

# **Sociology, Politics, Thinking and Acting:**



## **A Festschrift for Nira Yuval-Davis**

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The Centre for Migration Refugees and Belonging (UEL)

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To mark the launch of Nira Yuval-Davis' latest book

*The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, SAGE, 2011

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## Introductory Comments

### Molly Andrews

I would like to say a few personal words about what it is like to work and teach with Nira Yuval-Davis. I could sum it up in just one word, “delight”, but academics are never so succinct. So let me expand. I knew Nira's work well before I met her. When the word got out that she was coming to University of East London (UEL), there was a great buzz around the place; we were simply delighted and honoured that she was coming, and we knew that intellectually she would be a most valued colleague. Indeed, she has been just that, and more. Her work is thoughtful, brave and important. Today we will hear much more about that.



*Molly Andrews*

To actually meet Nira in person, and to have the privilege not only of working together but of becoming friends, is a very special experience about which I will say three things: first, she is the kind of colleague you dream of having, someone who is not only intellectually engaged but whose commitment and kindness run deep. Nira is someone who is willing to be counted and to stick her head above the parapet in hard times. Second, Nira has always been a great friend of our Centre for Narrative Research (CNR) which is now in its eleventh year but back in the days when it was much more vulnerable, Nira was always there for us and with us. More recently she began the Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB), and since its inception – indeed, even before – there has been tremendous synergy

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between our two research centres. I think we all feel very fortunate to work so closely together, sharing intellectual projects, co-organising various events, and indulging in much conviviality. Finally, Nira and I have supervised a number of PhD students together. This experience has made a big impact on me, intellectually and emotionally, as Nira not only nourishes but also vigorously challenges these wonderful younger scholars coming up. For me, Nira is someone who puts real feminist scholarship into practice and it means very much to me to be able to be able to call her my dear friend and colleague.

### Corinne Squire

There's little really to add to what Molly has so eloquently said. I simply want to emphasise that Nira's presence as a researcher has been inspiring for those of us who do not have close research interests in common with her, and yet have been able to draw so much from



*Corinne Squire*

her presence at UEL.

To read Nira's work is often to find connections with completely different work with which one is involved. It helps in making sense of that work; it can make a huge difference to it. Her work on feminist theory, particularly her ideas around transversal feminisms, her work on intersectionalities, and her more recent research on migration and belonging, have all, for instance, had strong effects on my research in the very different field of strategies for living

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with HIV, as well as on my more closely associated work on visual narratives in East London. I hope that this day will be inspirational for the many people who have worked closely with Nira, often for a long time, and who know her well but also that it will engage and motivate people whose engagement with her work has been different, perhaps less intense, but nevertheless often crucial and long lasting.

## *Intersectionalities and Gender Relations*

### **Floya Anthias**

It's a great thrill for me to be here today celebrating Nira's work. I can only echo what has already been said by her colleagues at UEL, having been a colleague of Nira's at the University of Greenwich, what seems to be centuries ago now, for many years, probably 20-25 years. When Nira arrived in the department in Greenwich, it was for me a great moment because we were a very small department in the 1970s and Nira came as a breath of air with political passions and vigour which I felt so close to. We shared so many understandings of the world and so many hopes about the world.

I am going to talk to you a little bit about how the work we did together evolved, and to give you a flavour of what prompted this work. This was a very fruitful collaboration for us both and it was particularly timely for me. I had two small children and I was beginning to develop my academic career. One of our common interests, in particular,



*Floya Anthias, Molly Andrews, Nadje Al-Ali*

was of course the way in which feminism relates to other struggles and I should say from the outset, Nira's work wasn't just theoretically and sociologically informed but always politically informed. The political analysis she brought to our work was absolutely fundamental to where the work went. Issues of inequality, of social justice and social divisions, nationalism, ethnicity, racism, and feminism were central theoretical and political interests in common. I myself come from a background of political activism through my family of origin and Cyprus (where I come from), where ethnic and nationalist conflict as well as colonialism and postcolonialism have left an indelible mark. Our collaboration was enormously significant in order to bring those insights that I had already had to the fore.

One of the earliest things that I remember of our collaboration was our experience in the Sex

and Class group of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE). The journal [Capital and Class](#) was one of the publications that came out of this group and the annual conference was a place where Marxists and socialist feminists met regularly. Nira and I were both beginning to talk about how feminism relates to anti-racist struggles and also to ethnic and nationalist struggles, and we were very keen to take this forward in the Sex and Class Group meetings. However, apart from one or two people, there was very little response to this interest and this was what drove us, in the early 1980s, to put together an article where we explored how gender, ethnicity and 'race' relate to feminist struggles: this article was called '[Contextualising Feminism](#)' and appeared in *Feminist Review* in 1983 (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983). In this article we looked at Marxism and Marxist feminism and some of the ways it had failed to take up issues of gender, race and class and their intersections. We wanted to broaden the agenda of feminism and to dispel the notion of a unitary sisterhood which didn't refer to differences across racial and ethnic lines, in terms of experiences and in terms of social practices and locations.

This was for us a very important moment. We realised that in Britain there was very little work that explored these issues and we wanted to introduce them to the feminist agenda. Of course, some work had been done in America at the time, of bringing together feminism and anti-racism, in particular through the black women's struggle and important work had appeared in America, for example, bell hooks' book, [Ain't I a Woman?](#), in 1981 (hooks, 1982). Black women's political activism was very much conscious of the interface between anti-racism and feminism. Both Nira and I in different ways were coming from a kind of Marxist-inspired analysis but at the same time felt uncomfortable with some of the presuppositions of traditional Marxism about the centrality of the economy and also the masculinist elements within Marxism. We wanted to move away from that and broaden the analysis, but retain the political dynamic of a Marxist-inspired analysis and a feminist-inspired analysis.

Working with Nira on that first article was indicative of the kind of collaborative work that Nira is so good at. We sparked ideas off each other in a very fruitful way. What we decided at the time was to continue on this theme by looking at concrete cases, doing research on gender, racism and ethnicity, particularly in relation to south-east London where we were based. Before we began the research, there was another very important stage in our collaboration which related to gender and nation (which is one of the themes under discussion this morning). Nira had already been writing on issues of gender and nation; she had organised a very interesting and empowering conference on our Dartford site and invited many scholars who were writing on women and biological reproduction and the state. This conference was



so successful and innovative that Nira decided that she wanted to publish the proceedings as a book and kindly invited me to take part in editing the book. I came in as a co-editor on [Woman-Nation-State](#) (Yuval-Davis et al., 1989) and we wrote the introduction to the book together. Interestingly enough, we sent a version of it to a journal before we put it into a book but to our disappointment it was rejected. The Journal had decided that it was too general, but we struggled ahead as young scholars must do and put the book together. This book has become pivotal in the whole area of the relationship between gender and nation. Of course the book wasn't about gender and nation, it was about women's role in national and ethnic processes. Later on, in 1997, Nira went on to produce the marvellous and influential book, [Gender and Nation](#) (Yuval-Davis, 1997), which actually addresses the issue of gender and nation and moving on from *Woman, Nation, State*, develops the analysis further and incorporates properly the issue of gender rather than just the issue of women.

Again, one of the significant things that I remember about that was a couple of very nice sunny afternoons in Cyprus, where I was spending a year, when Nira visited just before the book came out. We had a lovely time in the garden, talking about the introduction and we had a wonderful holiday, including trips to the beach. It was the best sort of academic collaboration which combines having fun as well as writing. After *Woman-Nation-State* we collaborated on our book *Racialised Boundaries* published in 1992 (Anthias et al., 1995). *Racialised Boundaries* was the outcome of our discussions related to the research we were doing in south-east London. In this research we were looking particularly at the Greater London Council's initiatives around multiculturalism and anti-racism and the responses of people in the borough of Greenwich to these. We had a number of research assistants, the most important of whom proved to be our last one, Harriet Cain, who is an associate author on this. In this book we address the issue of racialisation, its parameters, and we connected racialisation and racism to the phenomena of ethnos and therefore to nation and ethnic phenomena. Indeed, even when writing 'Contextualising Feminism' in 1983 for *Feminist Review* we had already begun to think of racism as one of a number of different discourses and practices which relate to ethnic and national collectivities and to ethnic and national phenomena more broadly. Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh in another issue of *Feminist Review* had suggested that we were in danger of underplaying the significance of racism. But I think that they were missing the point of our analysis. In *Racialised Boundaries* where we took up the issue again about the connection between race, ethnicity and nation (as well as gender and class) we did not argue that race was the same as ethnocentrism or that race discourse and practice were the same as ethnicity and nationalism. In fact, we made it clear that these are distinctive discourses and practices that are specific and contextual. However,

we argued that exclusion and otherness relate to all of these phenomena: to ethnicity, to nation and to race. It was important to look at these specifically as they manifest themselves at different times; we also addressed the issue of gender.

Of course, Nira and I have moved on from the work we did in the 80s and 90s. She has written on a large number of central issues found in modern society; she is an important social and political commentator as well as an academic. Issues of fundamentalism, of secularism and religion and, of course, of belonging and identity, which her latest book, [The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations](#) (Yuval-Davis, 2011) is concerned with, have all had a very central place in her work as well as intersectionality. When we started our work together and indeed in earlier work both Nira and I had been doing separately, we used what became later known as an 'intersectional lens'. We were writing on the interconnections between different social divisions from 1983 and even used the term "intersections". On the one hand, we argued that social divisions cannot be easily separated in practice, but on the other hand, we wanted to maintain the importance of looking at these as separate analytically before looking at how they related to one another in the real world. The form of intersectionality we have both continued developing is one that holds on to the importance of the specificities of the different dimensions of inequality around ethnicity, class and gender, and also how they interrelate and interlock in different ways under different conditions and at different times.

So a final word, Nira, thank you very much for being a friend. The best friend one can have is somebody who is always there for you and she has shown this through her relationship with her students and colleagues.

## **Avtar Brah**

It is great to be here. Nira and I go back a very long way; we met in Aberdeen, at the BSA (British Sociological Association) conference on Sexual Divisions of Labour during the early 1970s. We were very excited as it was the first time that the BSA had held a conference about this topic. All the big name feminists of the time were there. Unusually for Easter time, it snowed in Aberdeen during the conference and that was quite exciting. We were drawn to each other because we had both come to Britain after studying in the USA; we were both students doing our Ph.D. and we were virtually the only, what Nira described as, 'other women'. We were thrilled by the complexity and dynamism of the discussion. Marxism was at the centre alongside other sociological perspectives and feminism was just starting to interrogate these grand narratives. Among all this intellectual energy there was however a

singular absence of questions of race and ethnicity. We could not imagine how you could talk about gender, class and sexuality without considering the relationship with racialisation processes and ethnicity. We found that we had embarked on our life long quest for thinking about, what many years later was to be theorised as, 'intersectionality'. At an interpersonal level, it was the beginning of a personal friendship that has lasted till today.

As a political discourse we know that intersectionality is not new. As Ann Phoenix and I have noted, the idea of what it means to be a woman in different contexts, in different historical moments, was debated at least as far back as 19th century anti-slavery struggles and campaigns for women's suffrage in the USA. The famous locution 'Ain't I a woman?' by an enslaved woman, Sojourner Truth, neatly captures the idea that 'woman' is not a homogeneous category. Sojourner Truth campaigned both for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights for women, and she talked about class. She talked about the way in which upper middle-class women were treated with great respect, were helped into carriages, and were given the best place everywhere. But when no one helped her, she asks rhetorically, 'Ain't I a woman?'



*Avtar Brah, Corinne Squire, Georgie Wemyss*

During the second half of the last century, political projects such as that of the Combahee River Collective, the black lesbian feminist organisation in Boston, pointed as early as 1977 to the unacceptability of prioritising a singular dimension of experience as if it constituted the whole of life. Instead, they spoke of being actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression and advocated the development of integrated

analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. In academia, this insight was followed by the second wave feminist debate around the figure of woman as a site of multiplicity. Many anti-racist postcolonial feminists were part of this debate globally, but the specific term 'intersectionality' comes into academic feminist currency through the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw. It has found expression in the work especially of women's studies scholars, and become a key insight of the field.

Nira notes that, epistemologically, intersectionality can be described as a development of feminist standpoint theory which claims that it is vital to account for the social positioning of social agents. In the case of many of us, as Floya has already mentioned, intersectionality began to inform our work long before the term came into common usage. Hence, Nira's work in the field of intersectionality began with the use of the concept of social divisions in the early 1980s, when in collaboration with Floya Anthias they studied gender, ethnic and class division in south-east London. This was an important and influential text of the time. Nira has published extensively and her work is cited regularly by scholars in many disciplines. Her book *Gender and Nation* is a groundbreaking intersectional study that has been translated into eight languages. One might be pleased with just one translation! This book and her research have opened up many new analytical vistas. The debate between the concept of race and ethnicity owes much to the detailed and sustained analysis available in her scholarship. I am very confident that the new book *The Politics of Belonging*, will be equally influential. It is an intersectional analysis par excellence.

Another concept that Nira has pioneered is that of transversal politics which, itself, is an intersectional concept. It has been hugely enabling in grounding theoretical perspectives in politics on the ground. It foregrounds intersections of global social conditions with local concepts. As always, Nira's work is theoretically sophisticated and empirically relevant. Typically it is also collaborative, often bringing together feminists from the North and South in dialogue in the conferences that she organises. Many important edited collections have emerged from these highly productive intellectual and political conversations. Her work has been marked by methodological advancement. Her recent research project '[Identity, performance and social action](#)' with Kaptani is a methodologically innovative initiative which uses participatory theatre to study identity especially in relation to refugees in east London.

Nira and I both have had a troubled relationship with religion. We both reject some aspects of organised religion, especially when it comes to prejudice and discrimination against other religions or social groups such as gay people. We are certainly against fundamentalist manifestations of religion but we are both attracted to spirituality which plays an important

part in our lives. In a fascinating autobiographical article in a special issue of *Feminist Review* on religion and spirituality, Nira discusses her politics in relation to religion, how she equally values religious and secular spaces. When she lived in the US, she could call herself a 'diasporic Jew', secular or religious, and be part of the political left at the same time. Among the British left, especially Marxists, there was less tolerance for spirituality or ritual and prayer. Her Ph.D. research is about Jewish religious groups in Boston in the USA in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This research appears to have profoundly influenced her view on spirituality. She says that she learnt about the power and beauty of ritual and prayer and how they bring aesthetics into ethics and resolution and affirmation in times of confusion and distress.

I have a wonderful memory of visiting a beautiful old historical church when Nira and I went for a walk in the evening after a conference in Vienna. We were so moved that, although neither of us were Christian, we lit candles for peace. Spirituality does not live in the confined space of any specific religion, nor indeed is confined to religion alone. When she moved to the UK, Nira began the practice of inviting home family and friends once or twice a year to share spiritual reflection. I had been one of those friends who had the pleasure to share these gatherings with her. One of the important events of the year is the Passover to mark the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. Friends and family would get together at Nira's dining table with the traditional text read in a modified form, followed by everyone around the table sharing what liberation meant to them that year. One of the key parts of the ritual is a five course dinner: Nira and Allan are wonderful cooks.

On the other hand, though quite unsurprisingly, Nira is one of the founding members of Women against Fundamentalism. WAF is anti-fundamentalist but not anti-religious. It believes in maintaining secular spaces. There is sometimes a degree of confusion about the notion of secularism. One view is sometimes associated with extreme forms of rationalism. The other meaning of secularism refers to the separation of religion from the state although in practice many states such as Britain are imbued with religious ideology. As Nira points out in different publications, it is the second sense of secularism to which WAF women subscribe. Nira describes WAF as a political home; she has made a major contribution to its work and we will hear about that work later in the day.

She has also been a major contributor to the professional development of sociology in Britain as well as internationally. She has held offices in professional associations such as the BSA and the International Sociological Association (ISA). Apart from her major intervention in the academic world, she is regularly involved in other social and political activities. She is

regularly called upon to join expert advisory teams, such as the international initiative for justice in Gujarat after the anti-Muslim pogroms in 2002. She is a founding member of the International Research Network of women in militarised zones. As is appropriate to her interest in intersectionality, she is now editor of the Palgrave MacMillian book series titled 'The Politics of Intersectionality'. I often wonder where Nira finds the energy to do all these things. It is a privilege to have Nira as an intellectual fellow traveller and a friend. It is an honour to be here today.

