## PART FIVE

# INCOMMENSURABILITY AND (IN)VISIBILITY

*Theorizing an Asian American Feminist Praxis*

CHAPTER 11

# MULTIPLICITY, WOMEN OF COLOR POLITICS, AND AN ASIAN AMERICAN FEMINIST PRAXIS

Lynn Fujiwara

IN 2008 I PUBLISHED *MOTHERS WITHOUT CITIZENSHIP, ASIAN Immigrant Women and the Consequences of Welfare Reform* (University of Minnesota Press). My book was based upon several years of field research with community-based organizations and advocacy efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area in the wake of President Clinton's welfare and immigration reform. The connection between the demonization of single mothers and the move to "end welfare as we know it," presented an opportunity to examine how race, gender, and poverty could work to dismantle a program that (though fraught with problems) at least attempted to keep women and children out of destitution.

Noncitizens were to suffer massively from welfare and immigrant provisions that worked collaboratively to dismantle all sorts of immigrant rights. Most immediate was the devastating impact on elderly and disabled immigrants receiving assistance under the Supplemental Security Income program, as well as all immigrants receiving food stamps. My field research commenced with a forum conducted by several Bay Area immigrant coalition groups. As the speakers began to explain the new rules, the folks in the audience began to express fears about how they were going to survive or how they would care for their ailing parents. I learned about the suicide

hotlines that community organizations implemented because distraught immigrants were so fearful of what was going to happen to them.

When I began to think about studying welfare and immigration from the perspective of immigrant welfare participants, I knew that I wanted to understand the day-to-day experiences based upon their social locations, racial and gendered experiences, and community involvement. I planned to conduct interviews with immigrant welfare participants. I started with a very idealistic notion of feminist research as a way to give women's voices agency and self-empowerment. In my book I speak about the difficulties and unexpected challenges I encountered, which led to a more feminist activist (formally known as participatory activist research) approach, but I do not convey fully the level of complexity that I navigated as a US-born Woman of Color facing multiple levels of difference as I set out to understand the structural and experiential consequences of welfare and immigration reform.

I began by volunteering at citizenship drives organized by community organizations throughout the Bay Area. Although one of the citizenship program directors encouraged me to make phone calls to set up interviews with women who were current recipients, I soon realized that the power differential, along with my language limitations, would be devastating. I assumed that there would be some way that I could communicate my identity as a single mother from a working-class background and my intentions to make welfare more accessible for women facing poverty. Instead, my immediate introduction (in English) as someone doing research on the consequences of welfare reform was enough to evoke fear in those I sought to interview. Usually the first question they asked was whether they "had" to talk to me, and when they found out that they didn't, they quickly hung up. But in one instance a woman became very worried that I was calling because she was in trouble. She put her young daughter on the phone to translate. I could hear her anxiously proposing questions for her daughter to ask me, which her daughter would then translate. The daughter was clearly uncomfortable, as she sighed often and asked her questions hesitatingly. Once her mother was convinced that I was not a state agent prying into her affairs, she told her daughter to hang up.

I felt so horrible. I could not believe that I had put these women in the very position I was trying to critique. I quickly realized that I myself (with no research budget) could not conduct interviews with this group of women. I spent a lot of time after those phone calls feeling terrible for invading the lives of these women and the daughter as well, and for causing them so much discomfort. I asked myself how I had failed to foresee the harmful

consequences of this communication approach. I recognized that I had inflicted violence through language, power, and my seeming appearance as a representative of the state. I abandoned my plan to conduct interviews and shifted my approach to a participant activist/advocacy research model by volunteering in advocacy efforts, demonstrations, citizenship drives, and citizenship classes.

Before the book was published, I wrote an article for a special edition on feminist methodologies in a prominent feminist journal. Given the complex nature of my research, I utilized the article as a way to work through my positionality, limitations, and negotiations as I strove to conduct feminist research. The multiple levels of difference demonstrated a precarious positionality that would significantly impact the course of my research project. Here, though I and my subjects all fit within the category Asian / Asian American, we could not have been farther apart in terms of power, resources, language, and citizenship.

In the article, I utilized feminist theorists like Aihwa Ong, Kamala Visweswaran, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Patricia Zavella as a way to critique the complexity and incommensurability I found while trying to engage in interviews and explain how my project transformed into a feminist activist research methodology through community mobilization efforts. Although the heart of my article was a critique of my attempt to conduct interviews, one reviewer's criticism haunted me years after: "I could not believe you tried to conduct your interviews in English, this was unforgivable. . . . From a transnational feminist approach, those interviews never would have been conducted in English." At the core of this reader's critique was my lack of engagement with transnational feminist studies, and my foundational framework from the perspective of a US-born citizen. I abandoned that article, and it wasn't until many years later that I reworked it for a talk in Asian American Studies at UCLA. It was there that fellow scholars and audience members heard my self-denigration and shame and in their insightful feedback challenged me to rethink my own positionality as a US woman of color navigating an intellectual system where transnationality often takes primacy in feminist studies and where understandings of racial and class difference are reduced or even erased in the context of neoliberal global studies.[1] In the end, my reworking of *multiplicity* gave me the tools and language to better critique the multivalent and incommensurable levels of power at play in my research experience.

