

## On Teaching Postcolonial Feminist Science and Technology Studies

A Conversation Between Deboleena Roy and Sigrid Schmitz

Deboleena Roy and Sigrid Schmitz in conversation about the need to include *Postcolonial Feminist Science & Technology Studies* (STS) in academia and beyond, about the challenges this involves, as well as development, research, and teaching.

**Sigrid Schmitz:** Dear Deboleena, thank you very much for entering into this dialogue with me and providing me with some of your experience relating to the question of how *Feminist Science and Technology Studies* can meet the *Postcolonial Critique*. I'd like to start by asking you about the background and development of *Postcolonial Feminist STS*. This term – I gather – arose from the seminar that you, together with Banu Subramaniam, Sandra Harding, Kim TallBear, and Laura Foster<sup>1</sup>, organized at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender (IRWG) at the University of Michigan in 2013. My date, however, for the starting point of *Postcolonial Feminist STS* may not be quite right, because there was obviously a lot of research going on prior to this event. So, I would like to ask you about the story behind all this.

**Deboleena Roy:** I am sure if you talked to others such as Sandra Harding or Banu Subramaniam about this, they would have other versions to offer, but I will talk about my own recollections here. There were a few things that were coming together in 2008, maybe even a little bit before that. There was a South Asian postcolonial STS group organized by Itty Abraham<sup>2</sup>, and he hosted an STS workshop in 2008 at the University of Texas, Austin where Banu and I were both invited to give a talk, as was Kavita Philip<sup>3</sup>, whose work is fantastic. She is the author of “Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources, and Modernity in Colonial South India” (2003). Within this kind of South Asian postcolonial STS group, there was a contingent of feminist STS scholars who were also engaging in this kind of research. I had been thinking over that research question of mine, about Bhopal and surrogacy within a reproductive justice framework, already for some time, so I think it was that framework that I presented. And I remember Banu saying at this conference: It's interesting that in feminist spaces we're the ones that bring in some postcolonial stuff, while in postcolonial STS spaces we're bringing in this feminist stuff.

Before this, there was also the group FEMMSS, standing for feminist, epistemology, methodology, metaphysics, and science studies, that started in 2004. It was at the first FEMMSS meeting where I met Sandra Harding and Karen Barad<sup>4</sup>, and was asked to give one of the keynotes along with the two of them.

I thought, oh my god, I'm so scared, why did they ask me? But at that meeting I got to know Sandra and, you know, she was always very supportive and so very generous. Just after her book "The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader" (Harding 2011) came out, we saw each other again at another FEMMSS conference and she asked me, hey, Deboleena, what do you think about the reader? And I said, well it's great, but it's missing the feminist STS lens. So, I wonder now, how I had the nerve to tell Sandra Harding that I had this major criticism of her work!

Anyway, during dinner, Sandra invited me to sit with her and we started to think about a feminist and postcolonial project within STS, in terms of who the voices are, and what kind of projects there are. Soon after that, there was a 4S<sup>5</sup> conference and she invited me, Kim TallBear, Banu Subramaniam, and Laura Foster to her home in Los Angeles. And this is one of the best stories, which I love telling, about how incredibly supportive the feminist network has been for so many of us, particularly for myself, at that early stage of my career. Sandra Harding, who I believe at the time must have been close to being eighty years old, cooked a pot of chicken soup for us – it was delicious. In her dining room, she put the pot in the middle of a round table and said, I want you all to eat and I want you to talk about what *Postcolonial Feminist STS* could look like. And she just sat back and listened, and that, I think, was when the bringing together of our knowledge about these different kinds of fields happened, and where the current formulation of *Postcolonial Feminist STS* was born; also, importantly, Kim brought the decolonial lens into the conversation. So, that was the birth, okay, but the question was, what do we do? That's when we applied for the inaugural IRWG Michigan Seminar and it was fantastic, because many of us (including Anne Pollock, Ruha Benjamin, Angie Willey<sup>6</sup>, and more) had been working in these areas somehow, but had never come together in the same room. We shared papers during that seminar for three-to-four days in 2014 and finally, we said, okay, we are not going to try to build one narrative around this. We all do such disparate kinds of work and projects, maybe we'll see how organically people want to collaborate and how they want to work. That meeting must have resulted in at least ten different kinds of publications, including the piece that Sandra, Banu, Laura, Kim, and I wrote for the STS handbook<sup>7</sup> (Subramaniam et al. 2017).

**Sigrid Schmitz:** And Banu, together with Anne Pollock, collected papers, and in 2016 had a special issue entitled "Resisting Power, Retooling Justice. Promises of Feminist Postcolonial Technosciences", published in "Science, Technology & Human Values"<sup>8</sup>. Around that time, in mid-2010, that was when I began to realize that there was something more out there in the feminist STS world than researching and teaching about gender or even intersectional issues in the sciences' knowledge production and technological developments: the postcolonial lens. I began to restructure my interdisciplinary courses on feminist STS, which I have been giving to Gender and STEM students collaboratively for the past 20 years or more. Or it would be better to say, I started to try to integrate the