the United Nations.

AN: Okay.

SK: So, I actually grew up in Geneva and did all my primary and secondary schooling there. Then, I moved around a little bit, I studied in the UK, moved to South Africa in 1995—to Johannesburg—and then lived in the US for a while in Baltimore… back to the UK again and Tanzania, which is where I'm from—well, my father is Tanzanian and my mother was British, from London—and then ended up here in Cape Town where I live now in 2011. I came here because of the job I'm currently doing which is at the University of Cape Town.

AN: Okay. Excellent. For our record, what is your date of birth?

SK: 26th of August 1973.

AN: Excellent. Could you tell me about how you first started to relate to feminism or womanism or other forms of gender or intersectional theories or ideas?

SK: Yeah. When I finished my degree, I studied at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies. I did a degree in Economics and Swahili. After that I started working for NGOs. Actually, I moved to South Africa very quickly after I finished my degree, and I worked for the Women's Development Foundation, which was an organization that supported different kinds of women's empowerment projects. The one I spent more time working on was with women parliamentarians. That was after the transition to democracy in 1994, so we were **{03:00}**

sponsored by the swedes on the SIDA project, looking at how to empower women in politics and government through this parliamentary program. And I guess that was the first time I kind of encountered, in my work life, issues relating to women and women's empowerment. We didn't talk about it as a feminist project but I think it was. Then, I also worked subsequently for international NGO's, so the international HIV/AIDS Alliance in in the UK, and a Johns Hopkins program on reproductive health called Jhpiego. I guess the one thing that attracted me to those programs was really the focus on supporting women's reproductive health and sexual health. Although again, these programs were not explicitly feminist in their approach. I felt like I was coming into it with some kind of, you know, feminist perspective. But it became much more crystallized when I joined UCT in 2011—that's the University of Cape Town—it was, you know, in the first few years after I joined, the Rhodes Must Fall movement broke out, and in that space there was a lot of feminist engagement, involvement around issues of identity, sexual identity, gender identity, and part of the movement was a very strong feminist perspective on experiences of black women, both students and scholars in the academy.

AN: Interesting. When you joined the NGO, this would have been after you started school, were you a younger person at that point? Also, I wonder if you had, whether or not it was clear to you, but perhaps in retrospect, you already had feminist orientations? Or, if this just kind of really evolved because you were faced with these issues around women's empowerment and issues? Basically, was it a choice you feel like, or did it emerge?

SK: You know, my mother was an activist. Okay, so when I grew up, she involved us—well me—in all the activist work that she was doing. She was a Quaker and belonged to the Quaker United Nations office. What I remember the most, and I think why I ended up in South Africa, was her involvement in the anti-apartheid movement at the time. I think that's where I got my passion and drive for activism, and it necessarily became feminist because, you know, in Geneva, when we were growing up, we were one of the few like black families in our neighborhood at school. So, I guess it started more as like a consciousness of being black, consciousness of race but evolved into your consciousness of feminism at the same time, because obviously, these things intersect. So yeah, it's really hard to like pinpoint a time where I could say this was my feminist education, you know? I think it just evolved in terms of my experiences growing up but also in the different workplaces. Experiences of being black and a woman in the different NGO's that I worked with that kind of led to certain experiences that shaped my intellectual thinking around feminist theory.

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AN: Mhm, mhm. Okay. I think there is definitely a theme that I've seen in my own life, but also in interviews when it comes to women of colour where, often we seem to come to feminism after coming to terms with racial realities. I wonder if it is because one is… I'm not sure if that's where it is, but one is more immediate in terms of our interaction with the world? Is that something that

you've seen as well, where this is more obvious, quote unquote let's say, whereas feminism might be something that that is always an undercurrent but is not realized as a real orientation?

SK: Yeah, I think so. Because also… even when you're in the midst of a movement or engaging in like activist work, often the race issue takes precedent and the gender issue is secondary. You know, we've seen that throughout history, with all the Pan-African liberation movements. Even the way where we talk about them today, often we undermine the role of women in those movements. So, I think it's very common and still very alive today, that feminist issues are often seen as secondary.

AN: Yeah. I will touch on Pan Africanism a little bit later. I wonder perhaps you could tell me what attracted you to psychology and how you got into it, and if it applies how you have merged these values that we just talked about of feminism with your work as a psychologist. Or how your feminist values shaped your journey into psychology or vice versa.

SK: You know, I started my academic career and like studying economics and I felt like it was very dry. Then working with NGOs and international NGOs, just coming to the realization that the work that these organizations were doing… It was very frustrating to me and I became very disillusioned. Suddenly understanding the whole development context, aid context, charity and all that, and how we were positioned in it. So, I decided at some point I wanted to go back to school and do my master's and reflect on my experiences in development. I never thought I was going to end up in psychology. I started a masters in population studies and then realized that the theories that they were using, you know, we're very focused on like Maslow's theory, hierarchy of needs et cetera, et cetera, which… that's not what I wanted to be in, you know? So, then, I guess by chance, a friend of mine was studying social psychology at the London School of Economics and she told me about what social psychology was. So, I did a little bit of research and then decided to do my master's in social and organizational psychology. It gave me a kind of avenue to write about the development industry and racism of the development industry. So that's what my masters was focused on. And, you know, in that research I then became very aware about how development representations of Black people or colonized people in the development world were very gendered. How women were represented and how you know—women and children—were represented as very passive and not active, in need of help, in need of charity. So, that's when I first became very aware of how race and gender was so interconnected. It kind of propelled me to think about feminist theory, including feminist theory in my work.