As I write this chapter in 2016, it marks the twentieth anniversary of the passing of the 1996 immigration and welfare reform laws under Bill

Clinton. Unfortunately this anniversary has met with little public or scholarly commentary; it could be that our current battles under the Trump administration have dispersed activist efforts to defending what social democracy we have left, with nearly every avenue of civil, human, indigenous, and global rights at stake. Making sense of this twenty years later is a long time coming, and perhaps even a much-needed resolution to an emotionally haunting experience that started with scathing reviews of a methods piece I had written over ten years ago. I revisit these issues in my work to critically reflect on the way I understand the multiple layers of difference at play between myself as a researcher and the community whose histories and experiences compound their political vulnerability. Looking back, I can see with clarity that what is at stake is much more than a scholarly bruising, but rather, a women of color racial/class politics that is in tension with at once transnational feminist assumptions of commonality and the invisibility of Asian American women as embedded in historical and contemporary neoliberal projects of racialized violence.

This regrappling gives me the opportunity to reengage with Lisa Lowe's conceptualization of multiplicity in Asian America. Lowe's iconic article, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," was first published in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in 1991. At the time, this article gave scholars in Asian American studies an important conceptual tool to contend with the complexity, tensions, contradictions, and incommensurabilities within Asian America. Lowe's chapter challenges Asian America as a monolithic or homogeneous identity against a context of whiteness, racial formation, neoliberalism, US imperialism, and transnationalism. She pushes scholars and researchers to take on the thorny issues of intraethnic privilege and power, the reproduction of oppressions, and a consciousness for solidarity and coalition. Utilizing the notion of valences, Lowe notes the incommensurabilities within the heterogeneous group constituting Asian America and considers the possibilities of future solidarities through multivalent points of political commonality. Lowe's formulation of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity gave feminist scholars like myself the theoretical language to engage the complexities of difference and to insert Asian American issues into intersectional dialogues.

Because intersectionality exposes the inability of the state's top-down logic to make intelligible the complexity of Asian American struggles, it also exposes the need for a coalitional praxis in Asian American feminist

research. Accordingly, a coalitional praxis that presumes the multiple interdependent heterogeneous subjectivities of Asian Americans requires us to utilize the lens of multiplicity, a lens that foregrounds racialized neocolonial systems of neoliberalism and globalization to illuminate incommensurabilities within and across Asian America as sites of coalitional consciousness-raising; in turn, the lens of multiplicity gives us the tools to read and engage otherwise conflicted moments as generating knowledge that fuels a coalitional praxis committed to Asian American feminist change on the ground. Examining the point of contention by the feminist journal's reviewer, I emphasize the increasing significance of multiplicity as a conceptual framework to unpack the complex differences within a racial minoritized group that is majority foreign born.

In this chapter, I expand on Lowe's conceptual usefulness of multiplicity to critically interrogate the interdependent heterogeneous subjects produced through multiple valences of power toward an Asian American feminist praxis that carries forward feminist of color calls for intersectionality. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is noted for coining the term intersectionality to address the failure of antidiscrimination law to see Black women as litigants based simultaneously on race and gender. Crenshaw's analysis exposed the ways Black women are rendered invisible through single-axis modalities of understanding oppression such as race, gender, and class. Her theory of intersectionality complicates relative positionalities by embedding intersecting locations within power structures that are shaped simultaneously by race, gender, and class.

As intersectionality took epistemological primacy, feminist scholars put this theoretical framework into methodological and political action. While intersectionality has become a commonplace concept among millennials, putting this framework into praxis continues to be challenging. On September 24, 2015, after the tragic death of Sandra Bland in a Texas jail cell, Crenshaw published an article in the *Washington Post* titled "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait." Crenshaw (2015) says, "Today, nearly three decades after I first put a name to the concept, the term seems to be everywhere. But if women and girls of color continue to be left in the shadows, something vital to the understanding of intersectionality has been lost." Her point here is to highlight the persistent invisibility of Black women and girls, who also face injustice and death at the hands of the police. In a similar vein, Latoya Peterson (2015), the editor at Racialicious.com, insists that intersectionality must be more than an academic term utilized to theorize

identity or social position: "It becomes too easy to allow some feminists to recite the pillars of an intersectional feminism while still finding a thousand ways to marginalize people out of the framework."

