



**To cite this podcast:**

Araneta, K., Fraser, J., & Maatwk, F. (Hosts). (2022, March 22). Lola Olufemi: Feminism Interrupted, PhD Research and thinking about higher education through a feminist lens (No. 25). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster.

<https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/>

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34737/w12v7>

**Podcast transcript:**

**Kyra:** Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Black feminist writer and Stuart Hall Foundation researcher, Lola Olufemi. In this interview, we discuss Lola's journey into feminism and how she came to start thinking critically about race and gender, but also liberal feminist theory in action. As she carries out her PhD at Westminster, we discuss the focus of her research and the research process so far, which leads us to unpack the writing behind her book, 'Feminism Interrupted- Disrupting Power'. Finally, Lola offers us some insight into how we might begin to decolonise the University through a feminist lens.

**Kyra:** Hi Lola, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's so nice to finally meet you. How are you doing today?

**Lola:** Hello! Thank you for having me! I am...[I'm feeling good] today actually, feeling motivated - that's how I feel.

**Kyra:** Good. So, I like to start things off with our guests sharing just a little bit about themselves. So, first things first, where are you from?

**Lola:** I am from North London. I grew up in Edmonton. I'm Nigeria. Yeah, I'm very much a North Londoner – that is my...that's my sphere of London essentially [laughing].

**Kyra:** Yes. And, obviously, just thinking about maybe kind of like your childhood and then entering kind of like education, at what point do you think you started to think critically about race, and maybe colonialism, and having kind of those critical questions?

**Lola:** I think for me...I guess, like most people, when you're growing up as somebody who's racialised, when your body is gendered, you understand yourself as like placed in a specific kind of location. You understand that the way that people interact with you or the way that...the way your life is mapped out is determined by these kinds of oppressive structures. So, I think...growing up working-class and understanding very clearly from a young age that there were specific trajectories for people, for the people who I grew up with or the people who I went to school with. That, for me was when I began to really think...or question at least why things were the way that they were. And then, in school, I



was a really avid reader and, em, I think, you know, I really put it down to Year 11 Sociology, for me, is when I started to develop a language for this thing that I was feeling. I understood and knew what feminism was before that. Obviously, I understood and knew what race was before that and how it operated.

But that, to me, I chart that as the moment or one of the key moments in the kind of journey of [principle] consciousness, because I was introduced to schools of thought and political genealogies that were interested in...I guess questioning our material conditions, questioning why the world is structured or organised in this specific way, and why some people seem to have a closer proximity to violence because of that, but also I guess the historical processes that create those conditions, and it was through reading, you know, and engaging with Black feminists, reading Marx, reading a whole bunch of people that I had to engage with for school, at least superficially – I remember when we learnt about [?] and like, yeah, all of these concepts have really kind of stuck with me, and then obviously, when I went to university, that was expanded in a much bigger way. I was very involved in student organising, and very involved in understanding, I guess, my University's complicity in those histories of dispossession, those histories of colonial violence, and that gave me a very clear sense of what the purpose of the university is and what's...right, like so many universities in the UK were founded as kind of training grounds for colonial officers or training grounds for people who would go on to be diplomats or people who would go on to extend the nation's influence, you know. And so, yeah, understanding and knowing that, and understanding...yeah, the processes that produced the university, but also produced my learning conditions, produced my life, was really key for me I think.

**Kyra:** Yeah. No, I think, just going back to where you were talking about doing Sociology in Year 11, like I feel like my...like I feel like GCSE Sociology for me as well was really like an awakening, in a sense...

**Lola:** Yeah.

**Kyra:** Like we were already kind of having these questions, but then, to be in a space in a classroom and like...where you're introduced to theory and like you have a teacher who's telling you like "These are the questions that you should be having", like it's almost kind of like...feels like a safe space, in a sense...

**Lola:** Yeah. And it's also...I think it gives you a framework, like a language, and then a kind of apparatus to understand what's happening to you, and that, to me, is like one of the greatest gifts you can give someone because, if you don't, I think a lot of things go unmentioned. People just don't speak about, you know, yeah, the impact of these structures on them, the things that are accepted as if they were normal, and I think the role of theory is to de-naturalise the world we live in and to point to the fact that it's not normal that we live under these conditions, and that those conditions have a...a very real impact on our ability to relate to one another, our ability to, you know, exist in meaningful and transformative ways, our ability to love, even our ability to survive, at the most basic level, you know?