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But I have to say that it's not, you know, I did my master's and then I continued and did my PhD. It was not until I was actually working at UCT and developing my own body of work post-PhD that I started engaging with black feminist theory—like intersectionality, for instance. Something that I use in my research, but also in my private work. I do some consultancy on diversity, inclusion and equity with organizations and also at UCT in my management work. I'm Dean of

the faculty now, but I was also deputy-Dean of transformation before and reading intersectionality theory and particularly, you know, there's this idea of the matrix of domination and how power operates and how we challenge power. Those kinds of theories, I bring them into my everyday kind of approach to work and to research. So yeah, that was… I don't remember where I started, but that's kind of how I got into bringing feminist theory into my work.

AN: Okay. Well, the next question was about the trajectory of your career in research and you've basically touched on that. I wonder if you can raise some of the key themes, and how your roles have evolved, if we can home in on that a little bit.

SK: The key themes of my research?

AN: Yes.

SK: Yeah. So, I haven't done research for about 6 or 7 years because I'm now an administrator.

AN: Right.

SK: But before that, I've been focusing really on community psychology, political psychology, community empowerment, how to mobilize people into social action. I've developed a tool called photovoice to engage people in community action, social change. Basically, it's a participatory approach to social change, that is… The way I see it is… I work with different communities – so it could be students, it could be sex workers, it could be women, it could be young people – to kind of get them to understand the situation they're in, how they can improve their life, how they can improve their community. What is their knowledge and their context? In the interaction with me, because I bring a different knowledge of their context, how do I raise consciousness, build solidarity, assist in a process of change, whatever it is, whatever change they articulate. So yeah, those are some of the… and identity is always kind of central to all of these questions. How do they identify themselves? How do they talk about their sense of belonging?

AN: Right.

SK: What makes them human? What are their aspirations? Within that process, my role is to give them a perspective about… cause I only do work in the global South, so to give them a perspective of how we are positioned in Africa, for instance. For instance, I did a project with young people who lived on the streets. So, really getting them to think about, well, why did you end up on the streets? People would say, well, because of family dynamics, abusive family context. But then my role is to say, well, how did that context of poverty, substance abuse, all kinds of other social challenges arise here, maybe not elsewhere?

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So, it's that process of consciousness which enables them, then, to see themselves less as victims, to stop blaming themselves for the situation than they're in, and to start imagining, dreaming,

taking action towards a better future. So yeah, my work is very much grounded in community psychology, community empowerment, social change, social action, participatory methods.

AN: Yeah. That's great. What I'm hearing as well that's interesting is that research was really not just about what sometimes can feel like in psychology, which is kind of like extracting data and then presenting it. You're talking about both finding out what is going on and how people understand themselves and their circumstances and their and the context there. But you're talking about raising awareness at the same time, as you're doing research. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about that, like how you decided to do that and kind of deviate from perhaps the kind of psychology that is often extractive? I'm also curious about photovoice because how do you come to that? Why photo voice? But also, maybe later on, we can talk about the possibilities and limitations of photovoice that you might have encountered? But yes, first is this raising of consciousness as part of the research.

SK: Yeah. You know, I think psychology has a lot to offer. But we have to grapple with the history of psychology and the legacies of psychology. As you probably know, late 19th century, early 20th century research, psychology research was really based on ideas of hierarchies between races, differences and gender differences—and reinforcing those ideas, which then became legitimised systems of colonial relations of power. As these ideas of racial differences, and specifically hierarchical differences, become common sense knowledge…

AN: Right.

SK: Yeah, then then you know, psychology was very much implicated in how we legitimize colonization, slavery, et cetera. People call that epistemic violence of research. I think there's a lot of research that we do… positivist research, research based on psychometrics and those kinds of approaches that's very harmful to people. But at the same time, I think psychology is very necessary. My approach is to kind of figure out, well, how can we use psychology in a way that can actually be productive, be joyful, be rejuvenating, be healing? Hence, my interest in participatory action research, which is very much about understanding participants in your research as equals, as the researchers themselves, actually. You're just there to facilitate the process of consciousness. Yeah, I mean, so it's kind of flipping what the purpose of research and what we can achieve through academic research.

AN: Mhm. **{0:21:59}**

SK: So, photovoice to me was a really interesting tool because, also, it relies on photography, visual images… and less on necessarily on text. If we look at more traditional methods like interviews or surveys, the research has a lot of power there, because you're crafting the question that needs to be answered, and you don't always know if you're asking the right questions, right? Yeah. There was this… there was this the one person… when I was doing my PhD and I decided to do photovoice. It was because this colleague of mine at the time, she was doing her PhD in

Papua New Guinea, and she has this research paper that she wrote and the title is...Um... gosh, it was something about… *when we have so many potholes, why are they bringing condoms?* So, it was about a health project and she got funding from an organization that was interested in research on HIV/AIDS and health. When she got there, she realized that people's health concerns were not about HIV. Their health concerns were about potholes in the roads, were about sexual violence, were about everything related to poverty…It was a really good example of how, as researchers, we come in with particular questions—often directed by research or funders or whatever it might be, political concerns—when in fact people that you're working with have completely different concerns and priorities and perspectives. So, I think photovoice kind of allows that. I would just say go and take pictures, what are the challenges and what are the resources in your community? What are the positive things that happen in your community in your life? What are some of the challenges? Then you come back with stories, and based on the stories that people produce, then you have a conversation. It could be anything, you know? They could talk about access to water, they could talk about… There was a lot of stories about sexual violence, always. Then you're engaged in, well, why do you think this happens? That's when the process of consciousness starts to happen. Of course, there are many limitations. Ultimately, as a researcher, I have the final say. I do the analysis, I write the papers, and so my analysis is the final say on whatever project. I've tried to—I've done a couple of publications which were co-written with students involved in the projects, but also participants involved in the photovoice as one way of extending the idea of participation and collaboration. But I think there's so many more ways in which we can do that. Yeah, I mean, participation is often a term that's used because, at some point, development agencies felt that it was an appropriate approach to do development but, sometimes it's just a tick box exercise, so we need to just be careful about what we mean by participation.