### Georgie Wemyss

I first met Nira in a WAF meeting in late 1989. I had been studying Bengali in Bangladesh and travelling in China when the fatwa against Rushdie, the book burnings and the demonstrations and the formation of WAF were taking place. My understanding of these events was framed by my own experiences of having worked as a youth and community worker with women and girls in Brick Lane, campaigning against racism in housing and education in Tower Hamlets since 1984 and trying to learn more about the colonial and postcolonial history of Bangladesh whilst I was living in that country.

Then, as now, the political and cultural spaces in Bangladesh were sites of struggles between the religious right and the varied religious and non-religious secular voices. This was only 18 years after the war of liberation; memories of the genocidal killings and rapes of Hindus and Muslims, trade unionists and teachers, and the burning down of villages carried out by the Pakistani army and their Bengali allies were still sharp. They are still sharp. Returning to Britain it was impossible to see both the support and the opposition to Rushdie's book and these events as isolated from the continuing struggles in Bangladesh – they were part of the same conflicts – particularly in light of the fact that individuals accused of war crimes in 1971 Bangladesh had found asylum in Britain and were known to be active in mosques and youth organisations. I heard about WAF from Southall Black Sisters, some of the founder members of WAF, with whom I had worked in the past as a youth worker around issues of domestic violence, forced marriage and racism. In WAF I listened to and debated with feminists and anti-racist women from a wide range of backgrounds in a context that was always transnational. By that I mean that the discussions, around what I later understood as the 'intersectionality' of social divisions and how power operates through the contesting discourses and practices of religious fundamentalisms, patriarchy and racism, incorporated complex global dimensions of power.

Nira was one of those women, a very important woman unlike anybody else who spoke

before; at that time I actually didn't know anything about her academic background. I knew Nira as an activist in WAF who used her earlier political experiences in theorising the discussions. However, it was those WAF discussions with their empirical and theoretical, transnational and intersectional analyses – although I wouldn't have used those words at the time – that led me to return to do a Masters and then a PhD in Anthropology. This is very significant because I had studied Anthropology before but I had rejected it as being too close to the colonial project, and after I received a degree, I didn't want to go back to it at all. In a sense, it was Nira's involvement in those discussions that led me back to academic studies. As a part-timer I carried out my research outside academia, feeling very marginal and isolated for much of the time but I was encouraged by Nira's warmth at several moments that mattered.

The ethnography of my PhD focused on events and discourses in East London in 1993-94 following the racist attack on Quddus Ali, a student from the college where I worked, and the election of a BNP councillor to the local authority (Wemyss, 2009). During that period I had been involved in an anti-racist women's organisation made up of women, from many backgrounds, who lived or worked in Tower Hamlets, which was active in organising women to defeat the BNP. It was called Women United against Racism (WUAR).

WUAR, like WAF, was an example of a group of women from a range of positionings and perspectives who worked towards a common political goal, in this case to defeat the BNP in the forthcoming election. My analysis of WUAR's activism and of how Bengali and non-Bengali women were constructed in dominant and contesting discourses at that time formed a chapter of my thesis, but I never used it in subsequent publications partly because I felt too emotionally close to the women involved. I have chosen to focus on some of those issues today as it is appropriate that both my own involvement in the creation and activism of WUAR and my later theorisations about Britishness had been influenced by the input of Nira, SBS, and other courageous women into WAF discussions and activism. The experience of being part of those discussions had a lasting impact on my understanding of power and of how fundamentalist politics works.

Additionally, the discourses of multiculturalism that have dominated our view of the recent past have meant that the secular activism of that time, of which WUAR was an example, just isn't really visible. WUAR was set up after a vigil turned into a 'riot' when police and young Bengali men and boys fought outside The Royal London Hospital where Quddus Ali lay in a coma. Two Bengali women involved in the vigil and founder members of WUAR reflected on how the 'riot' happened:

*I could see paper being thrown, and then there was pushing and shoving. It was very congested, someone got really angry about the way they were being pushed about and they reacted against the police who were pushing...and the police came in large numbers ...riot police! They were very prepared for violence (JB).*

*The police had dogs and riot shields and the boys were on the other end ... it was really difficult to stop them from smashing anything (sic) ... so it was like trying to keep people from damaging property, keeping them moving and not being hemmed in by the police ...it went on for hours. I don't think we got home until after midnight (JB)*

*I had my shopping bag with me. I mean, if I was going to be violent or anything, then bloody hell, I wouldn't take my shopping bag with me (AB).*

This led to a small group of women – predominantly Bengali – deciding that women's voices were silenced in the anti-BNP movement that was taking place. Meeting and liaising with organisations such as SBS and other women from a range of organisations led to them and others organising a mass meeting of 120 women out of which a core group of about 30 women was formed. This group became WUAR and campaigned very tightly over an eight month period to get rid of Derek Beackon the BNP councillor.

There were about 16 anti-racist organisations operating at this time but the women within WUAR felt for a whole range of reasons that they would not be able to be effective in those organisations. I remember more that one significant person asking 'wouldn't it be very divisive to have a women's organisation?' There were already 16 other organisations! We found that quite amazing. One of the things was the very focused activism. The other issue was around the representation of WUAR, and specifically of Bengali women within the group who were constructed in the media as 'passive' despite the efforts of the group to challenge stereotypes:

*"The media can't put WUAR into a box as a black or Bengali or white group. Every time you have a face it is a different face, but the consistency is the message from the group" (CR).*

That formed part of my later analysis about how the construction of Bengali women as 'passive' and 'newly politicised' was one that dominated in the media at the time. One newspaper commented that 'Bengali women are traditionally seen as passive and accepting' (Weekly Journal 18.11.93) while another warned that 'As women get more politicised [there is a danger of factionalism.]' (Asian Times 26.10.93) One woman, Julie Begum, objected to how she was represented on the BBC news as somebody who was very powerless in



stopping the 'riots'. There is a picture of her stretching out her arms and trying to stop the mass advance of young men outside the steps of the hospital:

*I didn't really like that image. I suppose it was a contrast to what was happening, but it did seem something that was really out of control ...I just felt this is not the way we should respond. It's playing into the hands of the police and racist people ...I felt really anti what was happening ...It looked really ineffectual ...and I think it was done on purpose. I wasn't the only person who was trying to stop what was going on ... they used the image on TV to show 'Look at those crazy young men out of control'.  
(JB talking about BBC news footage of herself during 'riot)*

So what were the activities and the aims of WUAR at that time and how did that activity work? They collected and disseminated information, provided an opportunity for women to meet and organise, enabled women to take part in a whole range of anti-racist activities and, we are talking about secular spaces and secular activities, supported women who were experiencing racist violence and harassment. They organised a mass vote registration campaign of women – because Beackon was elected to the council by a margin of only eight votes and provided crèches at meetings and demonstrations. Some of WUAR's activism was invisible to many of the other organisations outside partly because much of the campaigning took place in domestic spaces and also in primary schools. Women were making telephone trees, Bengali speaking women were phoning other women to get them to vote, other women had set up voter registration stalls in primary schools which enabled many women to go in and register to vote:

*People phoned each other saying how scared they were and we were able to pass on information about protests going on. Lots of people don't understand the news and it really helped them.*

*My mum rang a lot of people and said 'you must vote this time'. She even rang the Labour Party Office ... they had Bengali speakers and Bengali leaflets (SC)*

There is no way of knowing how many women were empowered to vote through those processes because it was never recorded but one of the issues is how all this activism was represented in the dominant discourses of media at that time. The media was very reluctant to see WUAR as a group of women from many different backgrounds working together towards a single issue. There were also many comments in the press which focussed on the women being 'newly politicised', and which the women in WUAR were very keen to counter. Take the following example from *The Guardian* (Bunting 1993),

*From Veil and Sari to Combat Jacket: Second generation Bengali women in London's East End are emerging as powerful advocates of their community*

*The BNP has politicised a small but vocal minority of women who are turning the stereotype of the passive Bengali woman, their heads bowed and veiled, their eyes steadfastly on the pavement, scuttling to collect their numerous children from school – on its head.*

*These are second generation Bangladeshi women and the first to have been through the English education system ... their mothers were born into a traditional rural culture ...some are illiterate and speak only broken English ...their whole lives have been oriented round the production and rearing of children. (The Guardian 20.10.93)*

Here is what women involved in WUAR say about how they became politicised:

*Politicisation is a process not an event. When I was young my mother would take the phone off the hook whenever attacks on Asians were on the news [because she expected racist phone calls to follow]. (CR)*

*We used to live on top of the NF's (National Front) shop ... it was 1976 ... my mum said she was never scared of them, she just used to walk past with all of us in her hands 'cos my mum's really good in that sense, not showing people fear. (JK)*

So to conclude and to say thank you to Nira who might not know that the debate in which she was involved had a direct link to these events back in 1993-94, and many of the women who were involved in WUAR and other groups at that time have become involved in other activities not just in Britain but also in other parts of the world as well. Whilst our earlier discussions have been academic and theoretical, these very important discussions have not been limited to academia and that's why I think Nira's work is so special. Thank you.

## Q&A session

Q: I just want to speak about reproduction and the reproductive and the entanglement of gender and nation in relationship to that and reflect on how the entanglement of the reproductive has moved on and been complicated since Nira and Floya so importantly made that link for us in Woman-Nation-State. It really is an important way to think about the entanglement of gender, nation and ethnicity with reproduction.

**Floya Anthias:** The term 'reproduction' functions in different ways and has very different meanings depending on what the focus is. And here it is a very broad category. One of the

things we wanted to say in *Woman-Nation-State* was that it is not just about the reproduction of the nation but also the transformation of the nation. To talk about reproduction and to say that the nation is reproduced carries the danger of being a very functionalist position. Of course, certain aspects of the nation are reproduced because of power relations within the nation and here, women, who were the focus of *Woman-Nation-State*, have a role as biological reproducers of the nation.

We argued that there are five ways in which women contribute to the nation. This includes acting as biological reproducers of the nation, because they physically reproduce the nation: reproducers of the soldiers; of the patriots; of the national subjects. Only certain categories of women, defined by ethnic and other boundaries, were allowed in the nation state to have this reproductive role. Of course, as well as the biological, there is the role of women in cultural reproduction, in the preservation and transmission of culture in their role as mothers, and in keeping the family network together; in migration certainly women have a key role in maintaining links with family abroad and other co-ethnics. So reproduction work is not just about biological reproduction but women's role as mothers is also used symbolically. The nation is often represented as a woman and as a mother. For example, the symbol of the mother is employed in Cyprus in the 1974 invasion of Cyprus as the personification of Cyprus as a woman grieving for her soldier son. So there are different ways in which motherhood and familialism interpenetrate with the power dimensions of the nation.

Women are very often the agents and subjects of this process. Perhaps one of the criticisms that we can both make of this early work is that we treated women very much as being worked upon by the nation and certainly one of the things that we are both now very keen to stress is women's agency and how women participate in this process as well as challenge it. The role of gender is not monolithic. Some of the things women might do, in feminist neo-liberalism for example, is to reproduce existing social arrangements but at the same time, in other ways, they undermine and challenge those arrangements.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** Very briefly in my new book, [The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations](#), (Yuval-Davis, 2011) one of the things that I mention in relation to the construction of contemporary forms of citizenship is intimate citizenship in which women's and men's bodies are placed under surveillance, but this also relates to new constructions of citizenships under globalisation and the new technologies. We saw an example of this recently when caesarean sections were normalised as one of the ways in which women choose to become mothers; it is part of a construction of citizens as consumers which amounts to a de-politicisation of citizenship, a process in which the new technologies as well

as women's and men's bodies become bargaining chips in the exchange between citizens and state. I also make a distinction between citizenship and nationalism because at the same time that this kind of thing has been happening, neoliberal discourse, demographic racisms and global politics of control of reproduction very much continue. And religious discourse is about abortion and it is about the grand rule which affects so much the work of feminism globally, although it was regressed by Obama but only partially. So all these issues, of course, continue to evolve and interrelate.

Q: To what extent do you think, Georgie, that the lack of awareness and the suppression of Bengali women of the population of East London as victims of stigmatisation and oppression might contribute to the common difficulties? The representation of the Bangladeshi population and East End working class as being involved in cultural clashes when in fact at least one dimension of their oppression, the fact that they speak languages arising out of their own tradition, which are routinely rubbished by dominant ethnic groups which hegemonise the political discourses, tends to remain unanalysed.

**Georgie Wemyss:** There is a huge issue around class and language, in East London and in the politics of people who are from Sylheti speaking areas and tend to be from less middle-class backgrounds. - When I talk about Bengali women who were involved in WUAR, I could have problematised it, I could have looked at the categories of Bangladeshi and Sylheti and see how they were mobilised. The women I referred to were Sylheti speakers, but they were also English speakers. One of the reasons why that particular movement has become invisible is because those women moved on and moved out; they went to university and got jobs in other parts of London and other parts of the world as well. The kind of sexism they experienced in trying to operate within the jobs market in Tower Hamlets made it quite difficult for women who were from that background to obtain jobs or get involved in particular organisations. There isn't enough time to analyse Sylheti and Bengali dynamics in depth.

Q: This is a question for Avtar Brah. You talk about Nira's work, your work and also Floya's work and the relationship between religion, spirituality and the public manifestations of these kinds of debates. To what extent do you feel that the complex and nuanced debates and scholarships that feminists like yourselves have been working on have entered the public sphere because debates around the secular and the religious seem to be very much presented as fixed polar opposites. All of you seem to be engaged in the real world, based on activism, social reforms and debates around justice and human rights. To what extent can we translate such ideas into current debates?

**Avtar Brah:** I think that obviously there is a link between activism and theoretical

frameworks. Nira has been involved in both; how academic work influences actual policy or actual politics is quite complex. Sometimes a lot of the work we do in academia goes under water, no one really thinks about it. But the whole strength of Nira's work has been that she has actually made those links all the time. I am not sure how far we agree. The whole question of religion is a very complex one but Nira has actually looked at questions of spirituality, which is important. Some people actually disavow spirituality, they think that there is only one kind of politics and that is the secular politics and the other doesn't matter. I am not one of those people, and that's where Nira and I have a certain kind of common ground: that there are spiritual needs, but at the same time religion itself gets fundamentalised, gets racialised, so that one has to take certain positions. But these positions are not easy or straightforward and therefore they demand of us a constant rethinking of our own political positions.

Q: I really appreciate how you are bringing questions of spirituality and religion into academia because in the geography department where I work at the University of Sussex it is not OK to take spirituality and religion seriously, but I am more inclined towards your views. I have started some academic work on religion and am currently working with a number of faith groups in the multi-faith city of Peterborough. What I wanted to say is that certain academic attitudes, which are aggressively secularist, are also elitist, because within these religions which can be very patriarchal, very colonial, very violent, there is also liberatory potential and for many new migrants this is absolutely critical. Often it is a working-class view that religion is seen as emancipatory or liberatory or as a source of hope, and I think that academia has a lot to learn about this. You might not agree but I think it is not just about spirituality but it is also about struggles over religion.

**Avtar Brah:** I think it is struggles over religions, in religions and against religions. I think you are right that in certain political contexts, religious ideology can be liberatory but it can also be very oppressive at the same time. Again, what is important is the historical specificity and looking at what happens in those concrete situations.

Q: I associate Nira so much with defending secular spaces and intersectionality that I would like to hear from Nira herself actually about how she feels about the way in which the discussion went on now because I certainly would be surprised if that was the end of it in terms of how I perceive her and her work. Nira, would you mind saying a little bit more about it?

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** There is a whole session on fundamentalism in the afternoon and I think that a lot of this should be discussed there. But it is important that, in discussions on

intersectionality and activism, issues of religion and spirituality are now part of the main debate. It is important to remember that Avtar's speech emphasised the fact that our engagement with issues of spirituality was in the personal domain rather than in the political domain. It is very important to approach the issues you have talked about in an intersectional way. Of course, belief in religion or in any other ideology can be very empowering personally but we have to look at the political and the historical as well as the personal context in which this is taking place. A lot of the reasons why people need religion now more both materially and spiritually are to do with what is happening to the state: for example, the privatisation of the state in terms of support and services which are not available as they used to be. People are also facing the kind of crisis that I describe in the Politics of Belonging book as security rights, when people do not know where they are located, where/what their future is going to be, with whom and in what way. Therefore we cannot detach narratives of religion and spirituality, when we analyse them, sociologically and politically from these issues.

## *Transformative Pedagogy: A panel discussion with some of Nira's former postgraduate students*



*Umut Erel, Marcel Stoetzler, Ulrike Vieten, Samia Bano, Cassandra Balchin, Molly Andrews*

**Molly Andrews:** Everybody on this panel has been taught by Nira. The wonderful idea that the festschrift organisers had was to invite ex-students to say a few words about their experience of working with Nira. Then we will open this up to a general discussion. Please introduce yourselves.