I begin with this cursory reflection on feminist of color conceptualizations of intersectionality, positionality, and social location, as a way to guide my use of multiplicity as a conceptual tool that complicates what can be an oversimplification of intersecting identity locations. In particular, I think about how the development of US Third World and multiracial feminist perspectives moved epistemological frameworks to engage in complex examinations of women of color in the United States, whose experiences are shaped by colonial processes of racial and gendered domination. At the heart of this connection I strive for an Asian American feminist praxis grounded in difference and heterogeneity while engaging Women of Color politics that situate Asian Americans within broader racial gendered discussions. The understanding that *difference* plays out in power relations is not new, but how we go about examining difference can obscure or illuminate the power relations and the varying impacts of social policies that shape people's circumstances differently. In the following sections I use the Women of Color feminist methodology of *theorizing in the flesh* to illustrate the incommensurabilities within Asian America that pushed me to rethink the conceptualization of multiplicity as a format for an Asian American feminist praxis that aligns with the coalitional politics of Women of Color.

## MULTIPLICITY: POSITIONALITY AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

In Lowe's iconic 1991 article she points to a discussion in a short story between two Chinese American women, each harboring a fear that the other does not see her as authentically Chinese. The idea of racial authenticity is multifaceted and complex, but in this context the women held onto markers of language, time in China (homeland), and family practices. Lowe's timely intervention reflects on the multiplicity and heterogeneity in Asian America as post-1965 Asians in America have forged new communities and presence in the United States, in relation to third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Asian Americans whose ancestors primarily migrated to America before the 1924 immigration bar to most of Asia. Often referred to as two separate waves of immigration, the descendants of first-wave immigrants have vastly different experiences from transnationals, migrants, refugees, and their children since 1965. Lowe states, "As with other diasporas in the United States, the Asian immigrant collectivity is unstable and

changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a 'homeland,' and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from 'majority culture' in the United States" (Lowe 1991, 27).

Lowe draws from Frantz Fanon to fully grapple with contrasting Asian American differences, as well as multivalences of oppression, histories of colonialism and neocolonial projects of nationalism and assimilationism that are integral to interrogations of multiplicity and Asian American politics. Lowe utilizes Fanon's critique of neocolonial bourgeois nationalism, which formulates identity around ethnicity and culture (thus inverting colonialism), to advocate for a more complex understanding of multiple positionalities in Asian America. Lowe states, "An Asian American subject is never purely and exclusively ethnic, for that subject is always of a particular class, gender, and sexual preference, and may therefore feel responsible to movements that are organized around these other designations. . . . [T]hese differences represent greater political opportunity to affiliate with other groups whose cohesions may be based on other valences of oppression." Thinking about the difficulties of ethnic and cultural markers that shape who we are, I push Lowe's articulation of multiple valences of oppression to crystalize an Asian American feminist praxis that can approach resistance movements from varying points of entry and belonging.

Throughout my research experience, once I began a more feminist activist approach with communities engaged in mobilizing efforts, I could see that the level of heterogeneity and multiplicity was unbound, everywhere, inherent, and inescapable. The levels of difference and complexity among those organizing in community-based organizations varied from lawyers, law students, legal aid workers, union workers, social service providers, elderly, alter-able-bodied Asian Americans and immigrants, college students, youth, wealthy, impoverished, citizens and noncitizens. Then there was me, a third/fourth-generation, monolingual English speaker who grew up in an inland town in San Diego's North County—where there were no other people of color (in my youth)—whose parents had been incarcerated in Japanese American internment camps as children during WWII, a single mother of a young school-age daughter, immersed in the immigrant rights movement in the San Francisco Bay Area during Clinton era welfare/immigration reform. I frequently critiqued my own place as a researcher, as moments that illuminated my own privilege seriously put in question my role within this very complex movement. To make sense of unavoidable moments of contradiction, Lowe's piece, and her conceptualization of

multiplicity specifically, in dialogue with Women of Color frameworks of difference, gave me the lens and tools to consider the necessity for an Asian American and Women of Color feminist praxis.