AN: Very interesting. Okay. I want to ask, since you have moved into position as a dean and prior to that or—Dean of Humanities—if I understand correctly?

SK: Yeah.

AN: And prior to that you were Dean of Transformation—is that what it is? **{0:26:27}**

SK: Yeah.

AN: I wonder if as a psychologist, but also as a feminist and decolonial feminist – if that is something that you identify with as well, how your feminist and decolonial commitments influence your approach to leadership and governance in that kind of leadership position, and what it means to lead transformation from within institution at this point.

SK: Hm. Okay, I think I need to give you a bit of a trajectory of how I got into it. Maybe it will make things clearer. When I joined UCT in 2011, the university was in the midst of a debate on affirmative action.

AN: Mm.

SK: In the media there was a lot of discussion and some of it was very racialized. So, you know, after 94 black students started entering universities like UCT, that were reserved historically for white students, white staff. Since 1994, we've had the influx of black students, black staff. Although black staff were are still getting there. So, this debate arises as the number of black students are increasing. A lot of the imagery in those debates were about how black students are bringing down the… lowering the standards of the university, how affirmative action is reverse racism… how white students don't have the same opportunities anymore, black students are overcrowding the universities. So there were all kinds of images floating around and it was quite hectic. I mean, it was like every day and a lot of debates happening in the media. So, when I came into that space, I decided let me do a photovoice study with black students to understand how they were coping with this and how it impacted on them as individuals, but also on their ability to perform academically at UCT and what was their sense of belonging to the institution. I did that photovoice project and it was very powerful. Because, of course, one part of photovoice is raising awareness amongst your community, so once you've produced the photographs and done all that consciousness raising, we have a public exhibition of the photographs. Through those public exhibitions, we were able to sensitize other students, sensitize staff members, communicate with the university management about what was the situation and the experiences of black students at the university.

So that research gave me a lot of air time, because it was like one of the key issues that was going on at the university, and in the country actually. One of the stories produced by the students was the story of the Rhodes Must Fall statue and the impact that it had. As I was presenting my research at a seminar, students got very involved and the Vice Chancellor happened to be there, and that kind of started this campaign about removing the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. After that seminar, the students came up with this hashtag, saying *#justgiveusadate*. So, that was the one thing that happened where I got very involved in the Rhodes Must Fall movement.

Also, when I arrived at UCT I was a single mother and my children were quite little. Normally, for people coming from outside of Cape Town, you get access to accommodation for a while until you, you know, settle. **{0:31:07}** But when I arrived they told me there was no accommodation available, everything was full. So, I left my kids at home and just came, because I wasn't sure what are the implications if I don't come to work on time or whatever. So I just came and found an apartment and started my job. A few weeks into my job, I met a colleague of mine from the US, a white man. We had both started at the same time, and in my conversation with him, I was telling him about my accommodation issue and did he have an issue… and he says "no, they gave me a house". He said to me that the accommodation department had prioritized him on the house because he came with his two dogs [laughs].

AN: Wow.

SK: Yeah. So then, at that point I realized… wow, I'm not going to survive this place unless I have a network of support around me. I started seeking out, what are other black scholars going through, and are there are other similar experiences out there? That was the beginning of the Black Academic Caucus—the UCT Black Academic Caucus—which I founded with some colleagues and I was the first chair person. So, by the time Rhodes Must Fall happened, there was also the UCT Black Academic Caucus, of which I was the chair, and those two things, and my research kind of converged into me having this particular space at UCT and a particular voice, which led me into management. I first was invited to join the Special Executive task team of the university at the height of the protest and played a role in managing the relationships between students and the university executive. And then in my faculty, the Dean at the time asked me to be chair of the Transformation Committee, which then became a deputy Dean position and ultimately, and ultimately I was appointed as Dean in 2019. So that's how I kind of got into management. It was very much on a transformation ticket. That, you know, I was… on the promise that change would happen by putting me in that kind of position. Um, I can't remember now your question, but I knew that was going to be important to answer it! [laughs]

AN: Yes, no, this context is actually very, very interesting and it's very helpful. I think your answer provides a lot of the answers. The question was around how your feminist and colonial commitment influences your approach to leadership and governance, and I think what you just shared is how you how you got there, essentially, whether or not they were implicit there is definitely this decolonial commitment that is there. What I sense is—and correct me if I'm wrong—I sense is, a refusal to accept things as they are which ends up with you creating this Black academic caucus and continuously looking for solution. So, I feel like that's the decolonial piece and how that happened.

SK: Yeah. A lot of the findings that came up in my research with students were very much around gendered identity. I had a specific group who were all like gender non-conforming students and they talked about their experiences of single sex residence and accommodation, and how that made them feel like completely invisible. They spoke about sexual harassment, they talked about rape culture… Yeah, there was a no access gender neutral toilets, for instance. So there was a whole range of issues that came up which were very much highlighting gender issues and which did have an impact in some way at the university, **{0:36:09}** I mean we have a long way to go. But for instance, now you don't have to declare your gender on your student card. There are more gender neutral toilets now across campus. So, there have been some changes in some victories, but that for me that was really the moment where my consciousness around gender and feminist work became very strong. It was through that student movement at UCT.

AN: That's very interesting.

SK: Subsequently, a colleague of mine, Floretta and I set up the hub for decolonial feminist psychologies in Africa in the Department of Psychology. That was funded by the university. So I think that Rhodes Must Fall movement which talked about decolonized, free education, sparked

a lot of interest nationally and all these funding sources started to emerge to support decolonial work. So, Floretta and I applied to the Vice Chancellor for one of those grants and we were able to set up that unit in the Psychology department, which I think is the first of its kind. I haven't heard of one similar to this. So, that was very exciting.

