

## An Origin Story for Feminist Science Studies: A Conversation with Christa Kuljian

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### Abstract

Christa Kuljian's *Our Science, Ourselves* chronicles the life histories of seven trailblazing women whose work, activism, and ferocity forms an originary node for feminist science studies. These figures formed a powerful network in the Boston area from the 1970s to the 1990s. Inspired by the women's movement and organizations such as Science for the People and the Combahee River Collective, they led critical analyses of gender and racial biases in science. Their work famously challenged E.O. Wilson's sociobiology in 1975 and Larry Summers's comments about women in science in 2005. Drawing on extensive research, Kuljian celebrates how these women profoundly shaped our collective scientific knowledge and view of the world. I met Kuljian after she gave a talk at the STS colloquium series at Brown University in March 2025, and we subsequently connected for this interview.

### Keywords

feminist science studies, origin stories, Boston, activism, sociobiology, women in science

**Xan Sarah Chacko (XSC):** In *Our Science, Ourselves*, you focus on the stories of seven key figures but also include many others who are pivotal to the story. What was your process for selecting Ruth Hubbard, Rita Arditti, Evelyn Fox Keller, Evelyn Hammonds, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Banu Subramaniam and Nancy Hopkins?

**Christa Kuljian (CK):** The book focuses on seven women—six who developed a feminist approach to their science, and one—Nancy Hopkins—who was a reluctant feminist. The inclusion of Hopkins’s life and career highlights a key theme: the distinction between promoting women in science and the discipline of feminist science studies. My selection process began in 2019. But the inspiration for the book began in the 1970s when I was in high school and my parents gave me a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the groundbreaking women’s health book published by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. In the early 1980s, I studied the history of science at Harvard and took a course with biologist Ruth Hubbard where we examined stereotypes and bias around sex and gender in biology. That course greatly influenced me, my senior thesis, and this book.

More recently, I published *Darwin’s Hunch*, a book about scientific racism and sexism in the search for human origins in South Africa. After that book came out, I noticed comments in the media reminiscent of the ones Larry Summers had made in 2005. This prompted me in 2019 to revisit Ruth Hubbard’s coursework, and her papers at the Schlesinger Library, as I was curious about her networks and wondered who else back in the 1970s and ’80s had brought a feminist awareness to science.

I soon discovered Rita Arditti, a geneticist from Argentina who worked at Brandeis and then at Harvard Medical School in the 1960s. Arditti’s impact on Ruth Hubbard’s thinking was clear from Hubbard’s papers and oral histories. My research expanded to include Beverly Smith, a Combahee River Collective founding member who published an essay in one of Hubbard’s edited volumes. By late 2019, after time in Boston and Cambridge interviewing Evelyn Fox Keller, Banu Subramaniam, and Evelyn Hammonds, I had identified all seven women. I realized a critical mass of women in the Boston area had networked in this field. Initially, I had hoped to tell an international story, linking with women in the Global South. This remained a tension, but ultimately, I decided to focus on this Boston-area group. I felt this specific story could illuminate the early days of feminist critiques of science and the origins of feminist science studies.

**XSC:** I was amazed by your ability to hold space for individual stories while weaving them into the narrative of the bigger picture of the origins of feminist science studies. Do you have a method that you use to interweave the big picture with the individual histories and anecdotes?

**CK:** It is a craft that I've been working on for over twenty years. Rather than write a dissertation, I aimed to tell a story. This means the book is well referenced and researched, but that it also provides an overall narrative arc that includes women's life histories. This is my third book-length narrative, and I am glad it resonated with you. I kept a process diary, a practice from my studies of narrative nonfiction, to track my thoughts and reflections on new discoveries and emerging themes. The diary helped me to keep track of the linkages between different characters. I looked back at it this morning to see how I had identified all seven women by the end of 2019. My plans for more US research in 2020 were delayed by the pandemic, but online resources like Zoom interviews and webinars, including *Catalyst's* fifth-anniversary celebrations, enhanced my research. I returned to archival research in the US in late 2021 and 2022.