To illustrate the politics of multiplicity, I socially locate myself as a way to complicate my positionality as a scholar, researcher, and teacher, as I examine my own subject formation across multiple valences of power through my research experience. Language was a bit of a sore spot for my family of origin. My father failed kindergarten in Los Angeles because he could speak only Japanese. His grandparents had migrated from Japan to work on plantations in Hawai'i, where his parents were born (both in Hilo). Growing up surrounded by Japanese plantation workers, my father's parents spoke only Japanese until they left for the mainland. My father recounted the humiliation of failing kindergarten, and once he learned English, he lost his Japanese. My mother's parents had migrated from Japan in the early 1920s. My mother (sixth of eight daughters) knew enough "broken" Japanese to communicate with her parents, but at the age of five, she was incarcerated in Manzanar concentration camp during WWII. As she was growing up, her parents insisted that she speak English and assimilate into American culture by attending Christian churches, even though they were practicing Buddhists.

After my parents and their families were released from concentration camps at the end of WWII, they faced a postwar anti-Japanese racism they both described as horrifying and traumatizing. Beyond the racial epithets, getting spat on, racist teachers and schools, watching their parents struggle after losing everything during internment, there were deeper feelings of shame and embarrassment that caused confusion to them as children. Unlike the model-minority narrative, neither of my parents received college degrees, and in 1968 they ventured into a nursery business in a small, then rural, nearly all-white town in North County in San Diego, just eighteen miles south of the home of Tom Metzger, founder of the White Aryan Resistance. My parents had a hard time buying property, and we regularly experienced racist affronts growing up.

Like many other students of color from predominantly white communities, it was not until undergraduate classes that I was exposed to literature and scholarship by people of color and Women of Color. I had no plans to pursue a PhD; the idea was never suggested by any of my professors until my last year of college. I was a young mother in my last years of undergraduate studies at University of California San Diego when I stumbled on two courses taught by a visiting instructor, "Asian American

Women" and "Asian American Community Issues." The visiting instructor could see my excitement over the discovery of a personally driven intellectual and political consciousness, and she introduced the idea of graduate school to me.

Reflecting back on my political investment in studying the impacts of welfare and immigration reform and my attempt at interviewing noncitizen welfare recipients, I remain accountable to the harm caused by my failure to consider how English-only interviews would impact the women with whom I sought to connect. However, I think the reviewer's comments also warrant a critical analysis. The reviewer's critique is not incorrect, but her expression of disbelief and disgust (calling my misstep "unforgivable") at my attempt to interview in English from a transnational feminist primacy reflects a larger dynamic between transnational feminisms and US Women of Color feminisms. I do not wish to engage in an adversarial debate, as both fields are critical to broader feminist, antiracist, and global formations of power, oppression, and resistance. From a Woman of Color perspective, though, transnational feminisms have carried stronger institutional validation than Women of Color feminisms.[2] Though it has taken me some fifteen years to be in a position to rethink this discussion on feminist praxis in relation to research conducted twenty years ago, this opportunity to critically engage this tension is important for scholars of both fields. Multiplicity as a conceptual framework provides not only more complex ways of negotiating incommensurable differences in research and scholarship; it also provides a more complicated way to think about political struggles and a feminist praxis that strives for coalitional formations with accountability to differing, conflicted, and incommensurable positionalities. In the following section, I continue to examine multiplicity as a tool for unpacking incommensurable differences but push the conceptual framework to consider the potential for coalitional work.

## COALITIONAL POSSIBILITIES AND MULTIPLICITY IN ASIAN/AMERICAN ORGANIZING

Michael Hames-García elaborates in *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity* (2011, 13) a theoretical premise of social identity "as the mutual constitution and overlapping of simultaneously experienced and politically significant categories such as ability, citizenship, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexuality. Rather than existing as essentially separate axes that sometimes intersect, social identities blend, constantly and differently,

expanding one another and mutually constituting one another's meanings." Hames-Garcia's working of multiplicity synthesizes a racialized gender system that "reveals the extent to which the gender and sexual domination of racially subordinated peoples has roots in the legacies of modernity and coloniality" (106). For my purposes here, what is most illuminating about this framework is that it foregrounds the embedded colonial violence of white supremacy and racialized neocolonial systems of neoliberalism and globalization against which particular groups resist and empower themselves, without erasing the legacies and persistent oppressions among multiple valences of power and position.

To think about multiplicity as always embedded in (neo)colonial projects of white supremacy provides a logistical format for thinking about the incommensurabilities within intersecting sites of coalition. This framework gives me a more complex analytical tool with which to make sense of the multiple layers of conflict and collaboration in the brief example of my research experience and the subsequent review of my article that attempted to critically analyze my research experience. I developed my research project through a complex web of economic vulnerability, racism, and racialized gendered assumptions of need and entitlement. My own experiences of white supremacy and economic vulnerability shaped the foci and orientation of my research.