AN: Yes, I definitely had have not heard of that either. I discovered it literally looking to interview you, as well as Dr. Boonzaier. So maybe we can talk about that actually. Can you tell us a little bit about what the hub for decolonial feminist psychology in Africa is? I understand that the two of you are the co-founder and co-directors, and also how you work there connects to, perhaps the broader feminist movement and institutional transformation? But I'm very curious about what it is.

SK: Hm. Yeah. So it's a research space, it's a teaching space. It's actually got a physical space in the department which is very beautiful. It does not look like a classroom it looks like a really nice lounge. That was kind of really important for us, that the physical space had to be really welcoming, really nice… Challenge the clinical classroom environment, make people feel like comfortable, that they belong, that they wanted to be there. Um, I guess you know… In psychology departments—and I'm saying this with the with the knowledge that in South Africa we are very fortunate to have a long tradition of critical community psychologists who have produced incredible work, and so we do have access to that, but in the departments across universities, often you'll find very little connection between those psychologists who kind of clinical work, the social psychologists, and then the neuropsychologists. **{0:39:30}**, often it feels like very, very separate disciplines and that we don't… our students come into this space, and in one course they're taught that there's no there are very little differences between men and women and this is all constructed, and then they go to their neuro psych class and they're told that men and women have different brains. You know, having to hold that information and understand it requires some kind of critical historical understanding of the discipline. Also, dealing with what we discussed earlier, kind of the legacies of psychology and legitimising apartheid, colonization and slavery, we wanted to create a space where students could do work that criticizes that as well. I feel like this is the future of the discipline. You know, neuropsychology is very important, clinical psychology is very important, but unless we can deal with some of the harmful effects or the epistemic violence of our discipline, we're not going to be producing the types of psychologists that can have any impact on society. So, I think that was kind of the idea behind the hub. Also, you know psychology, although it's a very, very popular discipline, it has historically been very white, and we have all these entrance requirements… In particular, this math entrance requirement which has softened a bit now, but which meant that a lot of black students were excluded from psychology, because in township schools they don't often have access to maths, so they graduate from high school with something we call math literacy which is not mathematics. So, they get to university and they realize they can't do psychology. So, often you're there in a space where there's a handful of black students in this program feeling very alienated. So, part of the hub was also to create a space for them to belong and to find

mentorship and to get support for their ideas and work. **{0:42:08}**

It's been an amazing space, very productive. We have a really nice group of students every year from PhD to undergrad. They support each other, we do different activities together, we have a book club—it's not all about academics. Floretta's big thing is using karaoke, and so we have these karaoke events as well, which helps students kind of relax and find their voice in other ways. Across the past was seven years now that the hub has existed, we really try and make links with community organizations, with other academics from other universities, civil society organizations, artists, performance… So it's supposed to be very transdisciplinary space, challenging kind of the disciplinary boundaries of psychology. Yeah.

AN: Great, this is great. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your own personal experience with this. It's been seven years now and there's been a lot of things that have happened throughout. What have you, as you know, Shose Kessi, as an academic, as a psychologist, as yourself… what has been, what has that done for you? How has that been transformative? Are there things that have transpired from this for you personally?

SK: I think it's given a lot of recognition to the work that I do, and that we do as decolonial feminist scholars. It's allowed us to connect with psychologists on the continent and actually in the global South as well. People are really interested in what is this space and also having discussions in their own spaces, and now there's actually a structure and an entity that they can identify with specifically. So, we have developed relationships with the University of Dar es Salaam, University of Cheikh Anta Diop **{0:44:51}**, an institute in Cameroon and then in Brazil as well.
So it's slowly kind of—we're working towards, you know, what should a psychology curriculum look like in Africa? Or what should a psychology curriculum look like in the global South? And yeah, collaborating on those kinds of discussions and ideas. It also has given me like a home. You know, unfortunately I haven't been invested a lot because my administrative role has just taken over, but whenever I have a time where I can spend a few hours doing research or whatever it might be, I'll go to the hub and sit there. They also invite me sometimes to teach or to just participate in seminars. The students love it because I'm the Dean, so they think it's a big deal [laughs]. But anytime I have an opportunity to, it's a really nice space for me. It reminds me of why I became an academic. So very powerful, yeah.

AN: Excellent, this is great. I wonder if this might be a side question that's my own question perhaps. I'm very interested in the creation of space as part of decolonial work and so what you've created here is not just an epistemic space, but a community space. But there's also the physical space that has been consciously created to not be clinical, to be inviting et cetera. I wonder if you could speak to that decision to make the physical space different, and how or if that influences the work that's being done there, just the physical space?

SK: Yeah, I think so, definitely. You know, one of my students did a photovoice project around space at UCT and it was fascinating. One of the things, one of her findings was that students whose families either work at UCT or live in the kind of suburbs around, surrounding the university had this familiarity with the university, because they would have been there because their parents worked there, or they would have passed there walking, had access because they live in the area. And that kind of familiarity to the physical space had a huge impact on their sense of belonging and their academic performance. Because, when you feel like you belong somewhere, you feel comfortable, you're more confident, your self-esteem is higher, and so you're more likely to perform well. So, I think that that kind of motivation to make that space comfortable and inviting is really to tell students we really want you to belong here. Not just students, also our colleagues, who come into a kind of quite alienating institutional culture. You know, it's very English still… so yeah, it was very much in line with wanting to make it feel not like a classroom, not like a lecture room, not like an office. So, like somebody's living room, you know? Where they hang out and feel comfortable with their family. That was a very conscious decision.

AN: Excellent. So now we come to trying to define and I ask this question, knowing that it's a very wide question, and it still might be developing for you and generally as we expand on psychology… but how would you, as Dr. Kessi, how do you define decolonial feminist psychology, and if you share some examples from your work? Or what you've been doing and how you see? The third part might be how you see it unfolding in psychology, but how would you define it, decolonial feminist psychology?

