

# INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, entitled "Scholar, Mentor, Activist: Sondra Hale's Transnational Feminist Commitments," aims to highlight the seminal contributions of Professor Sondra Hale to the fields of anthropology, gender studies, Middle East studies, Sudan studies, and African studies. Sondra retired in December 2011 after over two decades of holding a joint appointment in the Departments of Anthropology and Gender Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).<sup>1</sup> To honor Sondra's life's work, in October 2011, Susan Slyomovics (UCLA) and Sherine Hafez (UC Riverside) convened a conference entitled "Gender, Art, and Social Movements in the Middle East and Global South."<sup>2</sup> A few months later, the Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) presented Sondra with a lifetime achievement award scholarship at their dinner at the Middle East Studies Association's annual meeting.<sup>3</sup> These conferences brought together Sondra's colleagues, current and former students, and family and friends to reflect on her personal and professional contributions. This special issue then, is primarily, although not exclusively, based on these conferences.

We approach the Introduction of this special issue as former students of Sondra. We both graduated from the Department of Women's Studies (now the Department of Gender Studies) at UCLA, and we each brought our own trajectories, interests, and histories to graduate school. It was in the 1990s that Azza became aware of Sondra's work via her involvement with Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA), a transnational group of Arab women in the diaspora who came together in cyberspace to discuss issues related to activism, identity, and politics.<sup>4</sup> While Azza was completing an M.A. in gender studies in Chicago, she and Sondra were "e-mail buddies" who exchanged ideas and thoughts on gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Azza's interest in Sondra's work on gender and feminist anthropology, women's movements, and transnational and postcolonial theories deepened through these cyber conversations. She then applied to the Women's Studies doctoral program at UCLA to study with Sondra. Khanum, on the other hand, had taken a course on Women's Social Movements with Sondra while pursuing an undergraduate major in economics at UCLA in the early 1990s. Sondra's course exposed students to social movement literature from around the world, focusing on the ways that women act collectively to re-think and transform the conditions of their lives. Learning about these movements spurred Khanum's interest in thinking about gender in global contexts, and upon returning to UCLA for doctoral work a decade later she approached Sondra to guide her study on women's religious activism in Pakistan. Our relationship to Sondra, then, has been that of junior scholars in the field of gender studies who have been mentored by Sondra, and it is from this vantage point that we introduce this special issue.

Sondra Hale's scholarship focuses on women's movements and organizations, Islamic movements, postcolonial studies, transnational gender studies, and memory and resistance. Straddling several disciplines, her scholarship often addresses questions that emerge from the contradictory assumptions that frame these disciplines. Hence she brings into focus questions that urge a re-thinking of a series of relationships, e.g. between gender, race, class, ethnicity, and the state; between Islam and women's agency; between feminist methodology, ethnographic accountability, and the politics of representation; between politics and political activism; and between the role of memory in conflict zones and resistance—questions that remain significant in feminist studies in general, and to the study of gender in the MENA region more specifically. Sondra's career spans a period of more than fifty years with publications in peer reviewed journals, books, magazines, and e-bulletins,<sup>5</sup> as well as a flourishing ongoing research agenda that pushes into new areas of inquiry. Many of her works have been translated into Arabic, including, most recently, her book *Gender Politics in Sudan: Socialism, Islamism and the State*—the first-ever Sudanese gender studies book to be translated from English to Arabic (Hale 1996).

Despite her commitment to creative cross-disciplinary conversations, Sondra's work remains anchored in an unwavering commitment to

political activism and social change. As her students, we have witnessed Sondra shuttle almost seamlessly between her research and teaching obligations and her work organizing and participating in various types of public protests to support communities in struggle. Sondra's dedication to both academia and political activism serves as an inspiration to her students in charting their own paths as scholar-activists. The struggles she has supported span local and global divides and include battles to support academic freedom, immigrant, worker, women's, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), and human rights and to oppose war, imperialist expansionism (including U.S. invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam), and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

This special issue is not intended as a comprehensive reflection of Sondra's scholarship and activism because it is impossible to capture the depth and breadth of her work within the allotted space. Rather, it reflects some ways that her work has traveled through diverse communities of scholars.