As a third/fourth-generation Asian American, I grew up very aware of my parents' incarceration as children. They were heavily scarred from this experience. Their families were very poor, but surrounded by community and family, they grew up to be proud, intelligent, and industrious. For me, growing up in that remote town in inland San Diego County with virtually no people of color, a town that prided itself on being a bastion of the American West, with a rodeo and an annual parade that included men in cowboy outfits shooting cap guns at Native Americans (white men in costumes) and a float featuring a sheriff and a jail cell with a bandit yelling for his release; I used to fear that one of those sheriffs was going to come and take my father back to camp, as both my parents often reminded me that "it could happen again." I recall walking into stores that refused to serve us and witnessing my parents negotiating with racist people with their heads held high in the moment, but what we saw in our home was quite devastating. My way of coping was to stay as small as possible, to not be seen, and to blend in as best I could.

I describe this neocolonial racial milieu of my formative years as a way to underscore the racialized gendered system of white supremacy that

pervaded every aspect of my family's survival. Until I left home in my mid-twenties, as a mother, I never knew the feeling of acceptance, I never felt the comfort or assurance that I would be served in any given establishment. I witnessed the backlash against migrant Latinos as their presence increased in the 1980s, the stories and racist narratives of migrant crime, fear, sexual violence, and drugs. Thus, in the 1990s, as a single mother in graduate school in Santa Cruz, the attack on immigrants through Proposition 187 in 1994, then the Personal Responsibility Act and Illegal Immigration Reform Act of 1996, my anger over the blatant display of nativism and the move for exclusion heightened my political interests to focus on examining the nativist policy movement, hoping to make some contribution to advocacy efforts.

Yet the multiple layers of difference remained as I set out to do my research. The racist imperialist thread shaped by a long trajectory of American intrusion in Asia through militarization and capitalism held in common an understanding of exploitation and exclusion. However, I, having been shaped as monolingual by the internal colonial racialized gendered system of white supremacy, had never traveled outside the United States, and I struggled economically as a single mother, racking up major debt through student loans and credit card advances while attempting to do research entirely on my own with few resources. Looking back now, I am not utilizing this framework to excuse my mistakes in attempting to conduct interviews with immigrant and refugee women facing welfare cutoffs, but I can at least analyze the structures, systems, and cultural formations that shaped that unfortunate attempt and recognize that it was a product of something much larger than myself. My failures to communicate reflect my own heterogeneous subjectivity born through multivalences of power. English-only colonial and white supremacist US laws and the violence of assimilation shape monolingualism among US people of color.[3]

Although I abandoned my attempt to interview Asian immigrant and refugee women, I continued participatory feminist activist research methods in community-based immigrant rights organizations, advocacy campaigns, marches, and citizenship drives. I found myself immersed in community service and political campaigns that would ultimately lead me to engage in research where community needs and goals directed my research. Participatory research is characterized by the intent to implement social change not from the top down but rather by following the course of action led by community participants. Suspending the "legitimized" top-down mode of knowledge acquisition enabled a horizontal move that

temporarily shifted the hierarchical connections across difference and allowed me to navigate the multivalences of power through a coalitionally minded feminist praxis. I worked side by side with immigrant and refugee women in ways I never could have under other conditions. Reflecting back, I can see that my own experiences of racialized class and gendered harm allowed me to understand, know, and feel the emotional harm I had caused to those few I tried to interview. Likewise, in a more horizontal approach to researching the welfare and immigrant rights movement, it was my emotional knowing of racialized and economic vulnerability that allowed me to connect with those I was working with. Hames-García argues that an expansion of political interests can occur through attending to multiplicity (Hames-García 2011, 27). A multiplicity through expanded interests can generate a feminist praxis and, in the case of my activist research, an Asian American feminist praxis that allowed me to connect with members of the immigrant rights movement based upon my political and emotional understanding of the racial, gendered, and classed harm inflicted by welfare.

As a volunteer positioned lower in the organization's chain of command, I often "took orders" from immigrant and refugee women during marches, workshops, or even citizenship drives. My work became useful for advocacy measures, as I found myself producing literature used in meetings with local county officials. As a community activist, I was operating in a world where women's voices were often raw, angry, and defiant. I was in constant correspondence with other activists sharing their own experiences, passing on the words spoken by the immigrants they worked with, and witnessing the collective work to pull these narratives together for advocacy purposes. As a result, I was able to examine how social policy affected immigrant women and their families at the community level. I was able to see how the power of the state operated on multiple levels (for individuals, families, and the community).