### **Ulrike Vieten**

I am Dr. Ulrike M. Vieten, and currently based at Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. You might want to call it a 'Free' university, but it is not an 'Open University'. Because of the time limits, I am not going to talk about my work so you will have to 'google' my name if you really want to know what I am working on and about my publications. Rather, I want to share a short anecdote. I started my MA at the University of Greenwich in 2002. It was, of course, very exciting because I had just moved from Hamburg to London.

After two or three weeks we had a seminar with Nira; after her academic talk, she said 'I am driving to the Houses of Parliament in the afternoon, would some of you like to join me?' I was very keen, as were a sociology student, Mariam, who was in a wheel chair, and a Romany student.

So the four of us went by car, and because of Mariam we even got a very good parking place in front of the House of Commons. It was exciting being so recently in London, and

immediately going to visit the heart of the British Empire or democracy, whatever. I can't remember what the topic was about, so it was more about the atmosphere and Alain was with us, too. So we met Alain at that place as well. That was a very particular start to my friendship with Nira, and the academic and intellectual inspiration I got by her; I experienced from her so much as a mentor. Yes, you do academic work - and some of the colleagues assembled here have framed this already very nicely – you do this with this political passion, also very much integrating new people and people from different walks of life – also it was very special to attend the gatherings at your home, we really liked that. So I very much appreciate the honour of coming here to London today, and also to having met Nira, and continuing our work and being in contact with all of you.

### Umut Erel

My name is Umut Erel. I am at the Open University. I got to know Nira in 1995 when I came over from Germany and started doing my masters at Greenwich. When I first read her work I thought that this was the place where I wanted to be, and exactly what I had been missing in my studies till then. Although many people have said it, I still feel that I have to say it again: it was a very welcoming place. Nira's concern and support for her students went far beyond the classroom. I will give you a brief example of this: it was my first telephone interview with Nira, I was excited and hoping to be admitted to the Masters. I was expecting all kinds of questions; however the first thing she said was not 'can you explain to me the equivalence of your degree to ours' but 'let me ring you back, it is going to be too expensive for you otherwise'. This was the era before cheap phone calls. This is a small example that for me encapsulates Nira's concerns for students in so many different ways. For example, our classes were held in the evenings and Nira would always make sure that people had a safe way to get back home from a rather isolated campus in the dark. We used to also get a lift from Nira which was fantastic. I am not a driver so whenever I am in somebody else's car I sit back and relax, but I did realise that Nira's driving is quite distinctive. Many years later I met someone who had been a speaker at the Greenwich seminar series when I was doing my MA there. She recognised me, but instead of remembering me for my nice smile or my thought provoking comments, she said 'oh, I shared a white knuckle ride with you in Nira's car!'

Nira's method of teaching is great at building networks and also encouraging her students to do so. I got to meet many distinguished speakers at those seminars in the Greenwich sociology department, some of whom you might hear today. One of the things that I found so remarkable is that despite their distinguished academic profiles, it was not an intimidating



atmosphere. On the contrary I would say that much of the very positive impressions I had of British academia, such as an ethos of collegiality and also genuine dialogue, was down to Nira's personality and not British academia at all. I would like to read something briefly from Niloufar Pourzand who was a masters' student with us and later did her PhD under Nira's supervision. I think this is very important not only because it is a wonderful letter but also because I think it shows that Nira has had an influence as a teacher transnationally and globally:

*Dear friends,*

*Meeting Nira has definitely been one of the most inspiring and pivotal turn of events in my life and the inspiration began even before I met her through the positive energy that she conveyed through the response to my letter seeking information about the gender and ethnicity masters studies programme. It continued with her incredible support to not only myself as somebody who was going back to university after a long gap in which a revolution and a war had happened in my country, and right after having lost my father, one of the main pillars in my life, but also to my family who were going to join me for that period in the UK, my mother and my two young daughters. Without Nira's compassion, support and inspiration I would never have made it to the UK at that point in my life or completed the masters' programme in one year. Nira changed not only my life but that of my family, I can say. And certainly, if it was not for her intellectual brilliance, social activism and overall inspiration, her commitment as a PhD supervisor to her students and her role as a persistent mentor who was able and willing to put the necessary time in her very busy schedule and certainly even in her own home and airport when travelling to attend a conference, I would never have succeeded in completing my PhD; one of the achievements in my life which continue to drive me forward even in the hardest moments of my life. I was indeed so fortunate to be Nira's student, and for sure otherwise I would not have gone [on] to complete my PhD while working full time for UNICEF Afghanistan. I am forever grateful to Nira. For sure, the moment when I came back to my PhD in my examination room and was told that my PhD was accepted was one of the happiest of my life. Thank you Nira for everything and for being that day with and for me.*

I also want to thank Nira for her continuous friendship since that time and her kindness to my family and during our stays in London. Every interaction with Nira is motivating, educational and positive and forward looking. You have continued to enrich my life in so many ways with

your academic work, views, experience, research as well as through social activism and feminism and anti-racism, through your strong and dynamic personality and through your friendship and love. Let me, in addition, thank Alain who is also very admirable, and who has also very kindly and generously welcomed us to your home. I do also want to say that we have gone through some hard times and perhaps the hardest being the loss of our dearest Tijen - another of Nira's PhD students who we tried so hard to keep alive and who is so very much appreciated by all of us who loved her for the incredible and beautiful human being that she was. She is missed today...there's more I can say but I am sure there are other participants that can add to what I have missed. I hope you have enjoyed the special day, Nira.

### **Marcel Stoetzler**

My name is Marcel and I am at Bangor University in north Wales. I really don't know where to start. I have been torturing myself the last three weeks thinking about what to say for the next three minutes. Every time I come to London I go to my yoga place which is one of the good things about being in London; living in the countryside you have beautiful landscapes but no yoga place nearby. The type of yoga I am doing is not the relaxing type but sweaty and heavy going, and one that comes pretty close to a heart attack every time. Last night, when I was lying down in the dead body pose where you are not supposed to be thinking of anything, which is good, I still could not stop thinking about what to say in my three minutes on how Nira influenced me. But then enlightenment struck: one of Nira's principle influences is self-reflexivity, which infuses Nira's writings and teachings. You can see from my inability to come up with a good idea about what to say now that I have not been a very good student. The second thing, which everybody has explained already, is that we were interacting in a democratic and egalitarian way.

I also came from Hamburg; there must be some kind of underground rail from Hamburg to Greenwich or East London. One of the principal reasons for coming here for the MA was that I was at the end of my state funding in Germany and, at the time, it was possible to get an extra year's funding if you went abroad. It was only when I got here that I realised that I was on an MA programme, something that wasn't a concept in Germany at the time. Then I stuck around and I did a bit of teaching for Nira, and a bit later I managed to find PhD funding. I then realised that it is actually conceivable to be an academic, which would not have occurred to me previously. Nira's personal attitude and her teachings showed me that you can have not so middle-of-the-road ideas and still somehow eke out a living and have a job in this particular industry. In practical terms, that was the most important influence and

through a whole chain of lucky coincidences, which wouldn't have happened without the MA with Nira, I ended up a lecturer. A lot of what Nira was teaching resonated with me; I was trying to think, quite literally and theoretically, in a different language. Subsequently, that also emerged in the collaboration with Nira when we wrote a couple of articles and did some research together; it became a kind of exercise in translating similar ideas from different theoretical languages into each other. It was quite tough like the yoga classes I mentioned before but since then I have made a habit of co-writing articles with other people. It takes an enormous amount of time and tends to be much more work than writing articles on your own but it tends to be much more interesting and lead to things you didn't know before.

### **Samia Bano**

I had the same thought actually of how difficult it is to fit into five minutes how Nira's scholarship has influenced us – all in five minutes?! But I do want to echo the comments that have been made before me. I had done an undergraduate law degree and I was looking for a course that actually meant something to me and could reflect my lived experience as an Asian woman. I think the Gender and Ethnic Studies course was fantastic because it really was based on the social and lived realities of minority ethnic women. It linked theory with everyday life, with issues of social justice, human rights, equality and how to negotiate who we are, where we are and what we can be and how we can live in a society that is just and equal or how we can aspire to achieving that as feminists. The Sociology department at the University of Greenwich, shaped by both Nira and Floya, was so pioneering and progressive in terms of all the other institutions and academic disciplines in Britain that it did then and continues today to have an important impact upon our scholarship today.

It was through Nira's work and my engaging with her scholarship that gave me the space and time to think about how important it was for me to draw upon scholarship that can better inform our everyday lives. For me that is what Nira's work does and what her ideas gave to me. It provides an intellectual space to think about ideas while moving away from fixed categories: so, for example, in my work I understood that I don't have to think about religion or the secular as somehow fixed and unproblematic categories but that I can think about them in a complex and intersectional way without losing the focus on justice, equality and human rights. That intersectional approach also translates into the personal and how we interact and negotiate and how our ideas can impact on the public/civic space. It was through Nira's scholarship that I felt that I could develop my own ideas. Through discussions with my fellow students on the MA Ethnic and Gender Studies, I became aware of the work of black feminist groups such as SBS and which gave me the opportunity to work with them. I saw

how Nira's ideas translated into practice where activists on the ground were trying to think about these debates, trying to take theories and put them into practice while trying to achieve some real change. It was and continues to be important for a number of us that this space provides an intellectual scholarship that is so much more nuanced and complex and actually seeks to engage with the complexity and fragmentation of everyday life.

I work on issues of religion, law and Muslim women at the Law department at Reading University. It often occurs to me when I am trying to develop some of my ideas that, in actual fact, not many institutions and disciplines work in a truly interdisciplinary way. The scholarship that Nira developed at the University of Greenwich and now at UEL is literally so advanced theoretically in trying to think about ideas across disciplines and across academia and academic institutions that it remains important for those of us who try to work in this way to continue to engage with her scholarship, her ideas and her passion for justice and human rights and to contribute to these ideas on the ground in public and private spaces. And finally Nira's work has also had a hugely personal influence on me. When I arrived at Greenwich I had come from studying law from a doctrinal approach where there was little, if any, understanding of how law operates in context. Coming from a Pakistani working-class background, I was often lost at university where issues of identity and politics were missing on my course. I was looking for scholarship that could help me better understand my personal issues of identity, belonging, what being British actually meant and how political change can be achieved in feminist politics. Nira's compassion and her scholarship gave me such important insights. It is also inspirational for many of us today because we are often told that it is the fixed binaries of belonging versus the other, insider versus the outsider, religion versus secular that define who we are when in actual fact we know from Nira's work on intersectionality that it is much more complex than that. Also Nira's scholarship isn't just theoretical - it isn't just pointing to complexity and intersectionality - it informs us on how we can think about change and social justice in society. Nira's work stands the test of time. She is also a kind, compassionate and fearless friend and scholar. She has supported many of us in our early careers; she has always been there for me and I for one will always be grateful for her support during difficult and good times. A true testament to a good friend and an inspiring feminist scholar!

### **Cassandra Balchin**

I think I am going to say a lot of what Samia has already said. Twelve years ago, I relocated to the UK after having lived abroad for 17 years in Pakistan. I was a single parent with two children and I was starting a new international coordination office for Women Living Under

Muslim Laws (WLUML). On top of all this, to start a part-time masters degree with Nira must have been completely bonkers. On the other hand, it was probably one of the most important moments of my life because Nira's teachings, and Floya's as well, gave me the words to articulate an analysis of what I have seen on the ground and experienced so that I could actually move the debate forward. I want to give you a very real life example; at first, I thought I had imagined this example. So I went back to my old emails and I dug out the email exchange so if anyone wants the evidence I have got it here today. It illustrates how Nira's analysis of women's bodies and the collective expression of identities translate into activism.

This was 2002 and I was working at WLUML; there was the terrible attack of the Israeli military forces on Jenin and a lot of mobilization was going on globally. We suddenly got this international alert for action about a dreadful case of a young man saying that their home was attacked by the Israeli military and that his sister was violated in more ways than one; the word rape wasn't actually used. It turned out that his sister was pregnant, she miscarried and her young son had witnessed his mother being raped. There was something that smelled rotten and it was Nira's work that gave me the ability to articulate it. I would have had the nose that there was something not quite right about this story but her analysis of the use of women's bodies as collective identity symbols in national and racial conflicts gave me the words and the thoughts to articulate that 'I think this is a hoax'. And it actually turned out to be a hoax, deliberately designed to discredit human rights activists who were reporting on the terrible things that were happening in Jenin.

So that is a real example of how analysis enables effective activism. But it didn't stop there. The other thought that Nira has inspired I have used in training across the world. I really mean that because I do a lot of training and speaking internationally; now there are people who have accessed these ideas in some very odd places, like an isolated Indonesian island. This is about the whole way Nira differentiates between social locations, identities and values and warns about collapsing them together. That spoke to me at a personal level so powerfully that I go and give mini- Nira lectures all across the world. I do write your name on the board every single time and credit your work as is due. Very often when I got feedback from presentations and workshops, the light bulb moment that many people reported back to me was about 'oh, that distinction between social location, identity and value'.

This has impacted the analysis of human rights standards and the international human rights lobby's ability or inability to deal with culture in a nuanced way. It has impacted women's refuges in the UK, which were trying to understand how to deal with the young staff who were harassing the non-hijab wearing members of staff who themselves were harassing

hijab wearing members of staff. So these are very different spheres of activism and analysis that have been impacted by your work, Nira.

### Q&A session

Q: I have not been Nira's student but I loved Cassandra's phrase 'giving mini-Nira lectures' because after hearing the panel and talking to Nira, often I have this fantasy to have her as a PhD supervisor. I moved to the UK in 2004, and I was looking around for feminist groups and discussions; Gita said 'come along, we are trying to revive WAF and the meetings will take place at Nira's house.' So I started going along to those meetings; Nira has the capacity to release in a phrase some very complex issues and one of the phrases that really sticks in my mind is when we were talking about the crisis of multiculturalism and she talked about how multi-faithism is replacing multiculturalism in Britain and that really stuck in my mind. I really thank you for the analysis you provided to somebody who was new here and just trying to grasp all that was going on in the public sphere. As much as you are an activist, you are also a brilliant teacher even when you are not thinking about teaching.

**Umut Erel:** I talked to various people when trying to prepare for my talk. As everybody has said, I also found it a difficult task to summarise this in five minutes. The way you started your contribution is also the way that many of my interlocutors started theirs 'I was never a student of Nira's but...' and I think that this is really something very important, that Nira was always open to young scholars and activists whether they were formally students or not, particularly as we are so marketised and education is increasingly commoditised. One of the spaces of non-commoditised, egalitarian sharing of knowledge that Nira very much supported was a 'gender, ethnicity and social theory' group that went on for seven years which was fed by Nira's current or former MA students or PhD students but also people who had simply heard about her, many of whom were actually relocating to the UK, contacting her and sharing their ideas with her personally. She said 'look, there is also a network that you might want to go to', collaborating beyond professional boundaries.

Q: I did my MA at UEL and I just want to describe one of my memories that I will never forget. At the beginning of the MA, after a couple of lectures, I thought 'uh, I don't understand anything, I want to leave actually'. So I went to Nira's office and I told her. She talked to me, but not just talked, what affected me was that she came with me to the door and hugged me. That changed my decision.

Q: I am teaching at the Continental European University; although the university is among the top 200 in the world, I have to say that the experience that I had here at Greenwich University which inspired provocative radical thinking was quite different in comparison to

the university I am working at now. Greenwich perhaps never made it into the rankings nor UEL but these are the publications and radical thinking that remain with us as the most inspiring. Talking to those doing a PhD, it is a very important niche where education and critical thinking have not been commodified.

Q: I am still a student of Nira's although I have never been a student of Nira's. I think she is one of those academics that when you pick up her work and it's important to you, you feel like you are a student of hers. There are academics like that but they are incredibly rare. My subject was International Relations (IR) and some of you might know that there is a quite big body of feminists in IR the US and the field is quite US centric, so scholars like Nira are important as she's obviously somebody who has a global reach but is based in Europe. Some of you might know of the International Feminist Journal of Politics; I am one of the co-founders of that journal but without scholars like Nira I really think that that journal could never happen. It is now over a decade since it was established; it recently entered the citation indexes, which is really important for scholars. I think so few scholars have a genuinely interdisciplinary reach. I never knew that I was going to be an academic; it was people like Nira who inspired me. I think it is incredible when scholars have the power to continue to inspire you no matter where you land up. I was an IR, globalisation scholar when Nira's work started influencing me.