### SNAPSHOTS OF A FEMINIST INTELLECTUAL

It is a difficult task to represent someone whose life work traverses a multitude of geographic, conceptual, political, and personal terrains. To fully capture the multidimensional aspect of Sondra's life in these pages is to do injustice to how she exists in the "midst of a living story," as she so eloquently describes in her Afterword. What follows is our attempt to offer a glimpse into various aspects of Sondra's work in building and sustaining some of the intellectual communities through which she travels.

#### Mentorship and Teaching

At UCLA Sondra's research and writing attracts a diverse and transnational group of students with origins in North Africa, South Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, and of course, the United States. In women's studies and anthropology combined she has mentored more than 120 students over the course of her career. Her students have held prestigious grants and postdoctoral fellowships; they are either teaching at universities and colleges or working with advocacy-based organizations within the United States and beyond. These students have critically, creatively, and thoughtfully engaged her scholarship beyond the MENA region and

Africa, carried her work forward, and in turn, influenced her own thinking about how theories of gender travel and translate across contexts.

As her former students, we have intimate insight into Sondra's role as a teacher, advisor, and mentor. For us, Sondra serves as a model of a teacher who cares deeply for student learning and well-being, a colleague who equally values academic work and activism, a scholar who is committed to social justice, and a friend who is kind and compassionate. Our relationships to her have shifted as we have moved from being graduate students that she mentored to becoming junior colleagues in whose careers she continues to be very much invested. Remarkably, however, even as we have moved on to becoming junior scholars ourselves, Sondra remains *always* available with seasoned advice on how to navigate our professional careers and priorities. Indeed, having had Sondra as a mentor has been invaluable for both of us.

But to consider these gestures as mere reflections of her generous personality risks minimizing the conscious political energies Sondra invests in the processes of both teaching and mentoring. In her teaching, Sondra models a Friirian method that views and engages students as sources of knowledge who, with proper guidance and facilitation, are able to articulate their own intellectual praxes. She remains respectful in how she educates, advises, and shares knowledge. For her graduate students, Sondra's approach demonstrates a delicate balance between providing rigorous hands-on guidance and ample intellectual space to forge their own creative and intellectual paths. As former graduate students, we have also benefitted from the extraordinary gentleness with which she receives ideas in progress—guiding and gently nudging them along while keeping them grounded in the project of academic inquiry.

Simultaneously, Sondra remains sensitive to the intersections that shape the lives of her students. Her support of students maintaining their political and personal integrity, as well as their ties to the communities that sustains them outside the boundaries of academic life, is well-known. At both the graduate and undergraduate levels, Sondra remains a staunch student advocate, often putting her reputation on the line to ensure that student's voices are represented and taken seriously within the halls of academia. In many ways, this reflects Sondra's relationship with power and authority—a persistent questioning of

the processes through which power consolidates—whether in her own practices as a professor in a U.S. institution or within the structures of academic institutions.

The aforementioned qualities in Sondra’s approach to learning, teaching, and activism are some of the main reasons students seek her out for mentorship. Sondra’s courage, warmth, and kindness, along with the way she embodies feminist principles and ethics of accountability, have influenced many junior scholars in shaping their own trajectories. For both of us personally, Sondra played an important part in our decisions to become academics committed to community-based social justice struggles. We both have personal and collective memories of our interactions with Sondra over the course of graduate school, and we share two specific memories to serve as examples of the imprints she bears on our journeys as academics.

Azza recalls a vivid memory of Sondra, one that has stayed with her from first quarter of graduate school until today. Coinciding with the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, Sondra and Azza joined a street protest at the federal building close to the UCLA campus. They were in the street, chanting and marching, and blocking traffic on a major intersection. The air was pungent with the possibilities of social justice and the power of the people. The crowd’s energy was infectious. Tired of chanting and marching, Sondra and Azza stood at the street corner and debated the military intervention and politics of “civilizing” the Muslim world. Tired of debating world politics, they talked about Azza’s potential research projects and their personal lives and families. And then they dreamed about what would become of these popular protests against the expansion of the U.S. empire.