SK: Mm. Ohh [laughs].

AN: Yes, I know… [laughs]

SK: Um, I think there's several layers. So, the way I understand the term *decolonial* is a process **{0:50:08}**. And you know, we don't have to draw on Latin American scholars only, we have our own scholars here, like Sabelo Gatsheni and previously, during liberation movement, African scholars were talking about decolonization like Ali Mazrui and so on. So, what I understand by that is that decolonial psychology would be a psychology that critiques the colonial relations of power that continue to exist in the discipline. You know, I gave you the example of like—okay maybe I didn't—you know, when we think about the studies around IQ testing, early 20th century studies on IQ testing, and the results always being like black people are the least intelligent, et cetera, et cetera. So, how those studies have impacted representations of Africa and Africans, how they've kind of contributed to maintaining colonial relations of power in the present, and how we can use a critical lens on psychology, a decolonial lens in psychology to understand that and to highlight that. But also, you know sometimes, we can't easily trace an inequality or uneven power relations to something that is rooted in colonization. So, the term decolonial I think, or I've used other terms… sometimes I talk about *epicolonial*, and it's kind of understanding how unequal relations of power continue to happen, in less visible ways often.

Yeah, very subtle invisible ways that are not easily traced to colonization, but they are definitely identifiable as contemporary colonial relations of power. I don't know if I'm making sense [laughs].

AN: You are. Absolutely. **{0:53:03}**

SK: Okay. I guess the feminist part of it is very important because of what we discussed right at the beginning. Often these movements around the decolonial ignore women's issues, feminist issues. I often give the example of how colonization created the *nation–state*, for instance. In…during the liberation movements and countries becoming free and gaining their independence, they remained nations as delineated by colonial powers, and Africans felt that at the time—you know, there's different approaches to Pan-Africanism, but one approach was that these nations as units were the best possible way of rebuilding the nation damaged by colonization, and then with these superstructures like the OAU and or the African Union now. So, at the centre of kind of the idea of the nation–state is also very gendered. Because the nation–state goes with ideas about what it means to be an active participant in the nation, and that's usually men. Part of the creation of the nation–state was about dividing men and women and making men active participants, involved in public life, and women becoming part of the domestic sphere. Once we understand how these two things are intrinsically linked, we cannot talk about decolonization without talking about feminism and women's rights and women's empowerment. It also, in my view, explains a lot of the violence against women that happens now. In order to maintain this idea of the nation–state, it means that you have to control women, because women are the ones who transfer culture, they transfer language, they bring up children. So, if these women where to sway, it would completely destroy this idea of nations... So, I think feminism should kind of be at the centre of the decolonial debate and the reason why we have to mention it, because it often isn't. It's often ignored. It's often made invisible by the decolonial scholars themselves.

AN: Thank you very much. It's a very complicated question, but I think you offered a very useful framework. I also appreciate the piece that I'll definitely have to think about a bit more, but how within oppression, there's always this possibility of resistance, and the idea that if women were to turn around and essentially decide that it's not working anymore, how we would completely destabilize everything and that kind of idea and power is interesting to think about. So thank you for noting that. All right, since we talked about Pan-Africanism a few times, I have a bit of a three-part question. I understand you have a recent book that actually we didn't have in our library. I just asked and we will be receiving it soon. So I'm excited to–**{0:57:31}**

SK: Oh, great—thank you for doing that [laughs].

AN: Yes, no, for sure. So, *Pan-Africanism and psychology in decolonial times* I believe is the title. Again, having read some of it that is available, and on YouTube there are a few conversations you've had about it as well. So how do you see, if you want to talk about it a little bit, in terms of how you see Pan-Africanism shaping the development of the decolonial feminist

psychology in Africa and/or vice versa? And perhaps, what a Pan-African feminist psychology would look like? So, beyond even to saying decolonial and you use the word *epicolonial*, which I'd never used or heard before, and what that looks like a Pan-African feminism. So there's maybe two questions: how do you see Pan-Africanism shaping the development of decolonial feminist psychology and, perhaps, what is a Pan-African feminist psychology?

SK: Hm, I should know this because I wrote a book (laughs)… I think that one of my goals in writing the book was to kind of shift where we ground our theories from… you know, theories around psychology have been very Eurocentric, but it doesn't mean that you know they're all bad. I started my journey in social psychology in community psychology literature, which is fascinating and really important, and drawing often on Freire, Freire's work, so South American liberation ideas. It is really useful stuff. But then it's also like, why can't we have our own perspectives? If you look at Pan-African theories, there's a lot of concepts there that are very relevant to the lives of people on this continent. So, I guess one of the tasks of a decolonial feminist psychology is to be relevant. One of the tasks of any decolonial project is how do we do work that is relevant to the societies in which we are in, but that is also global in its outreach, right? **{1:00:40}** Hence, the idea of the book. I am trying to bring in concepts like *Négritude*, like *self-determination*. I mean, there's a number of—*Afrocentricity*. There's a number of really interesting concepts that have to do with African identities that I feel need to be brought into theorizing psychology and taught in curriculums in psychology departments on this continent. It makes total sense because these are the people that we are thinking about and writing about. So I think there's a lot that can be learned. Coming from the standpoint that Pan-Africanism, in my view, has been the most influential critique of European imperialism. So, that the importance of Pan-Africanism—even though, you know, there's a lot of problems with it—but the importance of what it's meant historically needs to start filtering through our disciplines. Not just psychology, but all of our disciplines. I think it has the potential to completely transform how we see ourselves. Because, you know, we've been told in multiple ways, through a lot of academic work, that we are less than, and so we need to kind of shift that. Yeah, so I think it's fundamental in kind of shaping the development of a decolonial feminist psychology that is relevant to us, but that also can provide really important research that is recognized and that, you know, is globally useful to understand the world. You had a second question… I can't remember.