I will illustrate with an example from my field notes:

> On a cool autumn Saturday afternoon in 1997, I sat around a table in the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, with about twelve other organizers and immigrant activists. We were planning our march on Sacramento and legislative visits with our local representatives and senators to demand that they rescind the immediate cuts that were about to be implemented. Among these twelve people were activists,

staff members, immigrants, and their translators from Vietnam, China, Laos, Mexico, and Russia. At one point an elderly woman from Vietnam spoke very passionately, looking at each of us younger appearing staff, pointing her finger at us, softly hitting the table to emphasize the significance of what she was saying: "You have to realize how hard it is to survive. You see we were forced to leave and come here. The US told us that we would be taken care of here because we fought for them. It has been very hard here, we didn't have the skills to get good jobs, and now we are too old. No one wants to hire me now. But we need our SSI to pay the rent. I don't know what we will do when we don't have it. We are not going to be able to get by, if they take our cash. We need to make them change their minds or we will not get by." We listened intently and promised that we would all work hard to get Congress to restore SSI and food stamps.

Another soft-spoken elderly man speaking Spanish talked about the decades he has worked in this country, working in the fields, the family he has raised. Now that he is older and unable to work, he is being told that he cannot collect his Supplemental Security Income, which pays for his housing. Through his translator he tells us, "I will be homeless. I have worked hard all of my life, I have never been homeless, and now that I can no longer work, I fear I will be homeless." Everyone around the table nodded in agreement and compassion, when the NCCIRR staff member leading the meeting, a Vietnamese American woman in her midtwenties, expressed in anger, "There we have it, we will march on Sacramento, we will bring folks from all over California in their wheelchairs, walkers, however we have to, to show these legislators who they are hurting!"

Shortly after, a Korean American woman said, "I'm in my fifties, and I work at a grocery store. My mother is about to lose her disability benefits. She has Alzheimer's and needs to live in her nursing home. If she loses her disability, she won't get the care she needs, and I can't both keep working and take care of her. She needs twenty-four-hour care." Many folks around the table had never thought of a situation like the one this woman spoke about. Middle-age children of elderly immigrant parents were finding themselves in a bind because they did not have the means to support their parents. This woman went on to explain that she is barely making ends meet for her and her two dependent children. She said apologetically that she does not have other family that she can rely on for help. She was

> fearful and upset at the idea of her mother being kicked out of her nursing home. The atmosphere of the meeting went from solemn and quiet to enraged and boisterous. Suddenly the room was full of energy, folks working on organizing legislator lists, signs, volunteer calls, and everyone was working together, mainly taking orders from the elderly immigrants who were seen as the experts of the group.

In this group, the most striking differences were generational, national origin, race, gender, social economic status, educational background, and language. The commonality that brought us together was a political investment in challenging the anti-immigrant provisions in the welfare law. Likewise, immigrants who would normally not interact were collaborating and supporting each other as they shared stories of economic deprivation and political marginalization. Though experiences varied and family structures differed, the complexity was understood and structured into a larger dialogue and a platform for immigrant rights.

Through a feminist praxis that centered a lens of *multiplicity*, I was ultimately able to engage in the multiple valances of power through a multiplicity that allowed me to recognize my own location in relation to those I was working with and for. It was only through this coalitional praxis that I was able to see the multiple layers of difference, struggle, and solidarity among and across the heterogeneous immigrant rights communities. My role as newcomer and volunteer de-elevated my status in the eyes of many immigrants—longtime community members who were very familiar with the staff—who felt a sense of belonging and ownership of the organization or community center. Some immigrants acted as though they needed to educate me on the conditions they faced. No longer was I the distant, threatening, potential agent of the state. Rather, I was perceived as someone who needed to understand their situations to challenge Congress. And I was accountable to this perception that I needed to learn how to move in solidarity with these multiply different community members.

The leveling I experienced as a volunteer and immigrant rights activist went beyond the patient educational explanations that many immigrants felt compelled to teach us about their situations so that we could better fight Congress for the restorations. When immigrants utilized services at the Immigration Program of Santa Clara County or the Asian Women's Center, they expected me to provide assistance. Their sharing of their situations was not seen as an unwanted invasion or interrogation, but rather as an explanation to get the appropriate guidance or advocacy within and against

the system. However, in some instances, immigrants became impatient with me and expressed their frustration and demands that I act more immediately and proactively. The following scene is from a volunteer experience at the Asian Women's Center in San Francisco Chinatown when I worked with a woman on a long and cumbersome application for naturalization:

> I was helping a woman in her early fifties with her N400. She began to get very frustrated with me as we went through each question. She especially got mad when I had to tell her that she would have a nearly two-year wait before she would even get an interview with the INS. In a very sharp and crisp tone she said, "Why can't you do it faster?" I tried explaining that all I was doing was helping her with the form, that I wasn't making any decisions or acting in any "official" capacity. "What am I going to do?" she started to yell. She was very upset, and I could see that she was feeling very panicked. I tried to explain that it looked like the law might change, and she might be able to keep her SSI because so many people will not be able to live. I said, "Many people are working on it so that the government will change the law again, so noncitizens will be able to keep their benefits." She responded, "Well you better make sure they change that law fast, because we are not going to be able to live if they take that away from us."