After about an hour in the street, the crowd grew larger and louder, and parts of it turned unruly. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) became aggressive and began a more stringent crowd control. Sondra turned to Azza and said, “Here they come! They are going to try to disperse us when what they should be doing is joining us. We are not moving from this position no matter what happens. No matter what the threat is! All the police have are water cannons, pepper spray, and batons.” Azza was secretly both dumbfounded and excited. While she knew of Sondra’s reputation as an activist and appreciated her staunch belief that academia is not divorced from activism, it was in that mo-

ment that she realized this professor, whom she came to graduate school to work with, was a radical. With the LAPD threat looming before them, Sondra tried to put Azza at ease by telling her the story of her campus activism in the 1960s, getting detained by the police during demonstrations and trying to hide some of her radical activities from Gerry, her worrying spouse. That was Azza's introduction to Sondra Hale and to graduate school.

For Khanum, it was Sondra's approachable persona that facilitated her path to pursuing a graduate education and becoming an academic herself. As mentioned previously, in the early 1990s, Khanum took an undergraduate course on women and social movements with Sondra at UCLA. In economics, her major at the time, women appeared as abstract and genderless individuals, represented through demand and supply graphs that helped determine the price of goods. In Sondra's class, on the other hand, women appeared as gendered social actors who theorized and acted to transform the varied conditions of their lives in diverse national contexts. During Sondra's class, Khanum thought deeply about feminism and globalization, about radical politics and action, and about what she would do with a B.A. in economics.

When Khanum eventually decided to apply to an M.A. program, she hesitated to approach Sondra for a letter of recommendation. She had only recently moved to the United States from Pakistan and felt intimidated by the U.S. academy and the professors in economics, who seemed rather distant. But Sondra received her request with kindness and, in fact, encouraged her to apply to graduate school. This was about two decades ago—a key moment in re-defining the course of Khanum's story. Over a decade later, when she decided to apply to the women's studies program at UCLA, she once again contacted Sondra, who agreed to meet her for lunch and graciously guided her through the application process. As a teacher today, Khanum keeps such memories close to her, remaining conscious of the intricate and sometimes delicate histories that students may bring with them in their pursuit of a formal education. Sondra's actions remind her that, in these small gestures of generosity, teachers have the power to re-direct the course of individual students' lives.

#### Transnationalism and Gender Studies

For both of us, questions of what it means to do transnational work and

how to construct a methodology that allows us to remain grounded in a feminist social justice framework remain central. Originally from Malaysia and Pakistan, respectively, we both started Ph.D. programs in Fall 2001 and later found ourselves drawn to researching questions of gender, Islam, and the state in our countries of origin. Given the climate of rising Islamism and Islamophobia, we have been concerned with questions about doing feminist research, specifically in relation to theorizing women's activism and feminist agency. How, as Nadine Naber asks in this volume, do we think of ethnography as a decolonizing tool? How do we produce knowledge about populations already under scrutiny without replicating colonizing scholarly impulses or casting a protective net around communities of difference? How do we think about women's agency vis-à-vis religious discourse without compromising our commitments to a critical liberatory feminist praxis? Such and other conversations with Sondra have been key in crafting our scholarship in transnational feminist studies.

Sondra's commitment to transnationalism is partially embodied in and through her mentorship to students with diverse backgrounds who inhabit multiple conceptual and lived realities. Moreover, her own refusal to comply with dominant power structures, to insist that it is in resistance that creativity is born, is exhibited in her commitment to fostering critique within the academy. Such an ethic was instrumental in laying the foundations for the Department of Gender Studies at UCLA, which is on the cutting edge of grappling with contemporary issues of race, gender, sexuality, transnationality, and difference.