AN: Well, I think it's kind of how do you see Pan-Africanism shape the development of decolonial feminist psychology, and then what does a Pan-African feminism, feminist psychology look like?

SK: Yeah.

AN: What does it look like? Or what could you look like? Or what are the things we need to think about? **{1:03:27}**

SK: Yeah. You know that was one of the criticisms of the book is that we don't really talk about, then, what do we do? We give a critique of psychology but we don't really talk about what

psychology should look like. And you know, I resist that idea, because it's like asking what does a decolonial society look like? We don't know. Because coloniality reproduces itself all the time. And so I feel that my role as a decolonial feminist psychologist is to keep figuring out how coloniality reproduces itself and critique it. But I know that there's work out there, that's probably really interesting work, looking more at, you know, Indigenous psychologies. How do we draw on African cosmologies to do this work? I think it's really valuable, interesting work. Maybe that's where this project should be going and maybe that's what where it will end up. But I don't feel like it's my role to do that. I feel like what I can contribute as a scholar is that critique, and to keep trying to figure out how colonial relations of power keep repeating themselves and drawing on Pan-African concepts and feminist concepts to highlight how that happens.

AN: Great. Thank you for that. Excellent, this is very useful and you're providing an approach to these questions that I really appreciate, so thank you. I think you've answered actually the next question as well… how you understand—I'm going to skip it. The next question was how you understand the relationship between colonial legacies and contemporary gender issues. If there are things that you think we can home in on, certainly let me know and we can get into that, but also how institutions respond and how decolonial feminist perspectives help in understanding this relationship between colonial legacies and these contemporary gender issues. Do you feel this kind of covered it, or are they things that you feel could be added to the conversation?

{1:06:19}

SK: Yeah, I think we've kind of covered it. I don't know if you've spoken to Floretta already, but I mean, she does incredible work around gendered violence and linking it back to slavery. Yeah, and making those links about how the contemporary forms of violence against women can be linked to the violence of slavery, and I think her work is fascinating like that.

AN: Mhm.

SK: And, you know, when you think about also the Sarah Baartman story. All those images of so Sarah Baartman are reproduced in popular culture and rap culture, hip-hop culture, and what does that mean, you know?

AN: Mhm.

SK: So yeah, I think there's a lot to be said about how gendered violence, or the violence of colonisation and the specifically the gendered violence of colonization, reproduces itself now in all kinds of ways. By everybody you know, not just our former colonial powers, but even like ordinary people in our popular culture and relationships.

AN: Yeah, thank you. So, we're almost done. There's just a few more questions. I want to speak about how your personal experience with your intersecting identities in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality and any other identities, including your feminist identity, and how they've been received and how these intersecting identities shaped your sense of belonging. And your

approach to leadership, I think you've spoken about a little bit and so if you can share any—I think you shared that story about, you know, coming in at UCT and the lack of accommodation and then realizing—actually, that there *were* accommodations, but the way that was that was handled. Are there others that you can think of, specifically, I'm thinking about your sense of belonging, how that's evolved, how you've responded to that, and your experiences of discrimination?

{1:09:07}

SK: Yeah. I mean, I would say that when I first joined UCT, it was very different from what it is now. It's just way more diverse now. When I came to UCT, particularly in psychology, it was very white. So I really felt in the classroom a lot of scrutiny from white students about, you know, what are my credentials? Who am I? Why am I there? Yeah, a lot of really nasty stuff. But it's changed, like I really feel like it's changed. It's there's been a lot of, you know, Rhodes Must Fall did a lot, but there's been a lot more diversity and a lot more accountability. A lot more black staff who are bringing a different kind of consciousness to the workplace. But in leadership I think it's still a challenge. Um. There are very few black professors in the university. In fact, this year we've had our first black South African—when I mean black, I mean African, South African woman professor in the faculty. We've got one. And you know, I know internationally these statistics are not shocking, but for South Africa, it is shocking. So yeah, we have a challenge there and I think we do experience it… I don't know what you've heard about the University of Cape Town, but in recent years, we've had significant challenges with our leadership. We had a black woman who was Vice Chancellor, who was effectively pushed out I think because she took a very strong stance on transformation and kind of ruffled many feathers **{1:11:16}**. You know, we have this group of professors, white professors, who are quite powerful and also very much linked to our funders. So, it's really hard to… when you when you have a kind of personality that's pushes hard for transformation and is very unapologetic about it, it can, it can be very hard. So I feel like I've taken a more feminist approach because–[laughs]I think that it's good to have people who are going to remain for the long run. As a feminist, I've tried to lead from behind and adopt multiple types of strategies. It's not about being loud, because that being loud is exhausting, and you don't last very long. But I have to say that, yes, I have experienced quite a few difficult dynamics in my position. In fact, when I was appointed as Dean, I was, and this is a specific, very interesting like South African context issue, because I'm not South African. So, there's a lot of xenophobia here. When I was shortlisted for the Dean position, there was another black woman who was South African, who was then put forward first. Which was fine, you know, that's how it should be because of our employment equity rules. But the problem was that she didn't get the support of the faculty. So you have a selection committee that appoints and that makes a recommendation, but then the Vice Chancellor takes the recommendation to the Faculty Board, and the Faculty Board will vote. Usually, you need two thirds support. But in this case, she got very little support—I think it was like 14% or something. So, they went back to the selection committee and the selection committee decided it wouldn't be a good idea to appoint

somebody in that position who doesn't have the support of the faculty. It was a very difficult faculty space, and she was coming from the outside. So then the committee decides. In time—[inaudible]

{1:14:10}

The selection committee then decided to put me forward for the position but in the meantime a nationalist group formed who I think called themselves the 14 percenters who were supporting the black south African candidate. They went to great lengths to discredit me and my scholarship publicly through various ad hominem attacks. When my candidature was brought to faculty board for the vote, this group organised a protest and one of my colleagues disrupted the vote.

