



# DIS TRUST

NEW THINKING FOR OUR TIMES

## Professor Annelise Riles

### Introduction

Professor Annelise Riles is the founder and the leader of Meridian 180. She is an anthropologist and lawyer and she's held joint appointments in anthropology and law in her various academic places of work. She's educated at Princeton, London School of Economics, Cambridge and Harvard, she's taught at Tokyo, and at Yale, and at various other places until very recently she was a Professor of Anthropology and of Law at Cornell. And she has just begun a month ago, begun her appointment as the Associate Provost of Global Affairs at Northwestern University, where she is also the Executive Director of the Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Studies.

Today she's here in her capacity as the founder and the director of Meridian 180, and there's no better way to understand Meridian 180 than to hear Annelise talk about it.



### Speech

What a great day this is. It is so exciting to be here with you and I just feel such incredible gratitude to Fleur, and Rob, and Nicholas, and Bronwen and so many other people who have put their hearts into this and believed that we could do something new together and it's just really exciting to be with you today so thank you is the first thing I want to say.

Really when we started this project now seven years ago, can you believe that, we never, I think, thought we'd be here today, and so for some of you who weren't with us seven years ago, I thought I would just tell you quickly the story of how this thing began because I think it captures what it's really about.

So, in 2011, as Rob mentioned I'm an anthropologist as well as a lawyer, and I was doing fieldwork with lawyers in the financial markets in Tokyo when in March of 2011, you may recall, there was a terrible earthquake, followed by a tsunami, followed by a nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi Plant. And I could tell you that for the people that I worked with, lawyers, regulators, high-level politicians, the elite of the universities, of society at large, and also I have to admit for myself, a lot crumbled that day, along with the buildings. A sense of 'how could this happen?' How could something like this happen here in Japan, where we thought we had such good regulatory structures. We thought we had safety, we thought we could trust the system to protect us, and yet people are dying in camps up in the mountains, removed from their homes, and we can't stop the disaster.

And we started to just have questions, conversations of a kind that I really never had with those people that anthropologists call their informants, which just means they're collaborators, they're friends, about the doubts that we had, about what we thought we knew, and the blank spots in our own methodologies, and our ways of thinking about the world, and the points of disconnect. And we started to realise that that disaster was really a product of silo thinking. It wasn't the fact that no one could have predicted Fukushima. It was the fact that the activists couldn't speak to the nuclear specialists who couldn't necessarily speak to the regulators, and certainly, you know, something as international as a disaster like that, because of course, the plant was an American plant, the nuclear waste was going to be going all over the Asia Pacific region and even back to the United States. Something as international and multidisciplinary as that had to be understood from multiple perspectives at once.

A crisis like that was the product of interconnection and disconnection at the same time and that that kind of disconnect silo thinking actually was costing lives quite literally. And so, as we thought about this, we began to say to ourselves, 'well gee this isn't the last time something like this is going to happen'. Another disaster will be coming, another crisis. Maybe it'll be environmental, maybe it'll be a trade war, maybe it'll be, god forbid, a security crisis. At that time, will we feel, as a group that we've done everything in our power to alleviate that crisis? What would it take for us to be prepared? And so preparedness became a question for us, but of course as we thought about that, and we started to think about reconnecting all of the different disciplines and the nations in a conversation, we also began to realise that the problem wasn't just a problem of stitching together the different pieces of knowledge that needed to be connected.

So Professor Yuji Genda who heads up this project in Tokyo loves to tell a story about the tsunami, in which, you know in Japan they had excellent preparedness drills for kids inside the schools, what to do if a tsunami comes. And these were the products of the best urban planning knowledge, environmental knowledge, education knowledge, psychology, economics, and so forth. And it had been boiled down into a very good drill of what kids should do and practised again and again. And on that day, there was one school in particular in Fukushima, in which the kids saw the water coming and they got into their preparedness drill and decided, you know, get ready, they've got that checklist in their head of what to do. And half of the kids said, 'Wait a minute, something's different than what we thought. That water is coming at a different direction. Maybe we abandon the checklist.' And the other half of the kids said, 'No, we've been told what to do. We follow the checklist. We stick with the plan.'