Q: I just finished my PhD in 2011 and I have been Nira's student since 2005. What I wanted to say today is a really big thank you and to recount one of my most vivid memories and how I started learning in a different way. It goes back to 2005 when *Ahmadinejad* announced that Israel should be wiped off the map. In Nira's class the day after, I felt that I should apologise to Nira about this. So I went to her after the class and said, "As an Iranian student, Nira I want to say something. I am really sorry about what happened". She looked at me and said, "Masi, we don't represent anyone else". "Yes, but I am Iranian." So what? Ahmadinejad is saying whatever he feels like." I wanted to tell you how much I moved on from such a positioning. I really owe it to Nira who hasn't just been a teacher, she has taught me a lot in my life, how to deal with problems, how not to give up, how to be confident about my work. And another thing: a few months ago Nira's son contacted me to help him with some characters in his book. When we met he asked if I was a colleague of Nira's. Nira's way of referring to students as colleagues is about setting up egalitarian relationships: not looking at us just as students but as colleagues and younger scholars, and this is really appreciated.

## Women and Fundamentalisms

### Pragna Patel

I am absolutely honoured to be here today, and Nira, just to show how much you mean to me I had to wrench myself away this morning from a cricket match. It was the final day of West Indies vs India and when I left home, the match was balanced on a knife edge, so if anyone knows the results please tell me afterwards.

I have known Nira as a friend and a comrade since the late 80s and I have really come to



*Gita Sahgal, Nadjie Al-Ali, Pragna Patel*

admire the pioneering work that she and Floya Anthias have contributed to our understanding of race, class, gender, nation, state. They were theorising intersectionality before this became fashionable as demonstrated by their book [Racialised Boundaries](#) (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 2011), amongst many others. We at SBS were very quick to draw on their work, particularly in relation to our work on violence against women within black minority communities. Their contribution to the work of SBS, which tries to operate within an anti-racist, feminist, socialist, progressive, secular framework, has been immense. It is also fair to say that we were doing intersectionality before it became fashionable but it was the theoretical framework provided by Nira and Floya and others, like Avtar Brah, that helped us to articulate the complex connections between race, nationality, class and gender in ways



that did not lapse into dangerous forms of identity politics. Instead our analysis helped us to develop a simultaneous anti-racist and anti-sexist gaze at all forms of social relations that reproduce power and powerlessness. And above all they helped us to develop a politics of solidarity across feminist and anti-racist struggles, perhaps best exemplified by the establishment of WAF of which Nira, along with SBS, and other women from many religious and ethnic backgrounds have been founding members.

WAF was first established in 1989 in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair, to challenge the rise of fundamentalism in all religions and its impact on the reproduction of patriarchal norms of the family and their control of women's minds and bodies which are seen as the signifiers of collectivity. Although we were women from disparate anti-racist and feminist traditions, we came together on the basis of our commonalities and not identity. That is something that Nira in particular has reinforced in her work. In the British context, our resistance to religious fundamentalism involved a focus on the racist nature of the state as well as the dominant but dodgy model of multiculturalism in terms of relations between state and minorities. By analysing our different locations as women, within majority and minority communities we were able to thrash out, with some urgency, a common agenda for resistance.

One of the first reflections of the thinking and activism of the WAF collective was the book [Refusing Holy Orders](#) (Sahgal & Yuval-Davis, (1992)2000). Like *Racialised Boundaries* (Anthias et al. 1995), this book has become something of a touchstone, particularly in the work of SBS around religious fundamentalism. Some 22 years later, I still find myself dipping into it and re-reading sections. I am always struck by its complete accessibility – academic language can be so obstructive in many ways – and relevance today. In fact, I think more now than ever. From the useful working definition of religious fundamentalism as the political use of religion to gain power over resources and constituencies, through to a clarification on how and why secular public space is important, the book has been instrumental in making sense of the rise of religious fundamentalism and the religious right in all communities. A development that since has accelerated greatly under New Labour's cohesion and integration agenda, and the Tories' Big Society and localism agenda. Above all, *Refusing Holy Orders* has given SBS the space to connect the politics and practices of multiculturalism to our work on violence against women in BME communities. The histories of both are inextricably linked together; Nira, along with Gita Sahgal, has been key in helping us to shape our critique of the politics of multiculturalism which has created a conducive context for the rise of religious fundamentalism and more recently multi-faithism. Assumptions around the homogeneity of communities and minority cultures and claims of authenticity are some of the themes that run through the book which have also been central to SBS's work

on religious fundamentalism.

One of the very first cases that SBS undertook which allowed us to challenge both racism and religious fundamentalism was that of Rabia Janjua in 1990. She came to SBS's attention following her detention by the immigration authorities who were seeking to remove her and her two young children to Pakistan where she faced charges under the then Zina Ordinance for unlawful sex (sex outside marriage). The Zina Ordinance was part of a raft of legal measures that were introduced by general Zia-ul-Haq to aid the Islamisation process in Pakistan and centred on the control and subjugation of women; it facilitated and legitimised increased violence against women. The campaign that we waged on her behalf and supported by WAF challenged both the impact of religious fundamentalism and the racist framework of the immigration and the asylum laws. We were calling for the recognition of gender-based persecution in asylum law. Interrogating asylum laws, not only for their racist effect but also from the point of view of the human rights of women in their battle against religious fundamentalism, has been an important dimension in the struggle for accountability from public institutions.

Of course Nira, we have had many debates about the relevance of the international human rights framework and the rule of law. Nira has rightly pointed out that the human rights framework is itself not neutral and that it often masquerades as a universal framework when it is in fact used to shore up majoritarian or imperialist and capitalist interests and power. While this is the case, in the absence of any other mechanism of accountability at the local, national and international level, I think it still remains the only tool we have to challenge the undemocratic, racist, patriarchal abuses of power, both in the family, in the community and the state. Much of the work of SBS is geared towards making the human rights framework meaningful for the women we see, and for other powerless subgroups. What we can't afford to do is to vacate the political and legal human rights arena or abandon the principle of the universality of human rights, precisely because fundamentalists and the religious right are also using the language of human rights to great effect by actually subverting these very same principles. Paradoxically, they deny the use of what they see as a secular or 'western' human rights framework to women and other vulnerable minorities but at the same time they conveniently use the same secular framework to expose state sanctions, tortures and illegal detention. Of course that means that it is doubly important for all of us, including the human rights movement to ask some hard questions about allegiances that are formed in the struggles for human rights and there is much that needs to be done to safeguard the view that human rights are non-negotiable and indivisible.

It is in this context that it is also important to remember how much the analysis of the impact of the religious fundamentalism on women and girls, as set out in *Refusing Holy Orders*, has contributed to the development of human rights case law on the question of the protection of women. One really important illustration of this was the outcome of the Shabina Begum case in which the highest court in the land made a decision that was influenced by *Refusing Holy Orders*. People will remember that the 2002 case concerned a 14-year-old Muslim girl who wanted to wear the jilbab (full ankle length dress) rather than a salwar kameez (long tunic and trousers) and head scarf, which conformed to the school uniform policy. In 2006, the House of Lords, now known as the Supreme Court, delivered a judgment stating that her 'right to manifest religion or belief and her right not to be denied an education had not been violated and that any infringement was necessary and proportionate for the protection and the wellbeing of the wider school community'. However, in the course of the judgement the court also alluded to the fact that her challenge had been motivated by those who sought to impose political religious identity on women and girls. Specific mention was made of the fact that in all the dealings with the school it was not Shabina but her brother who represented her who appeared to be part of an extreme right Muslim political group.

At one point, this group held demonstrations outside the school, interestingly protesting not about the school uniform policy but against the secular nature of education in that school. The demonstration had the effect of intimidating other female students of Muslim background who complained about harassment and interference from the group. They didn't support Shabina's demands, because they felt that if she was successful they too would be pressurised to wear the full jilbab. They feared that deep divisions would be created in the school community and between those who were perceived to be pious and those who were perceived to have lost their religious way; they were afraid that if they didn't conform, they would be labelled 'bad Muslim girls'. The court recognised these concerns, and the fact that the school had carried out a very careful balancing act, respecting both the diverse school population but also supporting those who didn't wish to conform to their religious identity to do so, without fear of repercussions.

It was a very important judgment and one that must have been difficult for the court to reach. However, much to my dismay, I have since seen the entire judgement being challenged from a so-called feminist perspective. The argument that is made is that by making that judgment, the court showed no respect for Shabina's agency as a Muslim woman. For example, in a recent book, in which feminist legal scholars have re-interpreted classic legal judgements from a feminist perspective, Maleiha Malik, an academic, has re-written the judgement from a perspective which argues that what Shabina was doing was exercising her female autonomy

and choice as a Muslim woman living in a minority community (Malik, 2010). But in doing so, she completely skips the political context in which the case occurred: she makes no mention of the political demonstrations that took place outside the school; or that it was her brother who was determining what was necessary to comply with Muslim beliefs. Most crucially and, I would say, disingenuously, she avoids any mention of the fact that the majority of the other Muslim girls wanted no change in the dress code presumably because what they had achieved was developed through their own complex negotiation and battle with their parents and their community. Their voices were nowhere to be heard in her re-interpreted judgment. In re-writing that judgment, it is stated that she served to advance one of the goals of human rights and feminism - to promote dignity and autonomy of the individual - but it is very intriguing that in the re-written judgment, what we are in effect left with is some free floating notion of Muslim female autonomy removed from the political and social movements that gave rise to the kind of demands that Shabina was making. The critical point was that she was exercising female agency through her brother, to counter the secular nature of the state school and this is the point that other girls readily recognised.

Nira has contributed in so many ways to the work of SBS. More recently, she helped us to conduct a study which examined how religious identity and belonging are viewed by users of our centre, who are largely abused BME women. The findings show that the counter-hegemonic mobilisation around religious identity is in itself problematic, especially on questions of gender and sexuality since it assumes that those who are dispossessed have no access to or interaction with broader society and naturally belong to, or identify with, particular faith communities. I won't go into the findings of the study but would like to just say that in *Refusing Holy Orders* right at the outset, there is a quote from Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, to show how there is more than one kind of freedom: 'there is freedom to as well as freedom from'. I would say that one of the key problems highlighted by the women in the SBS study is that the right to manifest religion has overshadowed the right to freedom from religion and that there is an urgent need to de-link religion from public policy. Following the study, Nira and I tried to get extra funding to develop and expand the work but for a variety of what, I think, were spurious reasons, we were rejected by many funders who just didn't want to or were unable to understand our attempt to look at the gendered dimension of religion.

In conclusion, Nira's works, among others have helped SBS to address the needs of the most marginalised and most vulnerable and to campaign for justice and equality in more ways than I can show today. All I would like to say is thank you Nira. You have challenged us to think and act in ways that stay true to the realities of those we seek to empower even if

those realities are often inconvenient for us.

## Gita Sahgal

I have so much to say, but like everybody else I went through the exercise to remember when I first met Nira. I have actually asked her but neither of us remembers because we have been in each other's life for so long that the actual first meeting has disappeared in the mist of time. I know that we met before we were founding members of WAF in '89 because I remember engaging with Nira through going to conferences on socialist feminism, in the early 80s when I first came to Britain as a university student at SOAS. I came from the Indian Women's Movement (IWM), at a very exciting moment when we had been campaigning against rape and dowry and we were stressing the importance of secularism, campaigning against the religious right, aware of it although many of the campaigns came later, and certainly aware of the way in which women's bodies were used to signify the honour of the community. These were not things that were gifted to us by particular academics but meeting Nira provided an engagement with these issues. When I walked into a socialist feminist space which was largely white, I was not aware of myself as 'other' as it happened. But most of the socialist feminists who were there were very worried and frightened by the emergence of black feminism and treated me with great hostility. Nira was one person who didn't.

That was an early moment of a fractured feminism, and I think that we are here today in very fractured times as well, but we are also – unlike in the 80s – here today in revolutionary times. This is something we haven't really reflected on in the course of today. That last 20 odd years of analysis of the work that all of us have done as activists and certainly as academics is going to come under increasing pressure. I would say that my prediction would be that activists and practitioners will survive much better than academic work because a lot of judgements have been made about, for instance, the importance of religion in people's lives by academic writings which do not take into account why religion has become so important and why it has been – I believe – a contingent importance. It was something that arose very much in post '89 with the defeat of the Soviet Union on the one hand and the triumph of neo-liberalism on the other; the rise of religious fundamentalism has often been analysed as a rebuke to neo-liberalism, but I remember Nira and I saying that the culture of jeans and the culture of the headscarf, the culture of globalisation and the culture of fundamentalism had gone hand in hand, and we can certainly see this with the politics of the Hindu right, the Jewish and the Christian right. They are embedded in the project of reactionary globalisation, and identity politics has become imbued with that, although it is

often mis-characterised and mis-classed as something separate. Many of you can speak about this concerted academic attack better than I can, but Amrita, who stood against many of these academic fashions because of her commitment to activism as well as to academic analysis, said to me 'well Habermas has declared the secular project dead in supposedly the secular age'. The enlightenment project has of course been chastised as imbued with racism to the point that it is completely irrelevant for any modern thinking (or postmodern thinking). What we have now is a series of post-structural, postmodern, post-this, post-that, i.e. most academic analysis has been post something or the other and it has defined itself against what it isn't and not what it is because it has been operating in a space of complete political defeat. We have been trying to stand against that political defeat, just as 40 odd women, including Nira, Pragna and I, stood on a demonstration where we defended the right of Salman Rushdie to write [The Satanic Verses](#) (Rushdie, 1988) and our right not to be limited in what we read, taking a very small stand against the twin project of Thatcherite neo-liberalism and Muslim fundamentalism which was rolling across Britain, at a time when Britain became the global organising centre for the religious right which spread back across the world.

Now I think that WAF wasn't a very useful place for the forensic analysis of fundamentalism. It was a very useful place for the discussion of the shrinking space of secularism; the discussions we had of secularism did not valorise the existing forms of secularisms. We discussed secular projects of different countries in the full knowledge that, as feminists who were attacking the classic public-private distinction, we couldn't then simply replicate the classical liberal view of the secular project as separating religion from the public sphere, which we do believe in, but we also had a critique of the way in which secular projects, like Indian secularism, were deeply limited by the application of religious personal laws. That may apply, of course, to many places: for example, Israel, the only secular country in the Middle East also has religious personal laws, and many others that have been influenced by British colonialism.

What is very troubling to me is that the analysis made by Nira, Floya and others has been reduced to sound bites. For instance, there are mountains of very bad writing on the War on Terror, which cited *Racialised Boundaries* to talk about the creation of the 'other' as if the war of terror was simply an attack on Muslims as such. Now, I am not saying that Muslims didn't have a hard time, there was an attack on the human rights framework, there was clearly the use of torture, there was surveillance of the Muslim population, and so on, but the basis of the War on Terror was not just anti-Muslim feeling. While ordinary Muslims had a very rough time during the War on Terror, Muslim leaders have benefited from it because the disciplinary

project, that was the War on Terror, has fundamentally relied on having fundamentalist allies, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood as proxies of Western interests. When we are looking at the fight that is going on for the soul of the Egyptian revolution and what might emerge from it and what has happened in Tunisia most of the Western press has actually lauded the fact that the Muslims had won an election as if they were incapable of democracy. People often talk about racialised discourses but they don't look at the ethical discourses where the underlying assumptions are that Muslims are not capable as people, they are seen largely as 'people' by the same people who were saying that the West talks about the Muslims as 'others', homogenising them and so on, you get a counter discourse which is basically accepting the fact that Muslims have no ethical capacity to be 'other than led by some kind of forms of fundamentalism, that ranges from the far left to forms of security experts.' I think that that is one of the issues that WAF itself was fractured by. It wasn't fully able to engage with this. Interestingly, having avoided a racialised fracture in WAF for 20 years of its existence, in the early 90s and its revival later, the War on Terror silenced radical white women in talking about these issues. Those of us who came from a minority background and the women from a Muslim background in WAF were actually silenced on issues of Muslim religious fundamentalism and the forensic analysis of Muslim fundamentalism which would show us that organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami, to which Georgie referred in her speech, were not only responsible for playing a central role in the genocide in 1971 in Bangladesh, but were also key figures and key actors –some of them are the same people who I investigated in a film I made in the 90s –in the Rushdie affair and partners of Tony Blair in his search for Muslim allies through the Muslim Council of Britain.