**Kyra:** Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, you said that you were a strong reader. What kind of books or what authors specifically do you think kind of inspired your journey into feminism the most?

**Lola:** I think, em...I...am...I was kind of birthed from Black feminist tradition, and so it...it was the...the authors that would come to mind from that, people like hooks, people like Audre Lorde, people like Gail Lewis, you know, Stella Dadzie. Really understanding...the history of Black women's organising in the US, but also in the UK, was quite formative for me in developing a political framework that allowed me to synthesise lots of different political genealogies – and by that I mean what I saw in the Black feminist tradition was... were committed Marxists. I saw people who were abolitionists, like proto-abolitionists in some sense, I saw people who had a very strong critique of like hetero- patriarchy, had, you know, a strong allegiance to a queer way of living, and that allowed me to understand that being part of the historical or political tradition, or a methodology, which is what I think feminism is, needn't mean that you are married to the idea that the world...that liberation looks like one thing or that there's one root to that success – not success, no, "success" is the wrong word, but there's one route to that, I guess, vision or whatever. So, for me, reading widely – like alongside them, I was also reading, at the same time, like [Gramsey] and...and, yeah, and being able to really just... think about those movements together, or think about those writers, think about the ways that they informed each other, was really important. And then, obviously, I started to read more theory that's emerging at the moment, so people like, you know, [Tiya Kant], Christina Sharpe, there's a whole kind of...movement to study Black life, and so I'm interested in that in the work that I'm doing. It's always hard to name authors because I think it's a way of pinning down what kind of thinker you are, and I guess I like to pride myself on the idea that I take from...I take hopefully what is meaningful from lots of different radical political traditions – like I remember reading Angela Davis' biography, [?'s] biography, yeah, but also, you know, reading about, you know, the Miners' Strike, reading about the movement for solidarity between...like solidarity between movements that otherwise would have been considered disparate. And that, to me, is really important – it's like where are...not only the points of commonality, but where...where do political traditions meet, in a sense, you know?

**Kyra:** Thank you. And just before we kind of unpack, I guess, your educational journey and obviously talk about your work now, would you mind just giving us a bit of like a breakdown of your academic background?

**Lola:** Yeah. Unfortunately, I'm still...I'm still here [laughing]. I did an undergraduate degree in English, and then I did a Master's in Gender Studies, and now I'm doing a PhD. I guess my...I guess, [broadly/ broadening], my educational journey, I...I guess I'd kind of flirted with the idea – like I did an English degree at Cambridge and learnt little to nothing, and so I did a Gender Studies Master's because I was interested in actually learning something [laughing ], and so I...yeah, and that is kind of what propelled me to, I guess, stay in academia, and then it seemed like an obvious choice to do a PhD because there were still



things that I was interested in. And I feel like I've had, in the institutions that I've been to – I did my Master's at SOAS, doing my PhD at Westminster – I feel like I've gotten a real sense of, em, different educational environments, but also the effects of marketisation on universities. You know, like I've been around long enough – even though I wasn't of the fees generation, I think I've been around long enough to have witnessed many rounds of strikes, and so I see, in academia, not a bright future, but one, em, where so much of what continues to draw me here or so much of what continues to keep me here is about the intellectual connections that I make with other people and about producing – I'm interested in producing a kind of knowledge that is resistant and kind of committed and, you know, doing a PhD allows me to do that, whilst also doing other things.

**Kyra:** Yeah. I didn't know that you studied your Master's at SOAS.

**Lola:** Yeah.

**Kyra:** If I'm right, you studied English at Cambridge, right?

**Lola:** Yeah.

**Kyra:** Yeah. And I'm keen to kind of just understand I guess your experience of being like a young person of colour in, I guess, like a predominantly white space like during your undergrad. What do you feel like are some of the major challenges that BAME students kind of face in historically white institutions?