Early on in the program, when students pushed for a more complex framing of what constitutes feminist theories, Sondra formed a committee to help conceptualize what a non-Eurocentric framing of a feminist theories course could look like. Collaborating with faculty with different disciplinary trainings and graduate students in women's studies, Sondra supported curricular reform to attract students with a more transnational set of research interests to UCLA. Over the years she has also done consulting work to build a women's studies curriculum at Ahfad University in Omdurman, Sudan, as well as reviewed and offered input into the development of women's studies programs within U.S.-based universities.

At UCLA she worked on establishing the Global South Gender

Initiative (GSGI), a project that was meant to forge linkages with gender studies programs and institutes in the countries of the Global South, such as Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, India, and Palestine. The aim of this project was to create networks between scholars working in these different sites that would allow for an exchange of concepts, sharing of resources, and collaborative intellectual work or praxis on ideas of citizenship, democracy, civil society, and gender relations not only in the Global South but also in the United States. As a part of the GSGI programming, a one-day symposium titled “Women in Conflict Zones” was held in 2009 at UCLA. The symposium explored the intersections of gender, conflict, and militarism by focusing on cases from various conflict zones (e.g., Sudan, Palestine, Sierra Leone, and regions containing Kurds, Armenians, and others) where individuals may be actors, warriors, pawns, perpetrators, collaborators, icons, or symbols and, most significantly, where women may be mediators, peacemakers, and survivors.

She also co-organized a series of workshops titled “Migrating Epistemologies” on feminist, postcolonial, and transnational theories.<sup>6</sup> These workshops featured interdisciplinary conversations between faculty and graduate students to think through the ways that feminist epistemologies travel across geographical, linguistic, and social boundaries and the ways that they are transformed. One of the key goals of this project was to de-center the assumption of unit-linearity—that is knowledge flows from centers to peripheries, from the Global North to the Global South. Some of the topics that were addressed in the workshops include: cross-cultural appropriation and translations, cultures of feminisms in the global economy, and alteration of feminist concepts in Southern (and other non-Western) cultures. These workshops were key in forging early conversations about the politics of transnational knowledge production and the ways that it travels and is reconfigured in the process.

## ACTIVISM IN AND BEYOND CAMPUS COMMUNITIES

Sondra’s introduction to activism began in Des Moines, Iowa, where she was raised. She shared with us one of her earliest memories of learning to deal with racial difference in ways that challenged status quo norms of racial segregation. Below she narrates a story about her mother’s attempts to challenge racial segregation as a child:



We lived in a slum, with black folks (called “colored people” if one was being polite, or a bit later, “Negroes”) living on one side of the street (that was a dirt street, more like an alley) and poor whites on the other. Children did not cross the line. But my mother forced me to cross the line, to go over to play with the “colored kids.” I cried and protested, saying my friends would beat me up and call me “white trash.” My mother was relentless, telling me to “have a little courage.” Each day she would ask me with whom I walked home from school and if I did not say, occasionally, that I had walked home with some “colored kids,” I would get a mild lecture. This uneducated woman (in the formal sense) was really quite amazing. I grew up to feel very comfortable with African Americans and transferred that feeling to Sudanese and other Africans.<sup>7</sup>

She continued her anti-racist activism at Wilke House—a Black community center in Des Moines—when she was thirteen years old by joining a youth group that was trying to address racism. At age twenty-one, while working as an Employment Manager for the May Company,<sup>8</sup> she defied the management to hire the first Black salesperson at a time when Blacks were only hired as maids and the first Jewish person to work in the Personnel Office at a time when anti-Semitism was palpable. Sondra was told that if these hires did not work out, she would be fired. It was, according to Sondra, one of her proudest accomplishments. In later years, Sondra’s anti-racist work would take different shapes and forms and extend beyond the Black communities. She has facilitated anti-racism workshops at various community-based organizations and campus communities both in Los Angeles and on the African continent.