I am grateful to Nira when many academics would have erased this analysis. When they cite Nira's work, they don't cite her work on fundamentalism; they cite some work from *Racialised Boundaries* in a very partial manner without the political context. I am grateful to Nira for encouraging me to write, much of it published in books edited by Nira, but also for being there for this contestation, that Pragna referred to, which is about looking at the importance of human rights law. The way in which intersectionality has been understood in human rights law has been actually quite dangerous; it has been understood as a form of identity politics and promoting identity politics and not in the way that Nira has been discussing it. This is where Nira's work has been terribly important.

Nira has contributed to international political formations, particularly through the tribunal which was organised by Indian feminist activists when the Indian government was not allowing international organisations and human rights organisations into the country to investigate the massacre of Muslims by the Hindu Right in Gujarat in 2002. Indian feminists

organised a group of very distinguished foreign feminists to look at the idea of how identity construction and construction of the 'other' can actually lead to mass extermination, in other words, what Nira called 'a genocidal project'. Indian feminists don't refer to what happened in Gujarat as riots because it was a massacre of one side by the other. It has been popularly known as, but also legally correct to refer to it, as genocide. That thinking about genocide has really influenced my thinking; when I was at Amnesty and trying to understand genocide, I realised how poorly it is theorised and analysed in an international context. In the context of denial of various genocides, such as in Bangladesh, I think it's important to reinstate that analysis, because what we have now in Britain is a very poisoned alliance between the far left and members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi jihadi group who are engaged with some academics in the process of genocide denial precisely because there has been a popular movement for the accountability for the genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. This movement led by young activists who actually forced this issue on to the elections shows how the secularisation of politics are not only issues of the Middle East but also in areas like Pakistan and Bangladesh; that particular issue has not fed into public consciousness of women's rights activism anywhere else in the world. That shows that the space we are in is very difficult and that the women's movement is de-politicised in that it tends to talk about issues that are UN led, but does not give cross-regional solidarity to people who are struggling in their own context for justice and accountability.

So Nira, we had many discussions about these things and I look forward to seeing how you raise these issues in the Politics of belonging because I couldn't have done the work that I do on issues of crimes against humanity and genocide and all those legal issues without the work that you do. I think that we need to continue to have that analysis and what Pragna briefly referred to: that WAF was about the way in which fundamentalism controls the mind and the body. Much of the work that is being done now, on sexual rights and erotic justice, fits neatly into the mode of identity politics but concentrating solely on the body and forgetting that the freedom of the mind and the freedom to be respectful is actually the freedom not just for people to be free from religion, which I think is one of the most important freedoms, but also the freedom of those who are religious to be able to express their religious identity. I believe Nira is what I call an 'antinomian feminist', a concept I tried to develop in a book that she edited in a chapter called 'Legislating Utopia'. The reason that I talk about antinomianism is that when academics research religious identity, they fall into the trap of looking at fundamentalist groups as authentic working class groups, expressing an authentic identity because they don't understand that what they are seeing is the expression of a global political movement as it is expressed in very localised groups whether they are the Hindu



Right, supposedly cultural groups or whether they are the Muslim Right. They don't understand what they are looking at and they don't understand that those groups are about suppressing, invading and erasing the religious belief and practices of ordinary people that don't fit in to the kind of purity agenda that they are promoting through their paralegal system, Muslim law or the promotion of things like having new blasphemy laws under the so-called respect agenda.

### Q & A Session

Q: I certainly share your strong dislike of identity politics and share the need for your corrections that certain political developments entail, but when I really think reflectively as Nira has been asking us to do, I find that some of my engagement and my intersectionality is very context specific and depends on the inter-subjective relationship with my audience. This is not to say that I go from right to left, but certainly when I speak in London to a feminist audience, or recently when I was in Colorado Spring speaking to ex-military people and business people, or when I speak to some Iraqi academics, there is a shift in terms of emphasis and my intersectionality takes on different meanings and I was just wondering if you can reflect on that. I think that it is not just a matter of whether I am speaking to a secular oriented or religious oriented audience, it is not that, but I do think there is a difference for those of us who were focussing more on diasporic issues around religious fundamentalism as manifested in the West or as in my work on Middle East – I don't want to fall into these simple dichotomies, but what is the significance of the inter-subjective, what is happening between us as intellectuals and activists and who we are engaging with and how does that shift the emphasis of what we are talking about. The painful example that I always give, in this context, was shared with me by an Egyptian woman and activist who had spent most of her life fighting against female genital mutilations in Egypt. When she went to a conference in New York and was confronted by a US feminist who spoke about the racism in those countries, she found herself defending the practice. As she was telling me this, she was crying 'I won't do this any more; I have found ways of coping with it'. But I can very much relate to that pain and to that impulse and I was wondering if you could reflect on that and maybe Nira as well.

**Pragna Patel:** Recently I was in Denmark, at a conference on violence against women called 'Silencing Women's Voices' and I was really struck by the fact that the entire conference was talking about BME women and yet there were no BME women there, not one, except for me as a speaker from the UK. That made me very uncomfortable. Then

things got worse because the next day I had to go to a seminar which involved the refugee movement in Denmark to discuss practical issues around violence against women. I knew that the refuge took BME women, but they were hidden, completely hidden even from us who were participants and the seminar, like the conference, was an all white affair. At the conference, I tried to stay true to the experience of SBS by talking about how difficult it is to tread that fine line between critiquing our communities internally around issues of honour and shame, silence and so on, and then also having to talk about the state and its impact on the silencing process. I always make the point that you have to contextualise discussions on violence against women within a discussion of family, community, and state structures and how they interlock in ways that silence women but it is very difficult to talk about the collusion of family and community in a context that is extremely right wing and racist. At the seminar, it was even more discomfoting because they were talking about BME women and issues of honour and shame but they were all white women. I told them that as a service provider it was great that they were providing the space for BME women so that the refuge could also have an understanding of the specificity of their experiences. However, at some point, I said, 'if you are feminists and you are talking about feminist engagement, you are going to have to allow some black women's voices to come to the fore so that they can speak for themselves.'

I know that Denmark has an entirely different history of migration, but nevertheless what was interesting for me and what made it completely discomfoting for me was when they told me about the advice they gave BME women. They would say 'you know, when you come here you have to adopt the Danish way of life and adopt Danish values and you can't go round beating your children because that's not Danish values' and things like that. That is the worst kind of essentialisation, racialisation, 'othering' or racism in fact. What interested me was that these debates around domestic violence in respect of BME women in Europe are taking place in the complete absence of anti-racist struggles or progressive politicisation on race of any kind. Many have gone from being completely racist and from having an assimilationist position to this kind of integrationism which is also assimilationist so it enables them to say really racist things and operate in really racist ways. It is difficult to engage in that. And yet on the other hand, whenever we were attacked in the early days of SBS – we were always attacked for washing dirty linen in public – our view was that there is no hierarchy in struggles and actually to keep going on about one at the expense of other issues is to collude in that oppression; so you have to be true to lived reality but contexts do matter. I do think that I did not spend as much time as I could have in that Danish conference talking about the racist discourse of integration although I did try to emphasise that a bit more at the seminar. I should have emphasised it at the conference as I think that was the space where

such engagement was necessary.

**Gita Segal:** I would like to use a transnational approach to address some of these issues because I think that looking locally gets one stuck into particular types of binaries. For instance, the attack on human rights comes from the left and from the right, it obviously came from the Bush and Blair governments during the War on Terror in terms of promoting torture and trying to legalise some forms of tortures. But one of the things that has been quite damaging and that is accepted by quite a lot of these people right across the board, even if they disagree with each other, is that human rights are a Western concept. Clearly it has a Western lineage, it is a Western concept and we do not need to be embarrassed about that as descending from certain types of thinking from the enlightenment, but there is a more complex argument about who formed the Enlightenment, why key Muslim thinkers who were part of the Enlightenment were excluded by other Enlightenment thinkers, and if you do include them, then Muslims are also responsible for the Enlightenment and all its ills.

That is one level of argument. But another level is a simple reversion, a kind of story telling and a restoration of some hidden histories; our history is so recent and yet it is completely wiped out from most academic narratives because most books that are now published in defence of multiculturalism do not look at any of our work. It is not that they critique it, which would be fine, we would be happy to be comprehensibly trashed if anyone actually looks at anything we have written, except for Salman Sayyid and he engaged with us by calling us Eurocentrics... The point about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was that it was not written by Eleonore Roosevelt alone; the decolonised countries of the world which included Latin America and certainly includes India and Pakistan were at that table, women were at that table and Indian and Pakistani women played a crucial role in formulating the language of the Declaration, including the right to choice in marriage, and the fact that the Declaration doesn't say 'The rights of men' but that 'all men and women have equal dignity and rights'. Hansa Mehta, an Indian feminist, pointed out that until that time in all legal documentation women were assumed to be under the rubric of mankind. So we need to tell a different kind of story about the struggles, including the anti-colonial struggles, that have gone into the creation of this framework and why it remains an important point of defence for those of us who are fighting for secular and progressive values even though the framework itself has really failed to defend secular values at quite crucial moments. There is another way to deal with these binary problems.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** I absolutely agree with both Pragna's and Gita's responses. This is, of course, an issue that I have faced over many years, like the accusation of Zionists that we

are washing our dirty laundry in public whenever we criticise Israel and Zionism. But the issue of course is also part of history, in the sense that Gita means when she talks about the history of the Declaration of Human Rights which shows that it is not a solely Western project. I do have a critique of the discourse of human rights when it is not contextualised. But in terms of the issue of which context, I remember that in SOAS there was a big debate between Deniz Kandiyoti and Afsane Najmabani about feminism in which Afsane argued that after the Iranian revolution you cannot talk about feminism because it is a grand narrative and it has nothing in common with what women experience on the ground in Iran, so you have to have a piecemeal approach to achieving feminist goals. Deniz said 'yes, you can have a piecemeal one but as you don't challenge the structure of legitimation, one statement of one mullah can make sure that the work of years is destroyed'. On the other hand, when you have a secular space you can engage in debates which in other spaces you cannot, so the context is very important.

What I mostly dislike and see as dangerous is the work of so-called feminists like Saba Mahmoud who pose the '[politics of piety](#)' (Mahmood, 2012) as an alternative to feminism as if you are not in the West, as if issues of power do not matter and empowerment in terms of self-perfection is the only space open to women. This is, I think where context is not important that you have to transcend the context in which to talk about these issues, but at the same time I am very sensitive, in the debates in WAF and so on, to the context and, of course, the interpretations in terms of racism is sometimes inevitable but you have to be explicit. You cannot always assume that you have shared values with other people, and this is why I distinguish so sharply between caring and solidarity, because solidarity assumes shared values, while 'caring' is extended to everyone.

Q: I agree very much with what Gita said but I would like to include an exception to one remark which fails to differentiate between different elements of the far left; what she said applied to a far left which is not far left enough. We should be very careful to not go to bed with those who call for humanitarian imperialist intervention. Also they criticise the far left but that excludes some parts of the so-called far left who have colluded with various Islamists and so on for opportunistic reasons but that is because they are not far left enough.

Q: I want to make some comments on what Pragna said relating to my current experience of the Netherlands. I think we have to face up to a situation that we are talking about Europe which is fundamentally distinct from the UK context but most of you are based in the UK and familiar with this. From the continental perspective, it is heaven to have the space to think in a radical way and at least give space to different voices. The situation that Pragna

encountered in Denmark is very similar to our experience in the Netherlands. Even talking about racism or talking about more radical political contexts is swept under the carpet; you have to be pragmatic even in academia as most of the critical voices are losing jobs and becoming marginalised. In my view, we might have a shelter or a niche and it shouldn't stop us thinking as you do and contributing to a more complex debate but we need to be aware that this is really the exception to the rule. It is even worse than what Pragna was describing: concepts like intersectionality or integration are used as catch phrases but they have not been thought through and there is no support to continue thinking about it.

Q: This is not a fully formed question but something that I am picking up in a lot of the discussion: the opening and closing of different narratives. We are talking about ideological narratives, narratives from positions of power really in conflict with individual narratives and narratives on a much more micro scale, how language can open things up and how language can close things down, like the word 'diversity'. Looking forward, how do we start to develop narratives that on the one hand close things down but on the other hand reach a dominance that allows dominant narratives to start to be challenged? I appreciate if Gita or Pragna can clarify this.

Q: I am going to say something really reactionary. I was thinking about that conference that Gita talked about, the Socialist Feminist conference in 1984, and I want to make a plea to remember the intersectional analysis when you are talking about the native feminist movement. I remember that conference and there was a lot of mutual learning about different positionalities; you talked about the refuge in Southall and how it had two kitchens, and someone asked 'oh, is that one for vegetarians and one not?' and you looked at them and said 'no, there was one upstairs and one downstairs'. There was a lot of discussion about whether it was all right to go on the march on violence against women and so on, but the impulse and the energy to organise that conference came from a long tradition of anti-imperialism and socialist feminism and I think one ought to remember this.

Q: I was wondering, given the celebration of new public spheres, in terms of the internet, social networking, and all of you referred to specific contexts which influence what you say, and Nira's point of the need to transcend context when it comes to certain notions, and the fact that there is no hierarchy of struggles, whether you believe there is still, even though we are trying to transcend the context and trying to keep certain notions as universal, a certain selectivity in the way our words are being reflected elsewhere. Is there a way we can control our words, in a particular context, which are reflected, used and abused in other contexts?

**Gita Saghal:** I think you have posed the question of the day. I am struggling with this

question at the Centre for Secular Space which is precisely to re-tell different stories and to challenge some of these dominant narratives. The dominant narratives are not necessarily the ones that are said to be the dominant narratives, there's a dominant narrative of the state for instance on the War on Terror, but there is the counter-narrative of a lot of the progressives. I take the point that divisions on the left are much more complex than in the short space I had to do justice to the question, but some of the counter-narratives are actually part of the problem wherever they come from, not only the far left but from all sorts of spaces. How do we challenge that? We have to try. Meetings like this, putting in the work, doing it in cyberspace – I am a dinosaur in relation to things like twitter - which has been so central in mobilising the revolutions that are going on now, but these are people from a different generation to whom it comes much more easily.

How do we control what is said in our name? In our case, what we said was wiped out. It is not so much that what we said is used in different ways, quite often it is simply not taken account of at all, it is not engaged with, not debated. As I said, I don't think we can control what happens, just as Nira and Floya cannot control what other people do with their work, but you can simply re-state and develop your own positioning; that's an important point that we can clarify again and again what we mean and come back to some of the things we said before.

I was very struck by what was said this morning about the contestations around the idea of nation. I come from a post-nationalist generation in India; I grew up in independent India where our main enemy was the Indian state, the failure of the state to bring in social justice, to prevent religious violence, etcetera. In the course of that, one of the things we did was to criticise the native Indian secularism and the limitations on Indian secularism. What has happened is that a lot of feminists promoting various forms of religious identity politics have taken that part of our critique and trashed secularism as a concept entirely. Having spent my life criticising nationalism and the nationalist project and what it failed to do for women, I have to acknowledge that, in relation to the fundamentalist project, it actually gave space to women to mobilise. A woman like Hansa Mehta, an Indian feminist active in the Congress, was sent to the UN to take part in the drafting of the Declaration, without quotas and things like that, that women are still fighting for.

One of the issues is that feminists have also stopped talking about the nature of the state and many of the debates, which trash secularism, are saying that states are not important because all states have failed: the Shah of Iran failed in attempting to set up a secular project; Turkey is repressive. I am grateful to Nira for giving me the opportunity to debate

with A. Sharon around this point. She doesn't mention that Khomeini's regime might have had a chilling effect on the possibility of religion as a force for progress, but it is a very one-sided discussion.

**Pragna Patel:** I have come to the realisation that we have to just keep producing these alternative narratives and we have to keep producing the evidence. I think the evidential basis for what we say is so critical. I am now trying to refocus some of the work of SBS, particularly around collecting those stories and trying to put them out in the public domain. The SBS study, [Faith, Cohesion, and Gender](#) (SBS, 2011) is based on in-depth interviews of 21 women from different ethnicities and religious background who say fantastic things about their feelings about belonging and identity. There is an assumption that these women are some sort of empty vessels into which we pour our feminism. It is, in fact, their progressiveness that dictates our agenda. A lot of them have said things that then shape the political points we make publicly. They have blasted a hole through the whole notion of faith communities and the idea that they naturally belong to faith communities. They blasted a hole through the idea that their identity can only be seen as a religious identity. What they are saying is that religion for us is a very personal matter, it is spiritual. They are all believers but they do not want religion encroaching on public institutions and the services they desperately need from the state. The state cannot be imbued with religious values, dominant and often right wing religious values. We need more and more of those stories to come out. We can't control how our words are used but what we can do is to be better at what we do. A real struggle for us, in fact, a key issue for a lot of us, is that secular feminist organisations are dying. Although there is a resurgence of feminism, some of the wonderful work that some of the secular feminist organisations have done up and down the country and the centres they created are disappearing fast. So yes there is an urgency to write down that history.