**Lola:** I think that...for me...the relationship I have to it now is much more ambivalent. I think, at the time, em, especially when you're a student of colour or you're a working-class student, it can seem like the arena of politics is your place within an elite institution, but I think, having been someone who's organised, you know, in the University and outside of it, I have realised that, you know, the political stakes are not whether elite universities admit more students of colour – I don't think that they should admit...and that's a...that's a kind of key distinction, I guess, in my politics, is that I'm...I...that I can chart the growth of my politics, I guess, from understanding that resistance within the institution was what I could do whilst I was there, but I have no allegiance to its continuation or I have no allegiance to...the deeply unjust systems that keep it in place, right? In all of the work that I'm doing and in the feminist thinking that I'm trying to, I guess, put out into the world, I'm interested in re-organising how we live, and in that re-organisation, Cambridge won't exist, hopefully [laughing], or the university won't be the site of all knowledge production. That's what interests me now, more than that.

For me, my experience within the institution, I had a great time because I was organising and because... That's not to say – obviously, you know, there were...it was immensely challenging in lots of ways, but because I went in with a specific orientation, which was to make my time here worthwhile by doing things that weren't being in the library from 9am to 7pm, I was able to have experiences that not only shaped my politics but gave me a



critical framework. That's because I organised. I was there when students were...when they took over the Vice-Chancellor's office, when they occupied buildings, when they attempted to hold the University to account in lots of different ways. We were there on the picket-lines with striking workers. That, to me, was the best education. Nothing I learnt in the classroom really has stuck with me, if I'm honest [laughing].

**Kyra:** Thank you for that honesty. And, obviously, you're currently on a collaborative doctoral studentship with the Centre for Research & Education in Arts & Media, also known as CREAM, at Westminster, with the support of the Stuart Hall Foundation and Techne too. Congratulations on that! I mean, what an achievement on top of everything that you've done so far...

**Lola:** Thank you!

**Kyra:** I was going to ask, was doing a PhD...well, I guess you answered this already – doing a PhD I guess was always a part of your plan, but was this specifically something that kind of fell into your lap, like did you have an idea of doing a PhD on another topic or in something else...? I'm interested in that.

**Lola:** I wouldn't say it was always part of the plan. I would say it was timely [laughing]. I was kind of, you know...yeah, I was thinking...I had done my Master's on looking at the cultural production of feminist organisers, and I'd finished my thesis and I had more to say. I was more interested in the political utility of the imagination and its role in sustaining political movement, its role in defining the long and short-term political demands of people who are moving against the state or people who are making critical interventions into public space via direct action. There was more to say there and so I wanted...I guess I began thinking about a way to say it and the opportunity just kind of arose, and so I thought about my proposal, and I thought about how I might, em, use all of the research that I had already done about the imagination, but also use my hunch about what I think the material purpose of the imagination is in political organising to kind of further that by, you know, putting it into a document, sending it off, and having someone approve me to do this kind of work, em, yeah.

**Kyra:** And could you just talk us through I guess like the focus of this PhD, like the kind of themes and topics that it covers?

**Lola:** So, I mainly look at the uses of the imagination in Black cultural production, specifically looking at how liberatory movements and groups conceive of the imagination, how it impacts their understanding of the work that they're doing in relation to the present and past, and how the imagination can help us rethink the idea that the past, present and future are distinct temporal regimes. I think, more than like a study of utopia, or more than a study of like what an ideal society is, I'm trying to make the argument that I think there is a material connection between us understanding the uses of the imagination and our impetus to resist state violence, our impetus to develop strategies to deal with ongoing political crisis, crises, of multiple different natures. I think often my work gets



called “hopeful”, which I think is interesting [laughing] because I don’t think it’s hopeful. I think it’s more trying to pinpoint...how the imagination can leave the realm of the subjective, can leave the realm of like...that my capacity to imagine is different to your capacity to imagine, so that it might be drawn upon by lots of different people in order to sustain the work that they’re doing, right? When we think about imagining, it seems deeply personal, but I think that cultivating a collective imagination that allows us to think beyond the given, to think beyond the limits of the world as we know it, is an incredibly important tool in surviving it, or at least in naming the conditions that we seek to end.

**Kyra:** Thank you. I think we kind of do I guess a portion of that like in our project here, like I think, obviously, you know, we all want to be able to see like a decolonised university, but we don’t necessarily know what that looks like. But the fact that we don’t know what that looks like shouldn’t kind of dampen or like kind of hinder our ideas that we...like our ideation and how we dream together and how we re- imagine like a different kind of university or kind of education system in general.