**XSC:** You mentioned the tension of the domestic versus international story, but another tension you highlight in the book is that of whiteness and race. You address this head-on, crucially bringing up race alongside gender, and introduce other actors to support the claim that race and gender were intertwined from the start of feminist science studies. Would you like to add something?

**CK:** Yes, this theme is always important. Having just written about the history of science in South Africa, I knew how issues of race and gender are often erased from history, and I knew these issues would be central to this story of feminism and science in Boston. I wanted to make sure to foreground the voices of women of color. And I wanted to track how they influenced the thinking of some white women in their fields. Even though intersectionality is widely discussed today in academia and in public forums, issues of race and racism were often absent in discussions about gender in the '70s and '80s, on panels at conferences and in published anthologies, which is still the case today.

I specifically looked for women of color who were scientists and feminists in the 1970s and '80s and their impact. It was biologist Dorothy Burnham from the Genes and Gender Collective who called for feminist scientists to look not only at stereotypes about white women's biology, but also at the very different stereotypes and biases about working-class women and enslaved women. Shirley Malcom of the American Association for the Advancement of Science was the co-author in 1976 of an important report *The Double Bind: The Price of Being a Minority Woman in Science*. And, as I mentioned earlier, the Combahee River Collective had an impact in the Boston area as well, especially on physicist and historian of science Evelyn Hammonds, who went on to influence many scholars in the areas of science, race, and gender.

**XSC:** Since you mentioned *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, I have a special connection to it. In graduate school I had the opportunity to present a guest lecture in Caren Kaplan's course on Objects in Everyday Life and I chose to speak on the history of

the speculum. I discussed the role of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and the power of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. I was telling my parents about it during my annual return to India and showing them, with great pride, the slideshow of my talk and my mother exclaimed, "Wait, that book?" and disappeared for two minutes to retrieve a dog-eared copy wrapped in newspaper to obscure the cover. I removed the newspaper to reveal that it was a 1976 Revised and Expanded edition with the title in green. She said a woman from the United States gave it to her on a long-distance train in India in the 1970s. My mother, Laila, was traveling with my two brothers and trying to read, in rare moments of quiet, the newly published book by Alex Haley, *Roots*. The woman, whose name was lost to my mother simply said, "I think you'll really enjoy this book next" and gave her *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

My mother devoured it but kept it wrapped in newspaper, hidden with her clothes. I never saw it as a child, but in retrospect I feel that it influenced the way she understood herself and thus the way she parented me, her only daughter. It is amazing how that book traveled thousands of miles to impact an Indian woman on a train and a daughter she would have six years later.

**CK:** That's a great story! The global impact of *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)* is immense and there are countless stories about its ripple effect. I discussed my title, *Our Science, Ourselves*, with *OBOS* co-founder Judy Norsigian, who was generous and supportive from the start. My title is a reference to *OBOS*, the women's movement, the 1970s, and the Boston area. Many of the women in my book were inspired by *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and its challenge to biased medical authority. They began to question assertions about women's biology, and over time, these critiques spread to other disciplines such as chemistry, physics, technology, and science studies as well.

**XSC:** I think that's a good segue to talk about critiques of biology. The critiques of E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975 and Larry Summers's comments thirty years later are presented as significant moments in your narrative. How did these particular controversies serve as catalysts or turning points for the feminist science studies movement, and in what ways did the responses to each differ or evolve over time? I appreciated how your book linked the underrepresentation of women in science to sociobiological concepts that reinforced harm and difference in the representation of women and people of color.

**CK:** While researching sociobiology, I learned a lot about E.O. Wilson, Robert Trivers, Irven DeVore, the development of evolutionary psychology, and Steven Pinker, but I decided against focusing on these men. Instead, I wanted to highlight the women scientists who critiqued their theories and suggested that scientific research was not always objective and neutral, but also shaped by the assumptions of those doing the research.

*Sociobiology* was published in 1975, exactly when Ruth Hubbard and Rita Arditti had begun formulating their critiques of biology. It acted as a catalyst for their vibrant responses. Earlier this year, I published an article in *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences'* special issue on sociobiology's fiftieth anniversary. The article details some of the feminist critiques of sociobiology that began in 1975.