## Settler Societies

### Avishai Ehrlich

It is interesting that in this Festschrift gathering, dedicated to Nira's intellectual work, the concept of "colonial settler society" only came up towards the end of the day. It is not surprising, for most of you know Nira since she settled in the UK and you know her from her contributions to "intersectionality theory" and to "politics of belonging". Some of you got to know her as a socialist feminist, during the anti-racism campaigns or from WAF struggles. This is the mature Nira but there is a young Nira, chronologically speaking, for Nira is forever young.



*Naje Al-Ali, Avishai Ehrlich*

We seldom ponder the moral makings of theorists. Their ideas don't just spring from the head of Athena; they are shaped by their position in society, time, place and the political events they encounter during their formative years. I believe that Nira's special set of intellectual interests was forged with her realisation that Israel – where she was born, grew up and which she loved – is a "colonial settler society". This discovery was a turning point in her intellectual formation.

I have known Nira for five decades; we travelled a long way together before our paths diverged. I met Nira at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the mid 60s, where we both studied sociology. I was a Marxist and she was then a Libertarian, momentarily enthusiastic about – would you believe? – Ayn Rand, the author of *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*



and her concept of “ethical egoism”. Although Rand’s philosophy was principally pro-capitalist, it also emphasised reason, the struggle of the courageous individual against social conformity, pacifism and a basic suspicion towards the state.

Why do I want to mention Nira’s fleeting interest in Ayn Rand’s individualism? I do so because I believe it is significant in understanding Nira’s very special brand of complexity. When Masi presented herself here as an Iranian and apologised for Ahmadinejad’s denial of the Holocaust, Nira immediately admonished her for assuming personal guilt for what some of her co-nationals said or believed. For Nira, the individual is responsible only for what she says and does and she strives to avoid subsuming people under labels of class, gender, race, religion, etc. Intersectionality tries to avoid the reductionism of such one-dimensional labelling.

The main political struggle in which we were both involved in Israel was against the “military government”: a discriminatory regime introduced immediately after the 1948 war to rule over the Palestinians who remained within Israel after the Naqba. The military government restricted their freedom of movement, thus limiting their ability to participate in the labour market and making them the poorest section of the population. It also prevented their political organisation, facilitated confiscation of much of their lands and created a regime of clientelism and collaborationism. The military government was abolished after a long struggle in 1965, only to be renewed in another form in the newly-occupied territories after the 1967 war.

The ideological struggle was with the Zionist Left (and the Israeli Communist Party) who regarded the foundation of Israel, and the war which followed, as a just war within the framework of the struggle against colonialism and for national liberation. Among these Left Zionists, Israel’s struggle for independence from the British was seen as progressive. No different, say, from India’s liberation from British imperialism.

Some of us were in disagreement with the defence of an Israel where Palestinians could not be fully equal citizens. We were against the idea of Jewish supremacy embedded in the Zionist definition of Israel as the state of the Jews. Years later, one of Israel’s top political geographers, Oren Yiftachel, coined the term [“ethnocracy”](#) to describe Israel (Yiftachel, 2006).

The term “colonial settler society” was not invented by us. As far as I am aware, it was first coined in 1973 by [Maxime Rodinson](#) (Rodinson, 2001), the French historian, sociologist and Orientalist. Colonial settler societies, argued Rodinson, were atypical colonies, a species sui generis. In some colonising projects, settler communities that differed in race, religion,

language or ethnicity from the indigenous population were imported by the imperial power into the colony. They were settled on indigenous land and granted superior privilege. They were, thus, set against the indigenous population, enabling the imperial power to play divide-and-rule politics.

Most settler colonial projects collapsed with the end of colonialism. However, a few colonial settler communities strove towards establishing their own sovereignty; they used the colonial state framework to transport more settlers and initiated state institution-building processes. Under special conditions, some settler communities were able to rid themselves of the imperial power, establish their own sovereign states and continue to rule the indigenous population, displace it or exterminate it. Colonial settler societies were a creation of imperialism but some used colonialism (and I do not mean this as a conspiracy) as a shell within which to develop their own exclusionary nationalism.

I think that this early recognition of variation and specificity within larger concepts is what prepared Nira to analyse complexities. This theme, of her early experience in Israel, echoes in her book [Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class](#). (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995). One of the qualities of Nira's attempt to theorise is her rootedness in a global world view. The contextualisation of what she studies is taken to be part of capitalism, and of the particular time within capitalism in which we are living. That is where her socialist perspective comes in.

A second aspect that characterises Nira's theorisation is the conscientious effort not to subsume or to arrange multiple perspectives hierarchically into what could look – especially to people embedded in Marxism – like a more rigorous theory. Nira makes a conscientious effort to acknowledge positionalities. What she gains by this is anti-reductionism: an acceptance that each group involved in the struggle has its own definition of itself. Not because it should remain so, but as a starting point for analysis. This enables us also to view the shifts that occur, in the groups involved in the struggle, over time.

A third quality that characterises Nira's writing is the way in which she theorises from within the struggle, unlike many academics who assume God's gaze in their writings. Nira always tries to offer a tool-kit for understanding the situation. In her analyses, she strives to help create the unity in the struggle of different groups, without one predominating over the others.

I will return to memories of Nira and I as young scholars in Jerusalem in 1967-8 in the period just before we left the country. We were involved in a research project which compared the school curricula for Israeli Jewish pupils, Palestinian pupils in Arab schools in Israel and in

Jordanian schools in the West Bank and Gaza. It was patently obvious to us how education was used to inculcate nationalism, and how it was used differently by the majority group as compared with a national minority.

In 1968 we left Israel. A group of us realised after the war that 1967 had been a watershed – the beginning of a new era in Israel. Shimon Tzabar called it, “the empire”. Later, he brought out a newspaper in London called *Israel Imperial News*. The situation was new: Israel, a former colony (a mandate, to be precise) which had gained independence in 1948 and induced a Palestinian ethnic cleansing in order to create a Jewish majority had, in 1967, conquered the rest of Palestine, started to settle the newly-acquired territory and ruled as coloniser over the occupied Palestinian territories. We saw vividly the birth of a colonial state, and the way in which a former colony had become a colonial power itself.

Some of our group regarded themselves as political refugees; the majority wanted to study. We took different directions. Nira and some others went to the US; I came via Paris in May '68, and the SDS German students' summer demonstrations in Munich, to London straight into the UK student revolutions, and the mass Vietnam demonstrations at the American embassy in Grosvenor Square. Others stayed in the US, in France or Germany, but we maintained a network. I started a PhD at the LSE on the British student movement. What was intriguing to me was that the radicalisation was not classical; it didn't emerge from the working class, but from the youth, women and black people. In other words, we were witnessing the emergence of new movements and the birth of intersectionality.

I remember an anecdote. I was in the US in December 1968 at a student rally. Someone from Black Power got up and declared that if the white students, SDS, didn't agree with black people and follow their leadership, then they were shits like their parents carrying the white man's burden. A white woman then stood up to him and called him a black patriarchal shit, who shouldn't try his manipulations on women who had been oppressed more and longer than him!

The conflicts among different oppressed groups participating in the struggle were glaringly obvious. There was a need to articulate the different positions of different groups and their demands in order to aggregate them into one force. It was not a question only of theory; it was a practical question of the struggle. And it is precisely in this respect that Nira manages to theorise from within the context of the struggle she is engaged with. She strives not only to establish an analytically clear position but also to find a way in which all parties can work together.

Religion offers another example of the same problem: it is not an unchanging, essential and

eternal concept. It is whatever it is being used for; it is whatever people find in it. 'Opium for the masses' is not good enough. We need to contextualise religious feelings and religious movements within a political struggle, in concrete situations, in order to understand the role 'religion' plays in those struggles.

In 1974 Nira and I were among a group of Middle East intellectuals who established the [\*Khamsin project\*](#): a journal of socialist revolutionaries of the Middle East was also for socialists in other countries who are interested in that part of the world. *Khamsin* was a committed journal. It aimed not merely to reflect and express, but also to be part of the struggles for social liberation and against nationalist and religious mystifications. The journal was published from 1974 until 1989. It was devoted to the struggles of the Arab popular masses against imperialism, zionism and the Arab ruling classes. The members of the *Khamsin* collective were from various countries of the region, and belonged to different political tendencies. The journal's maxim was this: The "khamsin" is a hot desert wind which blows in the Middle East for 50 days each year. For many years a scorching wind had been blowing continually over the Middle East. For those of you familiar with *Khamsin*, it is obvious how it connected to Nira's agendas on gender, racism and against religious fundamentalism.

Nira is forever curious. She loves to travel, as everyone well knows, and she brings home mementos from every journey. Her house is full of them. In the same way, when she travels the world she brings back intellectual mementos with her; new problems which she picks up in different countries, novel theoretical perspectives which she appropriates and integrates into her work. I suspect that she benefits in the same way from her international students who bring ideas and issues from their different countries. Through them she learns about the world and new and different situations.

Colonial Settler Societies has become a field of study, almost a discipline on its own, with its own journals. The term is used by Aborigines in Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia where Nira spent quite a lot of time. It is a concept which was forged in Jerusalem in the 1960s and has since become globally acknowledged. So, too, Nira's fame.

## Q&A Session

Q: Very briefly I want to make a correction: the new era didn't start in 1967, certainly not with the war. The Zionist state is *sui generis* but not in the way Avishai describes it because everything he said about Zionist colonisation and its pretence of being an anti-colonialist and national liberation movement can be said about the US. And we in [Matzpen](#) (the Socialist

organization in Israel which initiated the establishment of *Khamsin*) actually came out before the '67 war, I can show you the documents. Moreover, Marxists developed a typology and taxonomy of different colonialisms as far back as the beginning of the 20th century. If you read Kautsky on colonialism, he constructs a taxonomy in which there are two kinds of colonisations: one where the labour power of the indigenous people is exploited and the one where the settlers work for themselves. He moves from this to very different political conclusions that you or I would agree with but some pre-recognition of some of the history you were talking about is in place.

Q: I was at the Palestine Society conference in March 2011 where the entire theme was to apply the paradigm of settler colonialism to the context of Palestine. Nira's work on this issue is absolutely amazing. She wasn't included on any of the panels which I think was a massive oversight. To me it is quite important the way Avishai has traced Nira's work on intersectionality, gender and national reproduction and how the other strands of work that she has done come from this first engagement with settler colonialism. Nira I would love to see you to re-engage with settler colonialism and bring that back to the politics of belonging and apply gender analysis to that.

Q: I am thinking about intersectionality and everything that has been said today. From my perspective, it reminds me of antagonistic democracy and the project of Jacques Derrida of democracy to be based on antagonism. Intersectionality allows us to explore antagonism as a continuous project which will never end based on antagonism which will never end. I would like to ask you if it is still part of democracy and what kind of democratic project would that be: not that project and not this democracy that we know and not the post enlightenment democracy which we operate in. In other words, I am probably thinking about Chantal Mouffe and Laclau and their radical theory of democracy, how do you relate to it? If it's a continuous project – the word project is not appropriate because project is finite – if antagonism has to be there, then is it possible to develop any narrative of speaking about them and using them politically without violence?

**Avishai Ehrlich:** Unfortunately violence is part of human interaction. We have to live with antagonism and we have to somehow try to mediate it. I am not even sure when a situation stops being antagonistic and becomes "agonistic". Anyone who talks about the end of violence is eschatological. I don't think this is part of Nira's project or of mine. Chantal Mouffe is combating the spirit of Karl Schmitt who regarded every political relationship in dichotomous terms of friend or enemy, and held that everything was justified towards an enemy. Chantal Mouffe is trying to negotiate a more nuanced in-between; the "other" should

not necessarily be annihilated. At the same time, antagonism can create struggle and struggle can sometimes be expressed in violence.

## *East London, Racisms, Refugees*

### **Philip Marfleet**

Nira and I are very recent collaborators, working together in our Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at UEL. I have to say we have made very significant progress in a very short time and I take this opportunity to recognise Nira's professionalism and energy as well as intellect and insights. Saying this doesn't mean that we always agree - and in fact we disagree rather a lot, including on issues of real importance like matters of religious belief and secularism and some aspects of political practice. But we agree on what we might call – and these are the right words – a “real fundamental” and that is a question of activism.



*Erene Kaptani, Molly Andrews, Philip Marfleet*

I'm very pleased the term activism appears in the title of this event, because Nira is an activist of a very particular sort: a restless enquirer about culture and society and about how people live and see their circumstances, and how they contest marginalisation and matters of oppression. This brings me directly to the question of East London. When Nira left University of Greenwich some years ago I think she could have easily placed herself in any one of several institutions of a certain academic status. In fact she came to UEL, which is a “poor relation” university in an area which is the most significant in terms of deprivation in the whole of northern Europe. The largest number of poor urban people in northern Europe is

concentrated in the boroughs of East London. At the same time, this is also a place with a very complex history – of centuries of migration, of inclusion and of exclusion – and vitally of course with a very complex history of activism and resistance. East London, in many ways, as an urban place is par excellence a site of resistance of all sorts: of organised labour, of anti-fascism, of battles for equal pay, and so on.

The history of East London is complex and contradictory. Several people here today have offices at UEL Docklands Campus which look out on the Royal Docks and the City Airport. Here's a site which until fairly recently was at the commercial hub of the empire: a location from which generations of imperial adventurers, speculators, colonial administrators, military men, missionaries and others left the shores of this country to become part of an imperial diaspora. I know people in the room whose parents and grandparents arrived in this country from various parts of what we call today the Global South – some also have antecedents like my great-grandparents who travelled to India to become part of the Anglo-Indian community. So East London has been an exit point – a site for departures – but of course also a site at which, for centuries, people of the Global South arrived as travellers, sometimes as labourers, as slaves, as refugees joining communities which even three centuries ago were among the most culturally diverse in Europe. Some of those people, the arrivals, were embraced, some were not. Many were both included and at other times excluded, and East London is today a great metropolitan city in which all the contradictions of Empire past and present are to be found.

These contradictions seem to have evaded many historians and contemporary social scientists amongst whom there has been a tendency both to minimise history and the contemporary reality of resistance. There have been numerous cases of communities rendered invisible and silent in various ways while others have been a focus of study. This is especially clear in the case of narratives of refuge and of sanctuary. This is one of the main areas in which I work, and in which Nira and I have collaborated. Now I want to say something about the question of refugees in East London, both in the historical and contemporary contexts.

I want to go back a few hundred years to what is often regarded as the definitive refugee experience, one which is directly seen as associated with East London, and that's the Huguenot experience. The Huguenots are often seen as the "real" refugees and as people against whom all other refugees, including the refugees of today, must be measured if they were to be viewed as authentic. In the 1860s a man called Samuel Bowles, who was associated with one of the Huguenot institutions – the French hospital – wrote a poem



saluting “the noble refugee” who had sought sanctuary in East London 200 years before. By the mid-19th century the Huguenot emigration – the search for sanctuary of French Calvinists who left under the oppression of the absolutist monarchy of the Bourbon regime – was viewed as a respectable part of British history. The poem celebrated the refugees of the 17th century and the reception they received from the English. I won't read the whole poem but Bowles concluded with the following lines: “Hey, for our land the English land, the land of the brave and free, who with the open arms in the older time received the refugee.”

By the mid-Victorian period there was an official British history which presented the Huguenot episode almost two centuries before as a celebration of Britain and particularly of the receptivity of Britain to people from all over the world. There was a national romance – the idea of a hospitable nation which would receive people who were victims of various forms of tyranny –which asserted the notion of “liberty”. At about the same time that Bowles was writing, there was also interest in the Huguenots from Samuel Smiles, who wrote a history of the Huguenot immigration as “a story of industrious, intelligent and highly minded Frenchmen, received by their hosts in London who crowded around the venerable sufferers with indignant pity and hearts”. Britain had become a place of asylum, he said, a place “of sanctuary in all times so freely granted to fugitives”.