My ability to engage in these settings as a researcher as well as an immigrant rights activist proved critical, as my positioning marked me as an "insider" to the mobilization efforts. Although my presence in the immigrant rights movement was not necessarily through an intersecting point of commonality, I was identifiable as an Asian American woman who was there to do the political work. I often felt my ability to negotiate the generational relationship with fluency informed the deference and humility on my part that shaped our interactions and conversations. Although our differences were significant, and I had important privileges as a citizen with economic advantages, language skills, and education, I was still accessible through a familiarity born of shared struggles as an Asian American woman advocating for noncitizens facing exclusion from benefits. For economically vulnerable immigrants and refugees, the act of making their circumstances public for political purposes carried a familiar form of collective responsibility as politicized subjects. Thus, my connection with immigrants' rights community organizations and advocacy efforts positioned me as an ally across and within these multiple valences of power. However, it was not just

a matter of finding a different research approach; my ability to engage with immigrant rights coalitional groups, citizenship drives, and advocacy efforts required a constant critical negotiation of my own positionality, both historically informed and in the present, through reading and understanding the terrain of the folks I was working with. While our political interests shaped the heterogeneous configurations of folks, we were clear of the legislative harm of the law and set out to challenge its implementation. Multiplicity was essential, though not simply articulated as an Asian American and Asian immigrant and refugee political praxis.

## MULTIPLICITY AS A TOOL FOR ASIAN AMERICAN FEMINIST PRAXIS

The heterogeneity that shapes Asian America complicates the ways we think about and enact solidarity. Claire Jean Kim recognizes that Asian Americans are roughly two-thirds foreign born and remain one of the most internally diverse racial minority groups in the United States (Kim 2004, 22). Either internally within an Asian American–identified community or broadly among communities facing other forms of political and structural marginalization, how we understand our positionalities requires a critical consciousness of the multiple valances of power that we occupy and/or resist. Chandra Mohanty's argument for political solidarity and common interests remains pertinent to how we mobilize politically across differences. Mohanty (1997, 8) states, "This idea of political solidarity in the context of the incorporation of Third World women into a global economy offers a basis for cross-cultural comparison and analysis that is grounded in history and social location rather than in an ahistorical notion of culture or experience."

Mohanty's argument illuminates the transnational feminist reviewer's critique of my article submission as an erasure of my own multiple struggles as an Asian American Woman of Color, which informed my cultural competency to be able to connect with immigrants and refugees who did not speak English. She reduces my cultural competency to linguistic know-how in an erasure of my history and social location as enabling modes of complex communication that extend beyond shared linguistic codes. My own trajectory of struggles against racialized neocolonial systems of neoliberalism and globalization moved me to share common political investments with the refugee and immigrant women with whom I sought to connect.

This disposition to connect across struggles enabled me to shift to participatory action research where I became legible to these subjects through on-the-ground organizing as someone to whom they could communicate their experiences and needs. The eclipsing of Women of Color feminisms in the review informed the pain I experienced as an epistemic subject denied the lens of multiplicity in my attempt to center immigrant/refugee women. The lens of multiplicity makes visible my positionality within multiple valences of power and makes us conscious of embodied knowledge born of lived struggle, encouraging us to suspend legitimized frames of knowing that disavow emotional forces shaping who we are and how we relate. In suspending legitimized frames that presume singular and exclusionary modes of knowing, we can attend to the energies infusing a collective struggle so as to fuel solidarity. Attention to the complexity of multiple valences of power helps one avoid presuming that a monolingual Asian American is incapable of communicating and connecting with Asian refugees and immigrants who cannot speak English—or that an Asian immigrant/refugee cannot connect and communicate with an Asian American who knows white supremacy intimately, albeit differently than them.

In line with Women of Color feminists who were challenging binary logics in race and feminist studies, Lowe's articulation of multiplicity strives to expand our analyses of counterhegemonic formations in minoritized communities that account "for a multiplicity of various, non equivalent groups, one of which is Asian Americans" (Lowe 1991, 29). In recognizing the multiple valences of power in coalitional spaces, there is no pretense of equivalency or an intersecting sameness. Rather, the commonalities that bring people together are shaped through a Women of Color politics of knowing oppression through our lived experiences while recognizing and holding accountable our varying levels of privilege. In her 1996 revised version of "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity" in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lowe expands on multiplicity as a political framework where multiple levels of difference among the various actors shape coalitional space, forms of solidarity, and resulting struggles. She states, "We can make more explicit—in light of feminist theory that has gone perhaps the furthest in theorizing multiple determined nations and the importance of positionalities—that it may be difficult to act exclusively in terms of a single valence or political interest—such as race, ethnicity, or nation—because social subjects are the sites of a variety of differences" (Lowe 1996, 73–74).[4] For Asian American feminisms, multiplicity provides

a way of engaging Women of Color politics through shared political investments and a consciousness of difference and power.