**Lola:** Yeah. I think, crucially, a decolonised university would not be a university. I think that’s...that, to me, is the crucial point, and to...approach decolonisation as a principle, understanding its historical...the seriousness of its historical provocation, in terms of, you know, people seeking independence from colonial rule, and not having that be kind of devalued or watered down or lessened when applied to the university, is really important. I think...much...many people who are part of...organising groups in universities, we’ve seen a real wave of what I think is genuinely critical thought about the place of the university in colonial history, its ongoing relationships with neo-colonialism, etc., but I think it’s important that that doesn’t...that the university doesn’t become the site in which decolonisation...is fought for, right, that we understand, actually, that though this language is helpful in galvanising, organising, us, so it’s meaningful to make that demand, that can’t be the endpoint of what we’re talking about, right, because, in many ways, thinking about decolonisation within the bounded walls of the university is ridiculous, like its... But, it’s meaningful, I think, in the ways that it brings us together in order to ask critical questions, even if those questions are...are wrong, you know, or even if those questions are not necessarily...the most radical ones that we could be asking, you know?

**Kyra:** Yeah. Thank you. And how are you finding the research process of the PhD so far – like at what point are you kind of at, at the moment?

**Lola:** [?] my supervisor would like to know! I am...I guess I’m doing what could be called fieldwork. I’m doing interviews and I’m mainly looking at archival material. I think what’s great about doing a practice-based PhD is that I’ve been able to bring my own practice into it, and I’m a writer, like...so there are elements of I guess what could be called speculative writing in it, but writing back to material in the archive, writing back to cultural objectives, is a big part of this project, and so that’s the stage that I’m at which is most interesting. I’m trying to craft stories, responses, interventions, based on a history that I don’t know, a history that I’m trying to kind of [cleave] open in a different way. And yeah, it’s just been exciting I think to go into the archives and see what you



kind of know theoretically to be true, which is that nobody really liked each other, and everybody was fighting, and there were serious disagreements about strategy in relation to the question of what will be done...what would be done about racialised, gendered experience under Thatcher, em, and even further back, and that's... Yeah, to me, it's incredibly exciting. I feel like I'm...I feel like a big nerd whenever I go to the archives, for that reason, because it's heartening to see that, at any given time, even though the present seems to extend and extend and be drawn out and to not...even though we seem to be at this juncture where there's no kind of room to move or change what seems to be the inevitability of, you know, life under a Conservative Government, or misery or whatever, it's heartening to go back to the archives and see that people have asked...have not only existed in the same conditions, if not worse, but they have asked the same critical questions. They've opened up junctures from which to provide support, solidarity, mutual aid, to keep each other alive, to educate their children properly when their children were not being educated adequately by the state. I think the history of supplementary schools in this country is a real testament to the will of... people with a critical consciousness to not allow their children to be swallowed by a school system. And I think, in movements for a more liberated approach, movements that seek, I think, to question the role of the university in imparting knowledge, have a lot to learn also from those movements who, from below, have recognised that their children were not being taught history as...their children were not being taught, at the very least, a critical history, and so they had to intervene.

**Kyra:** I also wanted to dedicate some time to talking about one of your books, 'Feminism Interrupted – Disrupting Power', and can I just say like what an incisive and just beautifully written text this is, like you cover like a lot of interesting topics, from reproductive justice, trans-inclusionary feminism, sex work, prison abolition, and on top of like the histories of legislation and feminist movements in the UK, and, honestly, like a lot of those topics and like details that you unpacked were relatively new to me, so I think, you know, this book is also great for people who are interested in contemporary feminism but also at the kind of like the beginning of that kind of journey, and, yeah, I just wanted to kind of discuss with you today the process of creating the piece and I guess like the journey you took before writing it too. When did you start to kind of look at feminist theory, particularly kind of like liberal feminism, through a critical lens?