Well, of course, it was not quite like that. When the Huguenots arrived in East London in the 17th century many local people insisted that they did not belong in the city. In 1681 the vicar of Whitechapel Church preached on the subject of the refugees and from the pulpit he pronounced that the Huguenots were “the very offal of the earth, who cannot be content to be safe here from that justice and beggary from which they fled and to be fattened on what belongs to the poor of our own land and to go rich at our expense, but rob us of our religion too”. The French refugees weren't Anglican of course; they were Calvinists and so placed under suspicion for being of an alien faith. When the question of naturalising the French refugees came along a few years later, most of these people were living in Whitechapel and Spitalfields. One MP argued against the naturalisation bill; he maintained:

*Should this bill pass, it would bring as a great infliction on this nation as ever fell upon the Egyptians, and one of the plague we have at this very time and very severe upon us. I mean that of the land of bringing frogs in abundance, even in the chambers of their kings. For there is no entry in the places of their kings but for the great noise and croaking of the froglanders. Let us first kick this bill out of the House and then the foreigners out of the kingdom.*

The Huguenot migrants were, later, broadly accepted by the communities of East London,

which of course contained all manner of people from across Britain's expanding empire. I mention these episodes associated with the Huguenots because I think the figure of the refugee is a very good example of the nature of official narratives, including official academic histories, which need to be critically examined with attention to their complexity and to the numerous paradoxes and contradictions in terms of life experience and in relation to social theory.

At this point I return to the question of Professor Yuval-Davis because I think Nira's approach, to questions of race, of ethnicity, of community and to matters of diversity and multiculturalism, embraces these problems of belonging: "Who belongs?"; "How and in what ways are they included or excluded?"; "What do people belong to? ... communities? neighbourhoods? nations?" Nira has cautioned us against homogenisation of groups in these categories, of attributing characteristics to Others with whom we do not engage; she's cautioned us against accepting dominant narratives, including those projected onto specific communities by figures who have authority within them. These critical approaches have an important historical dimension: much migrant history, and specifically refugee history, has been erased from the historical records or placed there in partisan fashion, as I described earlier in relation to the Huguenots. Histories of inclusion and exclusion have special significance today, especially in East London in relation to 2012, the Olympic year. Official accounts of the Olympics ask us to celebrate a city which is said to symbolise the unity of a globalised world, one in which historical and contemporary diversity speak of harmony and inclusion. But who belongs? Who belongs in London and especially in East London? And who decides who belongs and who includes and excludes? In the case of many migrants forcibly excluded from the city, who detains, who incarcerates, who deports?

Nira's great interest in these issues has already shaped the agenda for a key event we will be organising at the UEL very soon: a very important conference [London - City of Paradox](#). Perhaps that title should have been inspired by today's programme, perhaps we should have called the conference: 'London - sociology, politics, thinking and acting'. 'London – City of Paradox' is all about a city characterised for centuries by inclusion and exclusion, by oppression and marginalisation, and by resistance. Everyone who has attended today will be receiving an invitation from us. Nira and I will certainly be there to welcome you all.

### **Erene Kaptani**

Nira is important to us because she gave me and other migrants a space of intellectual belonging, a spatial belonging and emotional belonging and I thank her very much for that. Nira is important politically as well. Let me explain. As the title for this session refers to

racism and refugees in East London to which I would add migrants as well, I would like to talk briefly about the new racism they are experiencing. A Channel 4 series, [Go Greek For a Week](#), depicted members of the Greek working-class, a hairdresser and a bus driver, who had an amazing life. The hairdresser got a pension when she was 50 and went shopping for furs. By the way, their actors were British, so they went to their employer and said, "listen, I don't want to work anymore, I am Greek so I don't need to, I can get a pension just like that". Apparently somebody went up to a bus driver in the north of England and said "listen, you just need to move to Greece and you gonna have this amazing pension and you don't pay taxes." I thought this was racist.

I work with various groups in East London as a drama therapist and a performance leader and researcher. I was working with an African-Caribbean group, who knew I was Greek, and were surprised that Greeks faced racism too, 'Really? This is unbelievable that you are like Blacks!' I said, "What do you mean? These are all colonial practices". I just want to bring to your attention how concepts of racism are hitting Europe, how they divide Europe: *Go Greek for a week* was about dividing the working-class here and the working-class there. The other thing is that the economy is completely dependent on politics. So, how can we sort out the economy and who is going to pay for all this mess? We have technocrats now in government in Greece, in Italy and within this context, social sciences are shrinking. If you look for jobs in the arts? Plenty. Research on religion? Plenty. Social sciences? Shrinking. What about critical thinking? Especially with the economic crisis, the new racism, and youth crisis? We need critical thinking. We need self-reflectivity. Within this context, Nira's work is very important.

I was involved in a research project where Nira was the principle investigator ([Identity, Performance and Social Action](#)) and we used participatory theatre techniques as a social research method. When we applied for this project, one of the assessors was very sceptical and said "oh this project is more about social justice". What? Research and social justice cannot go together? Nira's other strength is interdisciplinary: she's not just claiming to be interdisciplinary because it is very fashionable, she is actually interdisciplinary as proved by the conference at the end of the project which was attended by artists, community professionals, scholars and activists all of whom found her work relevant.

Nira's third strength is intersectionality. Our project included a range of theatre events, plays and individual interviews. Her sharpness in detecting intersectionality was amazing. I remember three stories on what it is like to be a refugee: in one the child was ill and her mother, a Kosovan refugee couldn't get the name of the condition right but because she had

linguistic resources like knowledge of Latin and could call Kosovo, she could find out about the child's illness. Another refugee, from Turkish Kurdistan was an actor, who couldn't speak English but knew how to take videos, took a video of his child having an epileptic fit and when the doctor came he showed him the video. The third one was a Somali woman who was accused of abusing her child, who seemed to have bruises all over his body, a result of a hereditary tropical disease that they didn't detect, and in the end, her only way of dealing with this was to ask the manager of a community organisation to intervene on her behalf. These examples of different refugee parents were used by Nira to show how refugees are not monolithic and different refugees have different social and cultural resources to deal with the problems they encounter. Nira hates dichotomies; she likes nuances and brings them out. The other thing Nira does, and why this research went really well, is she takes risks; she is an academic who takes risks. I think this is beautiful. She likes moving; I think one of her reasons for working with refugees is movement, because this is what migrants do, we move, and this is beautiful as well. On my first day of work with Nira at UEL, what were we singing? Row, row, row your boat.

## Q & A Session

Q: I was wondering if you could, for those of us who are relatively new – with your background of research on East London – contextualise the riots and perhaps the new racism and the way it has been framed for those of us who have lived there as I have been very connected to Dalston, specifically after and during the riots.

**Philip Marfleet:** The East End is classically both an area of poverty and deprivation, and an area which was viewed by those with power and authority as a place which was threatening and fearful to them. For centuries it has been the place where working-class Londoners lived, where the majority of London's migrants first found a home and therefore a place of poverty and marginalisation. It was a centre of resistance, giving birth to Britain's – and possibly Europe's – first genuine industrial trade unions. At the same time, as people particularly in the field of cultural history will be aware, East London was also a place of fascination, particularly in the 18th century; a place where all sort of things which were improper in the white-washed streets of Kensington and Chelsea could be undertaken. I often say to myself: "Is this today the most culturally diverse place on the planet?" Parts of inner London are not now described as showing diversity but "super-diversity". The danger of course is that in this rich and enormously positive environment in terms of multitudes of people and complexity of interactions, "super-diversity" is also turned into a type of romance. East London is a quite

remarkable place in terms of its cultural characteristics but still contains the largest concentration of urban poverty in northern Europe - and that is not changing – in fact, it is becoming more clearly defined because of the crisis of the world system.

The way in which the neoliberal agenda is unfolding at the moment, and the way in which governments in Western Europe and America are conducting affairs, expresses a desire on the part of people with wealth, power and authority to displace responsibility for the crisis of the world system onto the most vulnerable. It seems to me that the outcome of the so-called riots of 2011 is a vigorous, ferocious and zealous attempt to make the most vulnerable people pay the price in a very high profile, exemplary, demonstrative way which mobilises the media. This is the chief characteristic of what is going on at a global level. The most wonderful and almost inspiring thing that is taking place in Egypt at the moment, a country that I am very fascinated by, is the resistance, the unwillingness of people to pay the price for others and I very much look forward to new forms of resistance being generated close to home and not least in East London.

Q: How do we take the same passion and that same twinning of learning and social activism into secondary schools and middle school and into education prior to university level or even into an undergraduate level?

**Erene Kaptani:** We don't have time to see the video we made of our research project but I think as academics what is important is to collaborate with people who have the skills to go to schools and create a space where people can reflect and think. For me what works is movement. You cannot go to young people and start giving a lecture, forget it. But by engaging them with the body, with space, images, very visual technology and methodology then you can facilitate a space of reflective thinking. You could even start theorising, not at the level of trained academics, of course. That's why I think that the methodology similar to the one we used with Nira in our project could bridge this gap. So it is not a bit of intellect here and a bit of practice there but praxis for addressing issues of power.

**Phil Marfleet:** It seems to me, from what I know of Nira's work, that it is all about engaging scholarship and that's why the term 'activism' in the title of today's event is extremely important. I think on Wednesdays when we can't find Nira it's because she's cooking at the Hackney migrant centre. It is difficult to find Nira because she is engaged in practical activity in support and advocacy of migrants in East London; there is an organic link between Nira's work and her practice. I mention two specific things here: one of the very best conferences I have been to is the conference organised by Nira and Erere at the conclusion of the project. What was important about that event – I wasn't quite sure what I was going to find – was that

it combined academics, activists, people engaged in community activism of various sorts in an extremely creative way. In the same context, I am going to give another plug for the conference we are organising in April, 'London - City of Paradox', in which academics will play a key part but we are also inviting people from all sorts of organisations, especially people involved creatively in the arts in relation to community activity, people involved in NGOs and, very importantly, people in education at all levels. We want to reflect on London past and present in a critical independent sense, which combines academic insights with other forms of activities and engagements. I think that in these things there is no wall but, if there is a perceived wall, we have to attempt to breach it.

Q: I like what you say about moving as migrants. Do you think you need any directions when you are moving?

**Erene Kaptani:** This connects to my thanks to Nira for giving us a space of belonging. I don't say that we should just move, without directions. However, coming from a theatre background, when you are stuck and have no ideas, just move and something will change, something will happen, trust me.

## Ann Phoenix and Nira Yuval-Davis in Conversation

**Phil Marfleet:** We are now at the final formal session which is a conversation about this book *Politics of Belonging: Intersectional contestations*. This is Nira's fourth major monograph, although she has been involved in editing all sorts of other publications including one with Ann Phoenix. Ann is a professor at the Institute of Education; she and Nira have been friends for very long time as well as engaging in this specific collaboration.



*Ann Phoenix, Nira Yuval-Davis, Phil Marfleet*

**Ann Phoenix:** What we are planning to do is to whet your appetite for Nira's new book that we're launching here today, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestation*, and to discuss some of the issues that it covers. What I think our conversation will do is to give more substance to many of the debates that have come up already today and to end this session with Nira filling out her ideas about her work that come together in this book. This is an informal conversation. What I want to do first of all is to talk a little bit about the structure of the book because it is divided into five framing questions that are the five main chapters. These are: (1) the citizenship question of the state and beyond (2) the national question from the indigenous to the diasporic (3) the religious question of the sacred, the cultural and the

political (4) the cosmopolitan question situating the human and human rights and (5) the caring question of the emotional and the political. These five framing questions are key contemporary issues that bring together Nira's ideas and interests in political activism. It is striking that although there are no question marks in the titles of these chapters, they are also questions. I am also struck by what Nira says at the end of the introduction – that she found it very hard to stop writing this book - and she found it difficult because she doesn't want to foreclose anything as these are ongoing issues. So I wonder, Nira, if your reluctance to end the book has something to do with your use of the notion of questions; whether in fact you are saying “here is this book. I have been thinking about all the issues it deals with a great deal, but I am providing you with no answers. I am just raising some questions for you”.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** Thanks Ann. This day has been emotionally overwhelming for me so please forgive me if I am not very decisive in my answers. I think that the main reason that I was reluctant to let go of it was that the book is an impossible mission because I tried to construct generic statements or relationships, something that methodologically I don't believe in. They all deal with processes/ structures that are not only contested, but are also shifting and fluid, interrelated and mutually constituted in each particular location, both spatial and historical. They are also dependent on the particular positionings of the people who are taking part in these situations as both individuals and as groupings. So the answers to these questions, the particular manifestations of these issues would be different in these different contexts. On the other hand, when you say something, and even more when you write something, it has a particular fixity. I tried to give illustrative examples but it was still very difficult especially as, at the time I was supposed to finish writing the book, the Arab Spring started to happen, the global crisis of neoliberalism both economic and political started to happen, and although I had talked about these issues already in the book, and hopefully, I don't think that anything that I have written has proved to be grossly inaccurate, at least until now, I could continue to reformulate and incorporate it all on and on. One of the things which also made it so difficult is because, in some ways, this is a book that also sums up all the various strands of my work that you heard about throughout the day.

When I finished my book [\*Gender and Nation\*](#) in 1997, I had somewhat similar feelings, but in some ways *Gender and Nation* was much more contained. Although I treated gender intersectionally, although I de-homogenised nation and nationalism and their relationships to state, culture and religion, it was still more narrowly defined. In this book I moved from gender to intersectionality, I didn't prioritise gender, although I prioritised feminist projects of belonging. At the same time, since I finished *Gender and Nation*, issues of nationalism and citizenship are becoming more and more separated empirically as well as theoretically. This



myth of the holy trinity (and overlap of boundaries) of people, nation, and state that has been going on since the French revolution, is becoming more and more vulnerable to a certain ad-hoc-ness in the way that they interrelate. Because of that I felt that I needed to discuss various contemporary political projects of belonging, of which citizenship and nationalism were only two, and also to differentiate different political projects of belonging within citizenship, within nationalism, as well as within religion and cosmopolitanism, and what I considered to be the main feminist political project of belonging, which is ethics of care.

**Ann Phoenix:** You started off talking about contestation, which is part of the subtitle of this book, about shifting, fluid nations, particularities and so on, and I am really intrigued that you started the introduction with the example of 7/7, and used that to get into some of these issues. Perhaps you could say a little bit more about why you did?

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** I have very vivid memories of 7/7. I was actually giving testimony in a court case for Avtar Brah's MA on Race and Ethnicity in Birkbeck College. I was an external examiner of that MA and a student accused her of racism, which is a good example of one of the paradoxes and contestations of life. We came out of the court and suddenly we couldn't get into the tube. We had to walk for miles and then I heard that bus number 30, which I would have caught to go home, had also been a target. This is one reason that I have used that example. Another is that I started to construct the book in its present frame around that time. But I think the main reason that I used it was because of the puzzled and supposedly commonsensical response of so many people who read about it and said "one or more of them were actually British? And even more so, they were born here and grew up here and were even educated here, how could they do it, how could they betray us?" This was a naturalising common sense expression of what is a political project of belonging, of citizenship and nationalism which means that you naturalise the holy trinity of people, nation and state. But then I read the text of one of the 7/7 suicide bomber's video, made before the attack and shown on Al Jazeera. He was born in Britain and grew up and was educated here. However, much of his speech was about 'my people', by which he meant the Muslim Umma, not the British people. And, of course, among the British people who were killed were Muslim people, but this was irrelevant to his construction of a homogeneous global Muslim Umma which was his political project of belonging. I thought this is a very good illustration of what is happening. That the hegemonic political projects of belonging might still be citizenship, might still be nationalism, but we cannot take for granted that they are the only ones or that other contesting projects do not become more and more important to more and more people. The processes I describe in the book are, of course, older than 7/7 or even 9/11. The end of the Cold War can be seen as an important signpost – but not a starting point – when formal

citizenship and belonging became more and more mediated by other collectivities of belonging.

**Ann Phoenix:** One of the things that follows from that, in this non-essentialist conceptualisation of belonging and of complexity and dynamism of people's feelings about where they belong and what they will do, relates to what you say about your own biography and what appals you. While you certainly do not devote much of the book to discussing your experiences, you do state strongly that some of your own experiences have an impact on the issues that you have identified.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** Yes. Like most other feminist epistemologists I don't believe that knowledge is achieved by an "objective view from nowhere", what Donna Haraway dubbed "the God trick" (Haraway, 1988). Of course the formulation of the questions in the book, let alone the formulation of the answers, is situated and, therefore, both methodologically and epistemologically it was very important for me to state where my own situated gaze comes from. As was mentioned earlier in the day, I aim by no means to reduce social location, identification and normative values to each other, but I do feel that they affect and are affected by such endeavours as I was writing about in the book and I felt that by stating how I came to be occupied by issues of nationalism, gender relations, religion, racism, cosmopolitanism and so on, it would provide the critical reader with more tools to assess and appreciate what I am writing.