More broadly, Sondra’s activist energies have hardly remained limited to single issue based activist projects. Through the years, she has been concerned primarily with advancing a liberatory praxis that spans local and global communities in struggle. As a graduate student in African studies at UCLA in the 1970s, she was also the founding editor of *Ufahamu*, a radical African studies journal and the African Activist Association. Thinking back to her political work in graduate school, Sondra recalls:

I was really active in the anti-Vietnam war movement. It was an intensely political time—the United States has bombed Cambodia, and

various political figures have been assassinated—Dr. Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Malcolm X. Students who protested over the invasion of Cambodia were shot and killed at Kent State University and Jackson State College (now Jackson State University). So, I was in many, many demonstrations and my whole life was really activism.... Now that I think about it I don't know how I managed to be a very good graduate student. I spent more time in my activism than I did in school.”<sup>9</sup>

In Sudan, Sondra was a fellow traveler of the Communist Party. Her apartment was often considered a safe place for party members to gather for discussions. In the last two or three visits to Sudan her work has been focused on Nuba women who have been marginalized by the centralized Sudanese state. Sondra is also active in trying to support efforts of Nuba women's organizations, specifically those who are refugees from the war. Among members of the Sudanese Women's Union (an affiliate of the Sudanese Communist Party), Sondra has been considered a controversial figure. Her critical writings about the Sudanese Communist Party, the Union's tie to the Party and the hierarchal and patriarchal nature of the two organizations, along with deeply entrenched and old leadership, are some of the reasons for this labeling.

True to her feminist politics, Sondra has spent time supporting younger or renegade members of the Union who have wanted to break the Union out of the traditional hold that the leadership has had for half a century. These dissidents have secretly (and sometimes not so secretly) consulted with Sondra about women's movements, organizations, and the nature of leadership. As an active and loyal supporter of women's non-governmental organizations, specifically leftist feminist ones, Sondra's commitment did not go unnoticed. In 2011, Salmmah, a Women's Resource Center, presented her an award that read: “In recognition and appreciation of Sondra Hale's 50 years of commitment and valuable contributions in support of the Sudanese Women's Movement.” In our conversations, Sondra mentioned that despite many awards and recognitions she has received in her career, this particular award is most meaningful.

One of our favorite stories that encapsulate Sondra's radical spirit has to do with her battle against right-wing efforts to crack down on the institutionalization of feminist studies on university campuses. Prior to

her joining the University of California system, Sondra worked in the California State University system for more than fourteen years. In this role she was instrumental in establishing women's studies programs at California State University's Long Beach (CSULB) and California State University, Northridge, campuses between 1980 and 1994. It was during Sondra's tenure as Program Coordinator at CSULB that she became embroiled in a legal case to protect the feminist spirit of the program.

In response to pressure from the Christian right and several state legislators, CSULB attempted to curb the spread of "radical feminism" and LGBT rights by restructuring the curriculum and removing "radical" faculty.<sup>10</sup> A class on "Women and Violence" was cancelled because the instructor was accused of promoting lesbianism by showing "a slide of her genitals" and encouraging women students to imagine themselves "doing things with another woman" (Cziment 1982). As Program Coordinator, Sondra was responsible for carrying out these changes, but she refused and, as a result, was removed from her directorship position. That she was an untenured lecturer during this time reflects Sondra's commitment to standing her political ground despite losing her job, and has been the hallmark of her feminist values and moral courage. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the State of California and the CSULB administration for the violation of academic freedom and free speech on behalf of Sondra and her colleagues. The case was resolved in the petitioners' favor after nearly a decade. CSULB did not admit misconduct. When the CSULB case broke, Sondra thought that this would signify the end of her career as an educator, but she was instead offered a job at UCLA as a Visiting Associate Professor housed in Anthropology.