Larry Summers's comments in 2005 were not made in a vacuum; they stemmed from thirty years of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and Steven Pinker's work. Summers had read Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, particularly the chapter on gender. He had not read Ruth Hubbard, Rita Arditti, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, or Evelyn Hammonds. He had not read Margaret Rossiter, the historian of science who documented, in her foundational trilogy *Women Scientists in America*, how the existence and contributions of women scientists have been silenced and erased. Summers was drawing solely on Pinker's chapter.

Nancy Hopkins and Shirley Malcom were in the room when Summers made those comments in January 2005. They were outraged that he resorted to tired explanations, blaming women's absence in science on their biology and genetics. Ruth Hubbard, then eighty-one, called it "warmed-over sociobiology," finding it tiring to reiterate arguments she had been making for decades. Banu Subramaniam and Anne Fausto-Sterling, though dismayed, initially preferred not to be distracted by Summers, and to stay focused on their own research. However, they lamented the lack of a collective organization of feminist scientists that could have spoken out as a group, and that critiquing Summers was left to individuals.

The recurrence of men suggesting that women's limited role in science and society is based on biological factors is not random; it is rooted in historical racist and sexist tropes. These ideas resurface cyclically. Social movements, like the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s and '70s, provoked scientific questions in response, such as investigating IQ and race, or sex differences in abilities. Similarly, in the wake of the more recent Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, we have seen a resurgence in similar scientific questions about race and sex differences.

**XSC:** The big friction for me in the book is that some of the interlocutors hold or at least did for certain moments in their lives to the ideal that while the institutions of science held the bias, discrimination, and injustice, the science itself was pure. The idea that if the discriminatory behavior ended, science would become a space for all to thrive. Meanwhile, Fausto-Sterling, Subramaniam, and Haraway hold as their core that science itself changes with who is doing it and why. Having been steeped in this friction for your extensive work on this book, where do you stand?

**CK:** My view is very clear: Science is often shaped by its social and political context, which shapes scientists, their assumptions, their research questions, as well as their analysis of data. We all bring our own bias, perspective, and standpoint to our work. Ruth Hubbard once stated her belief that science takes on the prejudices of the society in which it is based. I was introduced to these concepts while studying the history of science with Hubbard, Stephen Jay Gould, and Everett Mendelsohn. Later, while researching *Darwin's Hunch*, I examined how colonial thinking and apartheid shaped the search for human origins in Southern Africa. So I am always interested in exploring how a particular era, time, or geography can shape what scientific questions are being asked, and why.

**XSC:** Even if scientists are fully on board with this position, the pressure can come from departments. The concern is that if someone is seen as a “feminist” scientist, will their science be taken less seriously? This echoes the critique Evelyn Fox Keller faced in her writing about Barbara McClintock’s “feeling for the organism”—the idea that women scientists do something different. Yes, we’re arguing that every person brings something different to science, not just women or people of color. It is an individual practice, but also collectively mediated, meaning that our personal thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and even prejudices shape what emerges. And that is not a bad thing.

I attend a biweekly meetings with STEM faculty doing the heavy lifting in foundational courses, and find that most are contingent faculty like me, who want to innovate in science education, rethink assessment, bring in justice and equity, and reshape the curriculum to reflect current needs. They face pushback from colleagues in their own departments, often from those with the most power, senior tenured scientists who argue that science is separate, pure, objective, and outside the bodies of those who produce it. The fact that we are still having this conversation suggests to me that the work of feminist science studies is nowhere near done. We’ve barely scratched the surface.

I wonder if there are lessons from the past fifty years, specifically from the “science wars” of the 1990s and more recent anti-science rhetoric that have led not just to questioning social scientific and humanistic research but also the results of science itself. The proverbial baby has been thrown out with the bathwater (Callon and Latour 1992). Do you see lessons from your historical study and these personal narratives that could help us resituate our current moment?

**CK:** Your experience with STEM faculty at Brown reminds me of Anne Fausto-Sterling’s experience there thirty years ago in the 1990s when she faced challenges in her biology department, wanting to teach “science in social context.” Eventually she was successful.