**Lola:** I think that's a really good question. I first want to say that...thank you for saying that about 'Feminism Interrupted' [laughing]. I think...I think that my...what I wanted to do with that book was precisely that, like to...to understand – I think there's a common narrative that, when we come to radical, political genealogies, we have to start slow. We have to, first, go through liberal feminism before we realise that the promises that liberal feminism offers are kind of false, have nothing to do with us, are actively damaging, and then we move on to a more radical orientation. I guess what I was trying to do with 'Feminism Interrupted' was to trust my audience enough, like the most generous theorists do, to say, actually, you're capable of understanding or you're capable of recognising why, you know, the answer to sexual violence is not more prisons, or why sex work must be de-criminalised, or why abortion on demand is a limited demand, right – like you're capable of,



em....yeah, you're capable of grappling with those things. And it's important, I think, in allowing people to see that feminism is more than just this thing that is wielded by liberal feminists to justify specific actions. It's a political methodology that we can use to think about our freedom and the freedom of other people, and that's a kind of serious orientation. So, when it comes to, I guess, thinking critically about liberal feminism, I think really from an early age, I was drawn to feminist thinking – that was my route towards...into being, I guess, radicalised or having a critical consciousness, and I felt disappointed when I read major feminist texts and thought, not only does this have nothing to do with me, but it also...it offers no reflections, solutions, no invitation to change materially how we live, right? So, a second, quote/unquote, "second wave" feminist concern about, you know, the body, about aesthetics, about a particular anxiety about heterosexual relationships, etc., that never appealed to me as the...the ground on which our political demands should be staked. I recognised, from my own upbringing, and also from seeing how other people live, that our questions...the questions that feminists should be asking, and a large proportion of them are, were questions that had to do with survival, had to do with material conditions, had to do with work, labour, reproduction, capitalism, and were really invested in providing solutions to...not solutions, but were really invested in providing critical thought that could push us along in our understanding of those systems of domination. I think of people of Salma James, you know, people like the Italian [?]. There are whole kind of, you know, junctures at which feminists in particular have been fighting with each other about what the...what the...what is to be done about this world, and I saw, in more radical orientations, a real questioning that appealed to me, to say law and policy cannot be the only thing, to say there is a reason why you feel uncomfortable in the presence of the police, to say liberal institutions can never be transformed by...via representation or liberal identity politics or, you know...? Those were the things that appealed to me, and that's where I kind of began to think critically about what feminism offers, which is the promise of a world free from violence, you know, the promise of transformed relations, and in order to transform our interpersonal gender relations, we have to transform our relation to money, you know, our relation to the land, our relation to the ways that we live, housing – you know, these were the big questions that I think...really pushed me towards that critique. And if...'Feminist Interrupted' as like a building, stepping-stone, as a book that people pick up and then realise, two years later, it's no longer useful to them, it's supposed to be disposable in that way, it's supposed to be like, "Okay, this is the first thing I read and that made me...that led me to this and this and this, and now I have a deeper understanding of these systems."

**Kyra:** Thank you. And, like I said, you explore like a variety of issues and theory, but how did you actually decide what topics you'd be examining and which of those would actually become chapters? Because I'm sure you had like a whole big list of different kind of ideas that you wanted to address...

**Lola:** Yeah, I think this is actually...this is actually the easiest thing to do, as someone who was involved in organising. It was really clear to me, at the time that I was writing it, where the...where mainstream liberal feminism was failing, and the task of this book was not to like plug that failure, but it's clear to me that liberal feminists are not concerned with the



de-criminalisation of sex work, or they're concerned with a kind of feminism that is interested in fortifying and propping up the police, the criminal justice system, other forms of carceral punishment, and so it became easy for me to say, okay, this book needs an abolitionist critique in it, or it became easy for me to say the liberal narrativization of the feminist movement via waves, and via feminist movement that supposedly begins with the Suffragettes, is...is supposed to...is intended to discipline our imagination, is intended to allow us to think that feminism asks us to demand less than we deserve, really. And so, yeah, so it became easy then to take something, for example, that seemed...the question of food, the question of the body, that seems to be intensely individual – you know, when we think about eating disorders, when we think about the gendered nature of the pressures that exist for different people's bodies – it was easy to take something like that and then try and attach a real structure or critique to it to say food is not just about, you know, the things we eat, it's about how...it's about the conditions of the workers that produced that food. It's about the conditions of the workers who are often low-paid, often experiencing all forms of violence from employers, often have no right to labour law – that has some connection to our understanding of food, so that, in transformed conditions, if, you know, food were not produced in such an exploitative manner, perhaps our interpersonal relationships to food could also therefore be transformed, you know? That, to me, was my attempt to marry...the kind of structural critique with...what liberal feminism banishes to the realm of the personal, or what liberal feminism banishes to the realm of the unthinkable. You know, liberal feminism is happy to sacrifice any number of Black people to...to death, via the police, via the state, because they don't have an answer for this question of why, if institutions are consistently being called out, or why, if institutions are consistently being diversified, does contact with the police for so many Black people mean death? They have no answer. They're very willing to sacrifice people for the sake of their argument. And I was interested in putting forward an idea of feminism that refuses to leave anybody behind, refuses to say one person's death at the hands of the police is too many and so what do we do with that – how do we, you know, make a political argument around that basis?