{1:14:22}

AN: I don't know if you can hear me, but you are frozen right now.

(…)

SK: … There was an article in a newspaper about this academic eating the ballot. So basically it was a spoilt vote but in that process I got a lot of ad hominem attacks, publicly, in the media… so there's that kind of thing to deal with. I do think that there's still that sentiment continues for many people in the faculty, seven years on even. Um, but to be completely honest, I've had difficulties with everybody. It doesn't matter if it's white men, black men, white women, black women—they all challenge my authority, it just happens in different ways. Even black women who consider themselves as feminists sometimes they're very un-feminist things [laughs]. **{1:15:42}** So I mean, it's been a really interesting learning curve. I think in a context like this where, there's quite a difficult institutional or alienating institutional culture, a lot of people with very different backgrounds coming together in a space like UCT. It's very hard to manage those dynamics. And I think often, like feminist principles, just go out the window. So, I can't say that… I think white men, that's probably being the worst in terms of like the things that they do and get away with. Cause they get away with it, I think that's the problem. But everyone… I can't say that my experiences of being challenged, my authority being challenged, being attacked, has a race or agenda. Yeah, it's not an easy space to occupy.

AN: Then my next question perhaps is then… this feels emotionally demanding, demanding on multiple level—politically demanding, personally demanding. So how do you sustain yourself and like how do you navigate these all of these things on top of, you know, professional demands? How do you take care of yourself essentially? [laughs]

SK: Yeah, it's not an easy question to answer. I don't think I do a very good job at it. I think I work way too much and things stay on my mind a lot. It's a very stressful environment. But one of the things that I've been consistent with is having a network of support and building those networks. The thing that sustains me is having colleagues inside the university who support me, inside my faculty who support me, who I talk to about different ideas I have, or issues that I'm

faced with. I've had two, well three, really good mentors. One of them who's late now. Harry Garuba, who was the Dean, or acting Dean, for some time before I took on the role, and then there's Francis Nyamnjoh, who is also a professor in the faculty.

It was really useful, people who understand the politics of institutions. It's really, really helpful. You know, there was a period with our former Vice Chancellor where all the executive members were women, and I just found that was such a good moment for us because, you come into a meeting and you can share your ideas, your problems, your challenges, or whatever, contributions and you never have to think about: I'm talking as a woman and how is this gonna come across?

{1:17:59}

AN: Mm.

SK: It was a period there which was really great for that. But now we've gone back [laughs]. We've got men in the exec now. So yeah, the networks my colleagues, my mentors, my family's great support. I do a lot of exercise, so the gym keeps me sane. Hiking, swimming, lucky to be in Cape Town because it's a beautiful place to be outdoors. So yeah, I do those kinds of things. I have a really good friendship network as well.

AN: Good, and how has been your experience being a mentor? Is that something that you've that you do, that you enjoy? What has been your experience like on the other side?

SK: Yeah, I think mentorship is so important. When I came into the Department of Psychology, because of that challenge that we didn't have many black students taking the degree, there were even fewer going into postgrad… So we started a mentorship program for black students in psychology and I have to say, you just see results immediately. **{1:20:15}**As soon as students have somebody who believes in them, everything changes. And so that was a really effective program. Now I mentor people who come to me, like it doesn't have to be in psychology, I've got a mentee who's in the sociology department. They're usually black women like it's not actually even by choice necessarily, but it's just how it worked out. Usually the young women, the young people who contact me are black women, and I try my best to find time for them. I always say to them, you know, my job is demanding and I don't have a lot of time, but whenever I can, it's something that I really enjoy. I think it's really important.

AN: Excellent. Couple last questions. What advice would you give to a feminist, even a decolonial feminist or a budding decolonial feminist student, person entering psychology now, with all the experiences that you have? Any advice you want to give us?

SK: Yeah. Believe in yourself. Don't give up. You know, academics are trained to be critical. And I always say this to my students, it's like… It's really unhelpful sometimes, but we're trained to be critical, so [laughs] every time a presentation happens or this or that, how many times you say hear somebody say wow, that was fantastic, amazing, you're doing incredible work. People

zoom in to what, pick on like what it is that needs improving. Well, what it is that needs improving, you know? They want to be critical because that's how we're trained. I really feel like we need to change that. So I would say just believe in yourself and find support networks like your peers or find mentors. Find ways of belonging and just remember that any kind of decolonial work, or social change work, happens through action and it's very slow and it happens through praxis. It doesn't happen in our heads. I'm always very careful actually to call myself an activist because I'm actually a scholar. **{1:23:05}** Sometimes those two things don't always, you know, go together. I'm very mindful about calling myself an activist because as scholars, we have to be reflective on social movements and social activism. Our job is also to be reflective and critical of those activities so, yeah, find your networks, find ways of belonging in this situation. Remember that you belong there is as much as anybody else. Networks of solidarity are so crucial. Um. (…) Yeah, I think that's my best advice right now. [laughs]

AN: Okay. Finally, what inroads do you feel at this point, that feminism has made in psychology, and what roadblocks do you feel remain and generally, how do you see the future of feminists and decolonial of feminist psychology?

SK: I think we've made massive inroads, but you see the massive inverses are the same as the roadblocks. You know, challenging this whole idea of biological conceptions of man and woman. To me, that's like a massive contribution. But it still exists, you know, even though, you know, there's a lot of work and consciousness around gender fluidity, and the fact that men and women are more similar than they are different, and there's all kinds of genders in between…I think that's a massive inroad and it's changed. Yeah. Definitely. I think it's changed people's perspectives and worldviews on a number of things. And I think that's the work that needs to continue to happen because, of course, in the global context in which we're in, the resurgence of right-wing politics and very conservative views and religious views, you know, all of that work is being eroded. So I think it's also, yeah. Yeah, it's the same like, we need to just keep doing the same. Um, what's your second question?