I think it's very possible to be pro-science and to critique science at the same time. In the "science wars," the growth of science studies, particularly feminist science studies, was often labeled "anti-science." Today, the US administration is anti-science, and anti-diversity, anti-equity, and anti-inclusion. One thing that has consistently emerged from my book talks and conversations this year is the need to defend science and scientific research, and to recognize that women's, gender, race, and sexuality studies have profoundly contributed to the sciences, medicine, and technology. This is difficult amidst funding cuts and government efforts to scrub words like *race*, *racism*, *activism*, and *woman* from websites and documents. Many documents that once promoted consideration of gender, race, and diversity in scientific research have been deleted.

I believe looking at the history of the women in *Our Science, Ourselves*—their dynamic lives, challenges, and barriers—and how they faced issues in the '70s, '80s, and '90s can provide inspiration today. Despite vastly different circumstances, there's a need for people to come together so that they don't remain isolated, especially given funding cuts and career uncertainty. Perhaps organizations such as the Genes and Gender Collective, the Combahee River Collective, and Science for the People can offer inspiration in this present moment.

**XSC:** A leaked memo from the current administration listing key terms being used to cut grants and research programs match the keywords most often used in *Catalyst* with eerie precision. To me, this is a badge of pride. Perhaps *Catalyst* is the institution that could have responded in 2005 to Larry Summers's comments about biological differences in women. This space, *Catalyst*, is important, as it is the natural home for the inheritors of the scholarship of Anne Fausto-Sterling, Banu Subramaniam, Donna Haraway, and Evelyn Hammonds, among others. At *Catalyst*, we stay committed to questioning or staying with the trouble of science. I am interested in your thoughts on *Catalyst*, especially its mention in your epilogue.

**CK:** I wanted to go back to Donna Haraway. While not one of the central seven women in the book, her important contributions to the field make her a key figure. She appears in the book in 1994, at the joint conference of the Society of Social Studies of Science and the History of Science Society, when she delivered a scathing attack on Bruno Latour, the French scholar of science studies. Haraway told Latour that feminist science literature had already made many of the points he was making in his recent book, yet he didn't cite them or the social movements that inspired their work decades earlier. She mentioned Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and called attention to the writings of Rita Arditti, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, and Evelyn Hammonds. Her remarks gave feminist work in science studies greater recognition.

Attending the online *Catalyst* fifth-year anniversary and watching Haraway and Banu Subramaniam's live conversation and their reflections on feminist science

studies was exciting. One tension that Haraway said continues to exist is the one between “women in science” and “feminist science studies.” Haraway said she wished there had been more conversations with and inclusion of women scientists who tend to shun feminist analysis (Haraway and Subramaniam 2021). This tension continues to arise with efforts to embed feminist science studies within scientific disciplines and departments.

*Our Science, Ourselves* closes in the early 2000s. In a 2003 conversation in *Signs*, Evelyn Hammonds and Banu Subramaniam reflected on feminist science studies, noting the lack of an annual conference or a journal to unite its diffuse, interdisciplinary scholars. I use the metaphor that feminist science studies is like dendrites, spreading impulses far beyond their original source. The formation of *Catalyst* has been a crucial development, which is why I included its founding, and its fifth-year anniversary in the epilogue. But I think there’s room for more unifying efforts, perhaps a working group or ongoing seminar on gender, race, and science that could provide more infrastructure, if you will, for the field.

**XSC:** In *Catalyst*, we have a journal, but feminist science studies has no society or annual meeting. We do coalesce at other conferences, like those of the National Women’s Studies Association and the Society for Social Studies of Science. I’ve also been heartened to see an uptick in job postings for feminist science studies, often cross-listed between science studies and feminist studies, or specifically within women’s studies departments in the US, Europe, and Australia.

Many of us who are fortunate to have institutional jobs are diffused in the university. Conferences or collaborating on projects like edited volumes are where we find each other. There is immense value in simply knowing who we are and finding space to be together, which is a core outcome of consciousness-raising—being together, in person or virtually, and seeing what emerges. What draws us together might be a commitment to a way of doing epistemic work with an orientation toward justice that defines us as feminist science studies scholars.

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