So these primary kids, schoolchildren split into groups and half of them followed the plan, and unfortunately, those kids found themselves in a shelter which ultimately was inundated by water and they perished. And the other half abandoned the plan and ran up into the hills and were saved. And Professor Genda loves to talk about that, to say, you know, to prepare people, it's not just a matter of making the best plans, it's about preparing the soul, preparing the person to be flexible, to be imaginative in that context, to be nimble. To be able to think collectively and creatively, and with empathy and curiosity in the moment. And so, he has really pushed us to realise that the mission of Meridian 180 can't just be about producing better knowledge, it's also got to be about producing

ourselves as better and different people, with the kind of empathy and curiosity of spirit and risk-taking spirit that our world so desperately needs.

So, given that you know obviously, there are tremendous barriers to doing this, right? I mean we all know that those of us who work in universities, know that universities are not nimble, creative places all the time, right? That our institutions create walls, that we're often trained to stay the course, and not to try new things. We're rewarded that way. And that there are all kinds of barriers, language, culture, discipline, all kinds of problems to doing the kind of work that Meridian wants to do. And in particular, let me just mention, the way we've been thinking about the arc of research. So if you think about the way ideas get produced, from the moment an academic has a spark of an idea, way to the other moment when that work finally is produced and gets handed off to next users and hopefully makes an impact in the world.

We at the university have a well-honed, well-developed system for doing that middle chunk of that work. We know how to produce a hypothesis and collect the data, and test the data. And then vet that through a peer review process, and go out and get that piece published, right? But where does that spark come from? Where do we get the original hunch? You know we don't really talk about it very much, where does it come from? And if you think about how much investment we make in that middle chunk in my field of anthropology, it can take ten years to go from the moment you've produced the idea to the final product. It's a big investment for universities to make. Maybe we should think about making sure that our hunches are as creative and participatory as they can be. Because of course, that's a moment when perhaps we can bring the world in and people can tell us these are the questions we need answered. These are the problems we'd like you to address. Here's where we as a society can come together on that end. And also on the other end, when we hand things off to next users.

I remember when I wrote my first book, I was a baby professor. I remember I published my first book, I thought it was really great and I published it and I thought, 'Oh the world's going to change'. And I waited. Nothing happened. And, you know, I mean nobody read it, right, so the question in the eyes of a professor, I didn't have the skills, I didn't have the context, I didn't have the technologies to take my ideas and translate them, and hand them over to next users. And so one of the things that I think Meridian 180 can do, because we're a partnership not just of universities and scholars, but of people in the world, is built to develop those hunches collaboratively and bring the world in on one end, and also develop a collaboration that gets ideas into the hands of next users on the other end.

So how do we in Meridian 180 do this? Well, we're kind of a curious thing. We're first of all an alliance of universities, so University of New South Wales, our newest partner, we're just delighted, yay! The University of Tokyo, Keio University, Ritsumeikan University, Ewha Women's University, Northwestern University, and many more coming online soon. So we're an alliance of universities who are dedicated to changing university culture and working together to really allow those newest ideas that need to be born to emerge collectively. Because the genius of our time is a collective collaborative genius. It's not individual genius anymore.

We're not just an alliance of universities, we're also a membership organisation. We invite, of course, all the scholars at our home institutions to join us but also people who are not part of those universities. And also people who are not professors. We really welcome professionals and artists, and people from the creative fields, and activists, and government officials. And so it's a place where all segments of society can really come together and we can work on breaking down that wall between the university and the rest of the world.

So we're a membership organisation and we do a number of things, we have a platform online in which we hold our conversations in multiple languages because we really believe that language is one of those barriers that persists in keeping us from having that kind of dialogue that we need to have. So right now, all of our conversation is translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean and English, and we're hoping to add more languages soon.