AN: What do you see as the future for feminists and decolonial feminist psychology?

SK: The future? **{1:26:02}**

AN: Mhm

SK: Um. You know, if we think about… If we are true to this idea of decolonising the academy, I think a lot of it will revolve around breaking down the boundaries between disciplines. So, in the long term, maybe there won't be anything called psychology anymore. Maybe psychological? I don't know. Like, I think… the work that I do as a social psychologist is already so interdisciplinary…

AN: Right.

SK: That sometimes I struggle to identify what is the psychology in what I'm doing. And actually, more and more of the master's and PhD students that we supervise, often when we receive the proposals, it takes a while to answer the question, so why is this piece of work psychology? So I think like the logical trajectory for decolonization in the academy is going to be about dismantling of these boundaries around disciplines. Um, and I think what we also need to work on is methodology–

AN: Mm.

SK: And that research, academic work, is going to be more and more about methodology and how do we approach social problems, social challenges, in ways that are useful and effective and can lead to better outcomes and human wellbeing… and it's going to be way less and less about disciplines, and more and more about advancing our methodological approaches.

AN: Mhm.

SK: I think in the hub we've been like experimenting, you know, with photovoice, which might not be new to other disciplines, but in psychology it's pretty new, and the work that you're doing now, for instance… with life history interviews, it's really interesting stuff. Archival research, more and more participatory work and collaboration, meaningful collaboration, around research, meaningful collaboration around research. Yeah, so those are some ideas I think about what a decolonial feminist psychology future would look like. **{1:29:20}**

AN: Interesting. Some of these are definitely coming up among students amongst ourselves that in psychology, where we are very much in, I guess I don't know if it's a global thing or… but the writing papers in psychology but always… finding the psychology in the things that we're thinking, because we are thinking so much about the human, and philosophy, and decoloniality and all of that. And then psychology kind of, it's always there, but it's kind of in academic papers you have to name it and make the connection, but it's definitely always there. So it's interesting that it it's happening in Canada, it's happening, you know, in Cape Town. So that's interesting. To close out, what accomplishments do you value most in in the work that you've done so far and everything you've been involved in?

SK: Hm. I think that my training in psychology, the mentors that I have, the kind of approach to decolonial feminist psychology has allowed me to influence the course of transformation at UCT, and I think that's one of the things I'm most proud of. My role as a leader and a scholar in the institution in which I work, I think we've been able, not just me alone, but under my leadership we've been able to bring about massive change. So I'm really proud of that. And I hope it doesn't get erased when people write about UCT in the future. But also you know, setting up the hub, I think it's a really innovative and fun space… trying to get students to feel joyful about doing academic work.

AN: Right.

SK: You know, and in many ways because, I think you mentioned it also earlier, but because of who we are, sometimes we get into projects that are about us and our identities and understanding who we are and where we belong and where you know… and other people don't have that problem. [laughs] So students come into the academy wanting to understand themselves and so trying to make psychology or academic work a healing process, and one in which we can find joy and hope. I think those are what I would say are the most important things going forward. **{1:32:24}**

AN: Yeah. Amazing. Thank you very much. This concludes our interview and I enjoyed a lot of it—all of it—I hope you have as well.

SK: Yes, thanks Amanda. It's made me think a lot about my research and I miss it so much. So this has been really nice.

AN: And your work will not be forgotten. You are going to be in this archive and–[laughs]

SK: [laughs] Thanks.

AN: It's going to be there, in writing. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you maybe want to add before we close out?

SK: I don't think so. I was curious… I wanted to ask you a question because, you know… did you notice that feminist psychologists or psychologists that you've interviewed might not describe themselves as feminists? And kind of are there anxieties around using that term?

AN: Some, some certainly some don't like it, necessarily. Most of them immediately connect with it and have come to it differently, but some of them don't identify with it necessarily, and they still exist in our archive, it could be that their research or their practices as well connects with ideas of feminist work. But yeah, certainly not everybody identifies as a feminist.

SK: One of the things when I was thinking about before the interviews. Sometimes I describe myself as a decolonial feminist scholar, but not very often, and I think the reason is it's making a very strong statement. And as a scholar, I think that, I have to like be self-reflexive… and I'm not always sure that my work is decolonial or feminist. So I use those labels with caution not because I don't want to be or because I don't believe, but because I'm just think, you know, five or 10 years from now, I might reflect on the work I've done and think, actually, this was not really real feminist work. **{1:35:03}** Do you know what I mean? So, yeah, that's the reason why I'd be a bit cautious about using those terms.

AN: Yes, that makes sense. What do you think would be a way to… would it be more of an orientation or?

SK: Yeah, I would say, you know, sometimes I just say… I'm a social psychologist. I work on decolonial and feminist theories without saying: *I am* in the decolonial feminist scholar, right?

AN: Right.

SK: But, it's the semantics. [laughs]

AN: Um, I'm not sure. I think that's the kind of things that I certainly grapple with, but even our team with Psychology's Feminist Voices. It's not clear to us either. What it means, what it does… We see what… actually we see what it does more so than just identifying with it and then it becomes… it almost maybe forecloses some of the… other the possibilities?

SK: Mm.

AN: So, I think it's a really very salient point to bring up. I don't think it is always very clear. Yeah, we'll continue to work on that.

SK: But it was really interesting and thank you, and sorry again for the stops and starts, but finally we managed. [laughs]

AN: We managed [laughs]. It's all good. Okay, I will stop the recording.

END