Since 1986 she has been working as an educator and scholar at UCLA in the Anthropology and Gender Studies Departments where she has received numerous awards for teaching and activism, including the Women's Studies Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Luckman Distinguished Teaching Award, and the Academic Senate Award for Contribution to a Fair and Open University Environment. At UCLA she has served as Acting Chair of Women's Studies, and as co-chair of Islamic Studies. Between 2006 and 2010, Sondra served as co-editor of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. She was also one of the founders of AMEWS, which has since grown into a vibrant

space for scholars whose work focuses on the intersections of gender and Middle East studies. Due to her unwavering critique of Israeli policies sanctioning apartheid and the occupation of Palestinian territories, she has been targeted as anti-Semitic (Stillwell 2012). She was one of thirty UCLA faculty listed as “Dirty Thirty” on a web site of the most radical professors at UCLA. At Number Six, she is the most highly ranked woman on the list!<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

For those of us who talk about pedagogy, we talk about how important it is to educate for as it is to educate against. In recent decades I found I am doing more teaching against than I would like to do after thirty years of teaching. The classroom has become a place where colonial means a style of architecture, where Malcolm X is thought to be a TV show on a sci-fi channel, where Islam is thought to be a cult, where Sudan is what people drive, where Africa is thought to be a country, when heteropatriarchy means that one's father's is straight, where Homi Bhaba's concept of ambivalence is thought to be a rock group, and when once teaching a session on art in a feminist class and stressing the male gaze, a student said she is not sure what homosexuality has to do with viewing Picasso's art. (Hale, 2011)

Professor Sondra Hale officially retired in November 2011 after a distinguished career in the Departments of Anthropology and Gender Studies at UCLA. For those close to Sondra, we knew retirement would not slow her down. If anything, Sondra has become more prolific in her writing, delivered lectures in Argentina, Germany, and Turkey, traveled to Sudan to continue her work, and expanded on her research on women in war and genocide and on the politics of memory. She remains on the dissertation committees of many students in both anthropology and gender studies. As Professor Emerita, Sondra was recalled by UCLA to offer a seminar on postcolonial theories on Africa for the Department of Anthropology and to co-direct the Center for Near Eastern Studies. Sondra was also appointed Research Professor for three years (2012-2015) in the Departments of Anthropology and Gender Studies at UCLA.

As we conveyed in the opening, this special issue is not intended

to be a comprehensive documentation of Sondra's contributions as a scholar-activist. Rather, our intention is to capture snapshots of Sondra's scholarship and social life, to share how they travel, gain new meaning, and are taken up by scholars in various capacities. We are privileged to study with Sondra and to know her on a personal level. We hope this special issue provides a glimpse into the personal and the political dimensions of Sondra Hale's lifelong love and commitment for feminist intellectual pursuits and social justice struggles locally and transnationally. We look forward to many more exciting and challenging theoretical, methodological, and epistemological challenging contributions from Sondra's ongoing and newest projects!

## NOTES

1. At the time of this writing (May 2013) Sondra is the Interim Co-Director of the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA.
2. It is important to note that Slyomovics and Hafez originally initiated the idea for this special issue. For a flyer of the event, see: [www.international.ucla.edu/asia/events/showevent.asp?eventid=9005](http://www.international.ucla.edu/asia/events/showevent.asp?eventid=9005) (accessed on September 17, 2013).
3. See the AMEWS web site: [www.amews.org/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=100:annualmeeting&catid=39:activities&Itemid=50](http://www.amews.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=100:annualmeeting&catid=39:activities&Itemid=50) (accessed on October 1, 2013).
4. See Stephan (2013) for a history of AWSA.
5. Refer to the separate list of Sondra's published work included in this volume.
6. See Hale (2009).
7. Personal interview with Sondra Hale, May 15, 2013, Los Angeles, CA
8. A chain of American department stores based founded in 1877 and headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri. After various mergers and acquisitions, it is now known as Macy's.
9. Personal interview with Sondra Hale, May 15, 2013, Los Angeles, CA
10. In a personal interview, Sondra mentioned that the program's stance on practicing feminist principles in the classroom and management involved active participation in community activism and grassroots activities, centering non-hierarchical learning method and hiring faculty that did not necessarily reflect the conventional academic standards, such as publications and credentials. These principles of governance were sources of friction between the program and the university.
11. See Weiner (2006) and <http://www.uclaprofs.com/articles/dirtythirty.html> (accessed on September 17, 2013).

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