**Kyra:** And I guess this is something that is discussed more openly by authors of fiction, but do you think there's a similar kind of emotional [world] for non-fiction writers as well, particularly those who write about more sociological texts? Was that something that you kind of experienced whilst writing this book and what helped you kind of like get through that?

**Lola:** I think...the best theory that I've read... I was actually...doing some thing to commemorate bell hooks, and I think about her essay/theory of liberatory practice, and I think about how the best writing that I've experienced...or like the writing of someone like Diane Di Prima, Audre Lorde, etc., and so many other people, em, is...its ability to effectively shift people – and by that I mean its ability to change the shape of our emotional landscape, as it were, you know? And so, I think, for me, the question is less like "What was the emotional toll in writing?", I think... What I'm trying to say, I guess, I think that the best theory takes that emotional toll and is...invested in trying to get readers to make that effective leap or that emotional shift in a landscape. The difference between



reading a text and being transformed by it, like the difference between beginning a text thinking something is not possible and ending a text being like something is possible, you know, that's a huge... That's...I don't like to think in terms of wins and losses, but that's a huge....that's a very important shift that's happening. And so, I guess, yeah, speaking in terms of [emotional poets less], I think, whenever people are writing about violence or whenever people are writing about a world that continues to exploit, a world that continues to...to cause untold misery, that's painful, but I think the best writing utilises that pain for the purposes of critical invitation or for the purposes of allowing other people into a space in which more becomes possible by virtue of what has been written or by virtue of what they are seeing or what they are experiencing.

**Kyra:** Yeah. Thank you. I think it's really powerful how you're able to kind of look at it in that way as well and think of it in terms of kind of like what the audience feels, what do you want them to feel, and like that shift as well. Thank you. Can you remember like any responses to the book that like really stood out to you, like perhaps a comment or like a review that really like moved you?

**Lola:** I think the thing generally that...that...makes me feel like the book is useful, more so than...than [even good], useful, is when people say, em, "This book made me pick up another book" or "This book made me want to know more about a specific school of thought", "It made me interested in Marxist feminism", "It made me interested in the history of [?]" or someone like Olive Morris, or communism, or Claudia Jones, or "It made me interested in those things". That, to me, is I guess what is most important. And I hope...I hope in ways that...I hope for my writing to be galvanising. More than anything, I hope it does that work of allowing people to see that more is possible than what we think is possible, and that we...we can act as if...we can have those things that we would like to have, and that desire and strategy needn't mean...needn't be separated, that those two things can co-exist, that those two things fuel and feed each other, and that, in order to enact those liberated futures that we seek to build, we are going to have to, one, not only sacrifice things, but we're going to have to ask ourselves, practically, what we're willing to do in terms of organising. That, to me – when people say, "Oh, I picked up this book and I left and I got involved in organising" or "Now, I'm doing mutual aid" or "Now I'm doing..." – that, to me, is what's critical. That's important.

**Kyra:** And, lastly, what kind of advice would you give to aspiring kind of like feminist writers?

**Lola:** Read widely. Even those...those feminists that...are not good [laughing] because you understand what makes their – it's important, I think, to understand their appeal in order to strengthen your own critique. I would say that feminism is...as I said in the book, hopefully a living, breathing set of principles. It comes to life or is enacted in behaviours and in our actions, not only interpersonal, but I see feminism really as a promise, a political promise to say I'm not interested in the...this world, as it is. I see the pain that it causes, and I'm committing my life to ending it. I think I would say also keep open. Keep willing and able to change your mind and shift. I think the approach that I've taken of trying to synthesise lots of different radical traditions means it's easy for me not to get caught up in



fight, petty fight – not that, you know, tensions are not useful or productive or important, but I think approaching texts and approach other people and other radical traditions with a good faith, as well as [?], is incredibly important. I think, also, I would say organise – you know, don't just be a writer who writes. I think that's a shame, really [laughing]!