I grew up in Israel as the daughter of a Labour Zionist in the heart of the Zionist establishment. Reading *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand as a teenager, suddenly gave me permission not to follow the collective. I had to become a right wing libertarian before I became a left wing libertarian. My father was a secularist, a son of a rabbi from a line of rabbis, who rebelled and, paradoxically, was able to do so because Germans occupied his part of Lithuania during WW1 and they forced secular education for everyone, so he was exposed to another kind of education from the traditional Orthodox Jewish one. This is why the whole issue of faith schools has been so important for me as part of the agenda of Women against Fundamentalism. Meeting the Palestinians who remained in Israel after the 1948 war and some communists as a teenager also had an important impact. Then in the military – in Israel Jewish girls go into national service at the age of 18 unless they are religious or pregnant or married - I was supposed to be sent to the officers' course because I came from a good, middle-class, patriotic home. However for a couple of months until the next course was due to start, they sent me to what was considered to be a very privileged place in Tel Aviv; to the office of the Military Governor who controlled the movements of the

Palestinian citizens of Israel. On my first day my boss asked me “By the way, what do you think about the military government of Israeli Arabs?” With the innocence of all my 18 years, I looked at him and said “You know, I don’t think it is very just. Why do you have to govern all of them militarily, why not only those who you think are spies or enemies of the state?” This was the start of a whole month in the field security office where attempts to educate me politically resulted in me becoming more and more convinced that I was right. There was also a security investigation of me which found out that I had a boyfriend who was from a Palestinian village and another friend who was a communist, so I got a low security rank and was sent as a private to be a typist in the military garage where I was exposed to very blatant sexism. I was the only one there who had finished high school and I was almost the only one who was Ashkenazi rather than Misrakhi. So in a way my whole situated gaze on Israeli society changed then and the process of politicisation that eventually made me anti-Zionist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, etcetera, began.

**Ann Phoenix:** I think that this is very convincing and tells us a bit of why you are interested in narratives. Just one little thing I want to pick up from there, because you mentioned just now that there is no ‘God’s eye view from nowhere’ so I was a little surprised that you apologised for the limitation of your own perspective. What do you mean by that? Can you have it both ways: that everybody’s perspectives are situated and yet that you should try and get around that and apologise because your perspective is limited?

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** Maybe I should not have apologised; you make me feel guilty that I apologised. It is because when you try to write the most comprehensive thing that you can and you are very conscious of your limitations that you feel bad. We all want to be Gods, don’t we? We want to be perfect – not really, I’m joking – I can just see somebody quoting me on that....

**Ann Phoenix:** I am going to come back to the main messages of the book in a moment, but there are also some indications of how one, in your view, should do academic work. Some of them are implicit. One is that this book is very intertextual with *Gender and Nation*. You sometimes cite things you say there and think about how you have moved on. You also said that you started thinking about this book, albeit not in the form that it eventually took, the moment at which you stopped writing *Gender and Nation* and we know that you find it difficult to stop writing your books, so maybe you just close one book and begin another? I think that the non-flippant point is maybe that academic work linked with activism requires one’s continual thinking and committing words to paper, which gives it a certain fixity, but also helps one to work things out. The other thing is that you talked about academic work being

dialogical and it has been mentioned several times today how many collaborators you have had, successful collaborators that lasted over time, some of whom are in the audience today, and are still friends. We all know academic collaborations in which academics collaborate for one good project but then don't want to see each other ever again. You don't seem to have done that, so it seems that dialogicality is really important to you. A third issue that you talk about is around ethics. I wonder if you can take us a little bit further into your thinking about ethics in relation to the Politics of belonging and academic work.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** First of all, each time I finish writing a book, starting with my MA and then my PhD dissertation, I swore I would never write another book. In a way each book becomes more comprehensive and more impossible and a torture to write, and yet there is this kind of impulse, this kind of feeling that you must write it. I don't know why. One of the interesting things with virtually all my academic friends – and not just my academic friends – is that for us the 'real' work is the writing. We can teach, we can do administration, we can do housework, we can do millions of things and they are not work, although as feminists we would talk about housework as work. Yet the real work is writing. How many times do I feel guilty that I haven't done any work today? Yes, I have been in the office for 12 hours but I haven't done any Work. And it is not just me that thinks like that. We are all like this. But why? It is a subject that I invite people to do research on because I haven't a clue why this becomes so. Anyway, because life is a process, work is a process, activism is a process, there is an ongoing internal dialogue, not only an external dialogue. You feel forever that you have certain ideas that "I must write down, I must develop", so in some ways there is always this kind of internal race without a finishing line. One of the things that I was really amazed about while being an international visiting professor in Sweden for a couple of years, is that they go to the office for five days per week, early in the morning until 4 or 5 in the evening, then they go home and they stop working. They stop thinking about work, and this is something that in Britain and in the US and in Israel, for most of the people that I know, is absolutely unthinkable. I envy them in many ways but this is definitely not me.

In terms of dialogue, I am very conscious of its importance and I have also written about it, about transversal dialogue and situated knowledge and imagination. My dialogues have not only been with those I have been working with. I have been absolutely fortunate with all the friends who were either friends before we started working together or ended up as friends after we worked together. Although there were almost always a lot of difficult moments during that process I have remained friends with virtually everybody I have worked with. And as you said many are here, others sent me messages and apologies that they could not be here, but they are still friends. I have been moving throughout my life between the need to write my

own things and the need to work with others. I've found both teaching and working with others in terms of writing and so on the fastest and the best way of learning and growing. Like Pat Hill-Collins said, we can never reach the truth, but we can approximate the truth via dialogue with others. And the wider the dialogue from different positions the closer one can get to a true understanding. Therefore collaborative work with particular individuals or with a group of people has always been tremendously exciting and insightful for me and I find it really rewarding although by no means the only way I feel compelled to work.

**Ann Phoenix:** And the ethics question? You devote a section to thinking about ethics around the politics of belonging. I was also interested to learn about the ethics of your working practices, particularly since you are so politically engaged.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** I think that in terms of the practice of work, stating my own location and situated gaze has been absolutely basic in terms of ethics. As it has been mentioned throughout the day, both with my ex-postgraduate students and in my writing, mutual respect and exchange are obviously central. Another point is that while I consider only those with whom I share political values as my political allies, I consider it my duty to care for all those I carry out research with and on.

**Ann Phoenix:** I want to deal with a few issues that you have addressed. I start with perhaps a relatively tiny one. I always disliked the term 'autochthonous' which, it seems to me, serves to exclude others from the possibility to belong to the nation. It seems to me, often to be used in a similar way to 'indigenous', which I also dislike. So I was a bit surprised that you like it and used it.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** I use it not because I necessarily like the term 'autochthony' but because I consider autochthony as a hegemonic form of racism today. I differentiate it, for reasons I can give, from the notion of 'indigeness'. Originally I had never heard the word 'autochthony' and I was talking only about indigenous politics which are very much double-edged because, on the one hand, land rights and political rights and other forms of human rights of indigenous people have been the subject of a lot of political campaigns that I have been part of. This started from the rights of the Palestinians and the confiscation of Palestinian lands, included the land rights of the Aboriginals (from when I was in Australia) and later developed into the notion of settlers' societies, in collaboration with Daiva Stasiulis, (a Canadian who I met in Australia). In our book (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995), we both looked at the Australian case in comparison to our own countries and collaborated on developing a theoretical introduction to a problematic, which involved an intersectional approach to settlers' societies. The book included ten case studies from Palestine, Canada, US, Australia,

as well as societies like Algeria and South Africa.

In recent years we have had the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous people. I celebrated that and yet I was also preoccupied with a sense of discomfort in relation to those struggles. For example, in Australia there were some years where all the graduates from Anthropology were employed by particular land councils that tried to prove that particular aboriginal kinship groups were the 'real' indigenous people of this particular place and so, of course, they were the ones which should benefit from mineral rights to this land. The implication of this was that other aboriginal groups who settled there because they were displaced from other parts of Australia do not really belong and should not get a share in this combination of tribalism and neoliberalism. In North America they even use DNA blood tests in order to determine who belongs and who does not among 'native Americans' in burial sites. I felt that these kinds of exclusionary practices, this kind of claiming that "this place belongs to us and therefore all the other people have no rights" and it does not matter that their families have been living there for 2-300 years or how and why they came to live there; this is the side of indigenous politics I cannot accept. When I went to Australia for the first time, I attended a very interesting women's conference. The Aboriginal women there started talking about all non-Aboriginal Australians as the 'imposing society'. Then a Jewish woman claimed "We are not part of the imposers, we also suffered from discrimination and racism" and then an Irish woman said "We are not imposers, we were discriminated against" and then an English woman said "But my foreparents came here as convicts, they are not the imposers". So I decided to call the book on settler societies *Beyond dichotomies*. In the case of the Zionist conflict, the Zionist claim that the land belonged to them 2000 years ago is not the only issue. For example, my parents were the only ones who survived among their whole extended families; they were not murdered by the Nazis because by chance they left Lithuania before WW2 and by chance the Nazis were stopped in North Africa before they occupied Palestine where they would have enacted the 'final solution' to the Jewish community, Zionist or not, like everywhere else they controlled. So the issue of indigenous rights is complex. Now we see the British National Party and similar groupings in Europe appealing to the same UN declaration of indigenous people, claiming that they are the indigenous people in England and therefore the other people have no rights, they have to be deported.

Anyway, to go back to the book: I started by applying the notion of indigenous politics to both sides of the coin. Then, when the first draft of the book was sent to readers, both readers were very indignant, as they came from countries like Australia or Canada or the US and were very committed to working for the rights of indigenous peoples, so they felt that there

was a big problem about my talking about indigenous people in what they saw as a disrespectful way. This was the time when I happened to read [Peter Geschiere's book](#) about autochthony (Geschiere, 2009) in which this term is used only to express this exclusionary side of the politics of belonging, whether in Africa or in the West and I gladly adopted his terminology for the sake of greater political, if not analytical, clarity.

**Ann Phoenix:** We have only five minutes remaining, and there are lots of things I would like to ask. I want to ask about transversal politics, which has already been mentioned. A speaker said that the dynamics of your work, how much you think about, and are prepared to move on, in your thinking is exemplified in your shift in your thinking about transversal politics. It seems to me that you are much more lukewarm about it in this book than you were in *Gender and Nation*.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** It is not so much a question of being lukewarm as that I used it in a much more limited and particular way in this book. When I was first exposed to the notion of transversal politics and developed it, I thought that we had found the alternative to identity politics that we were all searching for. I don't have the time now to go into details about what 'transversal politics' is, but since then I have had time to reflect and observe that the shared epistemology developed during transversal dialogues is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the kind of activism we want to develop. What transversal politics shares with other forms of feminist politics and with other new social movements, is that they never found a positive solution to the problem of decision making mechanisms. They rebelled and rightly so against the hierarchical exclusionary type of decision making mechanisms in the old left, but consensus politics, however, that they produced as an alternative not only proved to be very inefficient as a mechanism of decision making, but also proved to be opaque rather than democratic, because it did not erase power relations within the group but rather made them invisible. Very often it was the people who stayed until the end of the meeting at 4 o'clock in the morning who actually made the decisions or some people were more articulate than others who became intimidated by them. Consensus politics presents the group as homogeneous and that all group members feel the same way, therefore I don't agree with it. This is even more problematic in the case of transversal politics because it is very clear that the people who are involved in the dialogue across borders and boundaries are not representative of the groups but advocates with their own differential positionings, in contradistinction from what happens in the case of identity politics that conflates positions and identifications and values as well as individuals and groups. So in a way even the excuse for consensus politics that we speak with the voice of our group and in its name is not readily available. However, while transversal dialogue is not, and should not, be the end

of the process, it is necessary to the construction of a shared understanding of the issues, even if it becomes clear, as is often the case, that the need for action is not the same for different participants in the dialogue.

What binds the participants in transversal dialogue together are their shared values. But what does this mean? In the chapter about the ethics of care, I described the debate between Levinas and Buber. Buber talked about the ideal relationship of 'I-you' (or 'I-thou') rather than 'I-it'. Levinas objected to this, claiming that the I-you relationship is based on Hulme's notion of mutuality and that care should not be based on mutuality, because mutuality is about mutual interest, almost a form of trading: "you are good to me therefore I am good to you". My argument was that the mutuality of transversal politics is not about interest but about trust, therefore long term solidarity and political alliance should only be built when you trust, and you can trust when you share values, even if you come from different locations, different collectivities, different identifications. However, caring can and should be done for everyone. Similarly, dialogue can also happen among those who do not share values and, epistemologically, dialogue is always very important for understanding and 'approaching the truth' in the way Patricia Hill-Collins suggests. However, transversal politics limits the boundaries of the dialogue for those who share values in order to bring the possibility of trust and long-term solidarity into the politics. So, transversal politics is absolutely vital, but it cannot be the end. We need to find other ways in order to carry out efficient political action. Look at the many uprisings, resistances and alternative actions that are happening these days all over the world, which is so wonderful in so many ways. And yet they haven't managed to develop alternative political structures and decision making mechanisms that will sustain them in the long term. Anybody with a good idea about how this development can happen please let me know!

**Ann Phoenix:** I think that is a good place for our conversation to stop. Just to say that the book is scholarly, it is highly engaged and engaging, and Nira manages to end it by noting hope and, as in *Gender and Nation*, we are left joyfully dancing, which is one of Nira's passions.

## Q&A Session

Q: Thank you very much; the whole conversation was brilliant and very stimulating. I am not sure if this is a question or a comment, but in terms of intersectionality I want to just note the need to engage in the critical literature around disability and look at disability as a political force of exclusion, inclusion and belonging where people are still segregated and which



appears to be justified within the main political discourse.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** Absolutely. My friend Helen Meekosha from Australia has been working on it for many years. We have been co-operating on this issue when I worked on issues of women, citizenship and difference. She was a major participant in the dialogue there and also when I was on a panel on intersectionality with Kimberly Krenshaw and others in the American Sociological Association last year.

Q: I haven't read the book, I just got it. I was wondering if you can tell us a little more about what you have already started to speak about in terms of the feminist ethics of care because a long time ago we had conversations about it in terms of political practices and the fact that one reason that fundamentalists are doing so well is that somehow they get the care thing right. The women's movement has failed, in fact, to sustain what you were describing. I was wondering if you could reflect a little bit on this and maybe also suggest some ideas about how we can be better feminist carers.

**Nira Yuval-Davis:** First of all I want to start by recommending Alison Assiter's most [recent book](#) (Assiter 2009) which is all about that, but secondly I want to say that my discussion about caring and the ethics of care looks at the two major feminist models of ethics of care. One which I reject is the one by Sara Ruddick and Virginia Held, which builds the ethics of care around the maternal model, which – and I suppose Levinas comes into this – is a kind of an asymmetrical one according to which we need to care for the helpless, the children, the elderly because women, whether inherently or because of their socialisation, are brought up to be the carers, and they are in this sense more ethical. It is a development of Carol Gilligan's two different types of ethics. The other one, which Joan Tronto mostly developed and I think also Alison Assiter, is much more linked to notions of citizenship rights and duties, in the sense that each of us, for shorter or longer periods of our lives, need care when we are vulnerable, young, old or unwell. This whole notion of the autonomy of the individual on which neoliberalism or liberalism is constructed is a complete fiction. The caring work of women (and men) has facilitated and oiled the working of society on which these 'autonomous' individuals rely. Therefore, care is an absolute and inevitable dimension of social, economic and political life and we need to engage with it.

The feminist ethics of care is not so much about the boundaries of belonging but about the ethics of belonging: how do we need to relate to each other? What does it mean to belong to each other? The other element which is very important, and part of the reason for my rejection of the first model, is that you cannot cleanse the notion of caring from the notion of power. Just this week we had this report (2011) about the caring of the elderly in Britain and

how abusive it can be. Therefore the power of carers and, in other situations, the power of the cared, needs to be looked at. In the book I quote Martin Luther King junior who talked about the insufficiency of love without power and power without love and in a sense the whole book is about the intersection of sociology of power with the sociology of emotions.

**Phil Marfleet:** I would like to make a couple of observations. First of all, this has been clearly a very fine and quite unusual day of discussion. I have been to events which launched a festschrift in the form of a book, where sometimes there has been a panel with an introduction and a conversation, or to specific meetings which recognise scholarly or activist or other contribution, but I have never been to a day quite like this. I think that it is a very eloquent expression of people's appreciation of Nira's work over the years and her direct engagement as a scholar, a supervisor, and a friend. In that sense it has been an extremely positive and notable experience. As I happened to be the chair of this final formal session I would like to thank the organisers of this event, Molly Andrews and Corinne Squire and Masi Fathi without whom this event would not have taken place.

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