We also have live conferences, events, Rob was just talking about one of them, and we sponsor global working groups in which scholars and practitioners and activists from a variety of fields can come together and work on a problem very intensively and pull it all the way through to policy outcomes where it can impact the world. In terms of our governance structure, we're purposely a very democratic and flat organisation. There is no agenda, I always like to say we have people who could get arrested on both ends of the political spectrum in our group, we're really open to all points of view. It's our commitment to really not leading with a singular agenda or set of ideas, but rather to providing a platform for people to connect with one another.

So just to give you a little example, one of our initial projects was on central banking. We brought together central bankers from around the world. We also brought together activists who protest against central bankers. We brought together academics, people from different fields and as the conversation developed first online it got focused then into a more specific question that emerged from the group which was, what about the politics on central banking. Then we had a series of working group meetings in different renditions that really worked on that question, and eventually it produced a book that is aimed at the public and as well at central bankers themselves, looking at how the public can engage more actively with central banks. So kind of new perspective really hasn't been in the debate about central banking at all and I don't think any of the members of the group would have been able to come at it on their own. It was really the collective work that allowed that to emerge.

So what does this mean for all of you? Well, first of all so glad you're here today. I know each of you has five other places you should be and really grateful for your time today, and I hope this can be the beginning of us engaging much more. So what's in it for you? I think the first thing is, a way for you to reach a new community of collaborators, of interlocutors. A way for you to take your ideas and give them a global audience through the project itself, but also a way for you to meet people who you wouldn't necessarily have a way to connect with, and to really have an intensive kind of conversation with them that you wouldn't have anywhere else. So, for example, one of our members in Tokyo is a principal of a large investment bank, and he said to me once, 'I wish that there was someone in the creative world, a dancer or a theatre person that I could talk to because performance is so important in finance, but I wouldn't even know how to find such a person', and through Meridian 180 he could find

such a person and have those conversations, and then he took those ideas back and kind of turned them into something he sold his clients, was very happy.

Those kinds of connections that would be very hard for you to make, we can help you broke, that's one thing. The other piece I think is, kind of feedback on your work that you might not get elsewhere. Fleur likes to say, you know, 'It's what we all wish peer review could be', right? The idea of being able to put out your ideas in a safe space, a space of experimentation, and questioning, and creative evaluation, and have somebody say, 'You know, that's really interesting as an economic argument. Here I come at it from this perspective from the health sciences and I would see a different perspective', or 'here's what I as a dancer would have to say about what you do', or 'here is what I would say as a politician', right? So to get different voices commenting on your work that you might not have otherwise and hopefully make the project better and richer that way.

A third thing, of course, is this alliance that we're building between our universities from the ground up. You know, most, I think unfortunately I'll say now as a brand new university administrator, that most alliances between universities start from the top-down, and in my view, those do not last very well and they don't produce the kind of richness and outcomes that we hope to find. This is a bottom-up driven alliance of universities based in the traditional, the hope and the energy of people who really want to be together, and we as administrators are just here to support it, and I think that's really exciting and new.

And then finally the fourth, and maybe the most important is a chance to part of something that I think is going to be really transformative. We heard Julie Bishop talk just now about trust in this world and how important it is, certainly in my own country right now, we have plenty of challenges and questions about what's happened to our culture and how do we begin to rebuild. And I think the kinds of connections that we're making for this project with people who are very different from ourselves, who by definition don't share our field, who don't speak our language, who come from a different set of institutional contexts than our own. These are really valuable and the knowledge that we're producing together is something none of us could have done on our own, and I really believe that we will all look back on twenty years and say, 'Wow, we did that, and we did it together, and that's wonderful'.

So, it's really privileged to have this opportunity to get to know you and to work with you and I'm just really looking forward to what the future will lead, it will bring for all of us and just want to thank the leads at UNSW for the tremendous work that they've done to make this a reality, and just thank you, friends, so thanks very much.