**Kyra:** Thank you. So, for our final segment, I wanted to kind of revisit our discussion of higher education, but, instead, kind of look at the institution through, I guess, a feminist lens. What do you think makes the current higher education system particularly kind of like non-feminist?

**Lola:** So many things [laughing]! I think...I think..."non-feminist" is such an interesting word here because I think the things that make it non-feminist are the things that make it unjust, you know – marketisation, the fact that education is not free. The fact that education is not free, that's a major impediment, not only to women in higher education but to everyone. And that's also an important feminist principle, right, because feminism is not only concerned with the advancement of women, you know? I think there are lots of... other things that make universities incredibly hostile places.

If we look at how universities are colluding with the Government around things like Prevent, that is, you know, essentially giving supervisors, lecturers, professors, licence to spy and surveil students, but also to pass the information on to the Government.

We also look at the way that the university colludes with the Home Office – that's another huge, important part of a regulatory system in which students fear organising, they fear stepping out of line, they fear missing class, because it's linked into their immigration status.

If we think about the way that policing and the police have become normalised on campuses across the country...and I think what's really interesting here is that you will find, if you look hard enough, many feminist defences of police on university grounds because, quote/unquote, "the police keep us safe". We know that not only to be false as a feminist principle, we know that, the more [they] come into contact with police, the more likely they are to experience all forms of violence.

And so, for me, the university is a space that should be abolished, but a space that is...must be navigated strategically, and so, when we're thinking about things that make it unfeminist, are people being paid a wage that's liveable? Are people...is the hierarchy between the people who tend to the grounds or the people who keep the university running, in a practical sense, and the professors, the lecturers, is that being firmly kept in place? And if it is, how does that add to the indignity of a workplace? That's an unfeminist principle for me.

And so, yeah, I could sit here and go on and on and on about like the many things that create an environment in which the university can never be feminist, [quote/unquote "feminist"], and often that will have little to do with attainment, you know? Obviously, attainment is important, but when we think about gender within the institution, we think



mainly about two key points: sexual violence, and attainment-gaps. And it's not to say that those two things are not important, they absolutely are, but in order to widen the conversation, we have to understand that, if a university is colluding with the Home Office, the police, other government regulations, it makes sense then that the burden of proof in a lot of universities in regard to sexual violence, em, was once a criminal one, you know? And so, if we are transform...or...not even "transform", to make the university liveable whilst we're in it, before it goes, there are, you know, questions that have to be asked around, em, what the purpose of our feminism is. Is that making more liveable space for everyone or is that a singular narrative about...that [centralises/essentialises] gender, right, and [centralises/essentialises]...women's place in the university.

**Kyra:** Thank you. And to quote you in 'Feminism Interrupted' in my question, in what ways can we kind of take feminism out of the kind of realm of words and theories and make it a kind of living, breathing, set of principles in higher education?

**Lola:** I think...for me, it's about linking up, em, organising on campus. I think my experience was that, because there were so few of us at any given time engaged in organising, we all knew each other – the anti-fees, marketisation people [laughing] were the same people that came to, you know, the Cambridge [?] education meetings, the same people that came to Fly meetings, the same people that came to the women's campaign, the same people that came to the BME campaign. There was...there needs to be a synthesis of strategies, goals and tactics, because if we begin...with the material, if we begin, em, with the labour, if we begin with that question, that takes all of us. That is...that is something that's not a singular issue. You know, there are no singular issues, you know? And so, there is a tendency I think, when people come into university, to be drawn to identity-based movements, which I...I...that was me – I completely understand that. But the movements that I was part of, and the Black feminist identity-based movements of, you know, the '70s, '80s, those had a material basis. It wasn't just "Let's gather to speak about our experience of being racialised". It was, "What, critically, strategically, what demands are we making? How are we, through direct action or otherwise, making sure that our experience of gendered racialisation don't just exist in the realm of... aren't just combatted in the realm of the linguistic or in the realm of like...I have gone to a space where I can share with others and that makes me feel like I can exist in this space – that's important, but that's not, in and of itself, a form of resistance, you know? It's a form of...survival, which is important, but it's not as important as marrying that or...or...it's not as important as connecting and joining that with strategic...hitting the university where it hurts, you know, strategically.