The issues I have explored here further crystalize how a framework of multiplicity can be useful for resistant strategies, self-reflexive political accountability, and mobilizing efforts. Multiplicity allows us to grapple with the messy, contradictory, and incommensurable relationships that still find us fighting on the same side. While numerous Asian American or Asian immigrant communities may find few intersecting structural similarities with the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement, a racialized consciousness of institutionalized racism that can see the oppositional divide-and-conquer motifs can lead to the organizing of such groups as Asians4BlackLives. The Asians4BlackLives movement uses a framework of multiplicity to enact a form of solidarity that simultaneously recognizes Asian Americans as racially privileged vis-à-vis Black Americans and as racially subordinated by white supremacist foundations.

Strategies for solidarity require naming and grappling with *difference*, conflict, and the potentials for enacting harm by those whose relative privileges impose communicative obstacles in our attempts to unite with differently oppressed people. From a politically resistant standpoint, the stakes remain critical, as Asian American feminists often need to define their common interests and political consciousness within cross-racial social justice struggles. The tension of naming the multiple layers of difference within Asian America lends itself to the relative invisibility of Asian Americans as coalitional subjects. In other words, when Asian American feminists fail to account for the multiple differences within Asian America itself, we reinforce the very homogenizing logics that render us invisible as coalitional subjects in solidarity with other communities of color. Multiplicity as a feminist praxis inserts complexity into any coalitional space, where Asian American feminist activists share common political interests, even though different social and historical processes bring them there. Using a lens that accounts for and engages multiplicity is especially urgent in "Trump's America" as Asian American feminists heed the call to organize against the persistence of police brutality toward Black bodies, the Muslim ban, anti-immigration, the attack on healthcare, the environment, workers, and Mexico. In these trying times an Asian American feminist praxis must always remain conscious of the multiple valances of power at play, as well as our positions within and across those valences, to enter the spaces in which to enact solidarity.

## NOTES

1 Major thanks to Grace Hong, who in her audience comments at my talk at UCLA helped me to rethink my "failure," beyond my privilege and power, but more so to unpack the complexities and multiplicities from a Woman of Color feminist perspective that shaped such a critical encounter.

2 For a more elaborate discussion, see Soto (2005), Chowdhury (2006), Holloway (2006), and Roshanravan (2012).

3 Thanks to Shireen Roshanravan for helping me parse this out.

4 Here Lowe is discussing the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chela Sandoval, and Angela Davis in challenging binary logics that place Women of Color on the margins of antiracist, antisexist struggles, pointing to the complexity and the need for an understanding of positionality that centers the specificities of particular struggles within its political context.

## REFERENCES

Chowdhury, Elora Halim. 2006. "Global Feminism: Feminist Theory's Cul-de-sac." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4 (3): 291–302.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 2015. "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait." *Washington Post*, September 24. www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait.

Hames-García, Michael. 2011. *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Holloway, Karla F. C. 2006. "'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood': Global Feminisms and the U.S. Body Politic, Or: 'They Done Taken My Blues and Gone.'" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 7 (1): 1–18.

Kim, Claire Jean. 2004. "Asian Americans are People of Color Too . . . Aren't They? Cross-Racial Alliances and the Question of Asian American Political Identity." *AAPI Nexus* 2 (1): 19–47.

Lowe, Lisa. 1991. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences." *Diaspora* 1 (1) (Spring): 24–44.

———. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1997. "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and Politics of Solidarity." In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 3–29. New York: Routledge.

Ong, Aihwa. 1995. "Women out of China: Traveling Tales and Traveling Theories in Postcolonial Feminism." In *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, 350–72. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Peterson, Latoya. 2015. "Intersectionality Is Not a Label." *Washington Post*, September 21. www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/21/how-intersectionality-lost-its-punch/?tid=a_inl.

Roshanravan, Shireen. 2012. "Staying Home while Studying Abroad: Anti-Imperial Praxis for Globalizing Feminist Visions." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 2 (Spring): 1–23.

Soto, Sandra K. 2005. "Where in the Transnational World Are U.S. Women of Color?" In *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, edited by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins, 111–24. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Visweswaran, Kamala. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Zavella, Patricia. 1993. "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13 (3): 53–76.