**Kyra:** Thank you. And what do you think university-based decolonisation projects like this one, or just social justice projects across universities in general, can learn from radical feminist movements in wider society?

**Lola:** That those movements didn't base their entire political vision on the university, that they extended beyond the university, and that, if some of the people involved in those movements did go to university, their aim was always "How do we steal from the university? How do we make sure that all the resources, the books, the articles, the



journals, etc., that are available to us by virtue of our inclusion in the university are also available to people we organise with outside? How can we redirect money and other funding outside of the university instead of fortifying its presence?” I think so many people have theorised, you know, what the purpose of the university is. I think about like Walter Rodney’s idea of the guerrilla intellectual. All of that must be opposed to the very shiny neoliberal university that’s obsessed with student feedback and employability and all of that kind of stuff. We’re in a very kind of bleak moment, and so I think those movements have to...really take from others that, even though this juncture or this, you know, period feels overwhelming, or it feels as if it’s impossible to see through, education was once free, you know, so it can be free again! Even, you know, a small demand – it can be free again – and to not lose sight of that, even as institutions consolidate on the feeling of misery that is created when everyone’s kind of on edge. Teachers are on edge because they’re being evaluated by students, and we’re told that, em, we should only think about education through the lens of like how much money am I paying for XYZ lecture. That’s an ideology that’s really infected the way that students think, so that education isn’t this expansive, transformative, potentially transgressive act or relation between students, between teacher and student – it’s a financial transaction. And I think, alongside strategic planning and making demands and campaigning, but also direct action, these groups have to be aware of, and doing also, that ideological arm. And I think strikes often...we’ve seen like a range of strikes happening across the country. Strikes are often that space where...where, suddenly, students recognise that, actually, the people that I think are...the people that are my lecturers are also on precarious contracts, they’re also making demands from the boss, who is not, you know...who has a lot of money and is not intent to give that money up, so that workers, you know, have a pension. These are...these are the points, I think, of tension that really allow people to see, em, what could be possible in a university, and to see that... to see the prevalence of the ideological slight of hand that is, you know, neo-liberalism. And so, I think the...kind of task is twofold: people have to change minds, structures, feelings, but they also have to like make those critical interventions when they...where they can.

**Kyra:** Thank you. Unfortunately, we’re coming to the end of our interview here, but as something that I like to end on: what is something you’d like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

**Lola:** What a question... I’d like education to be free [laughing]. I think, in my rant, I’ve made that clear! I think free education would once again rattle and shake the very foundations of what a university is, what its purpose is, and also, yeah... I’m not saying every conversation stems from that, but I do think it would be a major point of destabilisation, which would be crucial for any of the other discussions that we’re having to also, you know, have kind of leverage. I think what we’re going to see in the next...couple of years is, undoubtedly, more action from workers of all kinds – cleaners, university staff. We’re going to see more and more disruption to a marketized education system because it cannot stand. It’s not one in which people are able to make a living, and so it will always be disrupted, hopefully, at the point of use. And so, I’m settling into the fact that like...this is... we’re in this for the long-haul, but I think free education would be a starting point.



**Kyra:** Thank you for that, Lola.

**Lola:** No worries!

**Kyra:** I just want to say what a pleasure it's been to just have you on the podcast and just thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with us today. I'm really pleased we got to have this conversation, especially about your book, which is so amazing, so I highly recommend it to everyone in the audience! And of course it's just been nice getting to know a little bit about yourself, and I look forward to seeing you complete your PhD and reading it, but, yeah, your work-

**Lola:** Me too! I look forward to completing my PhD as well [laughing]! Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me and for your careful and considered questions. I hope my answers don't just become a big rant [laughing], but I really enjoyed it, and, yeah, good luck with the podcast as well.

*To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj>*