

a long road to travel before achieving credibility, power, and acceptance as filmmakers, Janet Yang, Mina Shum, and Kayo Hatta are role models for the passion and commitment filmmakers require to survive with integrity and to make a difference. Thus, I end this essay with their words of encouragement.

My film [Double Happiness] is about finding the courage to dream: when we have grown up with generational [and] cultural conflicts, when we have to come of age within two communities, and bridge both worlds, there are so many elements within that fight that tell us "no," "you can't," and "you shouldn't." And what I want to say with my film and my career and my life is that anyone can if you want, and if you have the courage and the talent and the energy to pursue your dreams, don't let anyone say no. I've had millions of people say no, but I keep coming back, I just keep getting up again. (Mina Shum)

I made a lot of my key decisions in those crucial years following college and in the beginning of my career, and I made decisions that seemed highly impractical in some ways, but I did so because I was following my heart—and my nose. You have to follow your instincts. You may fail, you may not be able to make a viable career of it, but at least you're doing what you like! (Janet Yang)

Don't ever underestimate yourself. You would amaze yourself at what you're able to do if you push yourself and challenge yourself and put yourself into really difficult situations, because that's exactly what we did . . . We were driven by a relentless passion to make this film. That's one thing I would tell aspiring women directors, but the other thing is to lighten up, to remember to enjoy the process, to have fun! (Kayo Hatta)

WORK, IMMIGRATION, GENDER: ASIAN "AMERICAN" WOMEN

Lisa Lowe

for Lydia

Hello, my name is Fu Lee. I am forty-one years old, married, and I have a nine-year-old daughter. I have been living in Oakland Chinatown since I left Hong Kong twelve years ago. . . .

I worked as a seamstress at Lucky Sewing Co. for two years. Before that, I worked as a seamstress at other similar sweatshops. All of the workers worked long hours, ten to twelve hours a day and six to seven days a week. We were paid by the piece, which sometimes was below the minimum wage. Overtime pay was unheard of. You may think sewing is an easy job, but it requires a lot of skill. For fancy dresses, with laces, tiny buttons, and tricky fabric patterns, you really have to concentrate so you don't make any mistakes. My wage was never enough money for our family to live on. We always worried about our daughter getting sick because we had no health insurance.

My eyes hurt from straining under poor lighting; my throat hurt because of the chemical fumes from the fabric dye. Sometimes, I would wear surgical masks so I don't have to breathe in all the dust from the fabric. My back never stopped hurting from bending over the sewing machine all day. Our boss was like a dictator. He was always pushing us to work faster. There was a sign in the shop that said, "No loud talking. You cannot go to the bathroom." When we did talk loudly or laugh during work, he would throw empty boxes at us and tell us to go back to work. When there was a rush order, we had to eat lunch at our work station.

Last year, my employer closed his shop and left us holding bad paychecks. We found out that he had filed for bankruptcy and had no intention of paying us our meager wages. The twelve Chinese seamstresses including myself were so mad. After working so hard under such horrendous working conditions, we should at least get our pay.

With the help of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, we began searching for ways to get our pay.

Mrs. Fu Lee's testimony,¹ at a community hearing initiated by Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in Oakland, California, describes the conditions of many Asian immigrant women in the San Francisco Bay Area garment industry: low-waged or unpaid labor, forced increases in productivity through long workdays or speedups, repetitive manual labor, occupational hazards and environmental toxins, poor lighting and ventilation, and no union or collective bargaining protections. Before the Lucky Sewing Co. closed shop and left the sewing women with bad paychecks, Mrs. Lee and the other seamstresses were to have been paid \$5 a dress; the subcontractor was paid \$10 a dress, yet each dress was sold by Jessica McClintock, Inc. for \$175.

In the Bay Area garment industry, women sew clothing that their meager wages (if they receive them) will not permit them to buy as commodities. The women work under physical conditions that are unsafe, unhealthy, and fatiguing. Furthermore, the policy of paying the worker by the piece exploits the immigrant women in ways that extend beyond the extraction of surplus value from hourly low-waged factory labor. The incentive to complete as many pieces as possible makes certain that the sewing women will work overtime without compensation and will intensify her productivity even if it results in exhaustion or personal injury. Because many of the women speak little or no English and consider that their employment options are limited, because eight out of ten Chinatown immigrant families with multiple wage earners say they would "barely get by" if there were but one breadwinner in the family, they are forced to accept the payment terms dictated by the employer.² Many also bring work home and solicit the help of children and relatives, making the domestic space of the home an additional site of labor.

Mrs. Lee's testimony gives a vivid picture of the working lives of many Asian women in the U.S. But when viewed in all its complexity, it also reveals the necessary relations between Asian American women, Asian, and Asian immigrant women, and suggests the important roles that Asian American women can play within the broader coalition of U.S. women of color.

Asian American and Asian immigrant women represent a linked group emerging out of colonialism and war in Asia as well as immigrant displacement to the United States. Along with other racial and ethnic women workers, these women constitute an important low-paid workforce within the U.S., "occupationally ghettoized" in particular sectors: menial, domestic, and reproductive labor, textile and garment industries, hotel and restaurant work, and a current mix of mass production, subcontracting, and family-type firms. Asian immigrant women are at once determined by the histories

of Western expansionism in Asia and the racialization of working populations of color in the U.S.³ In light of post-1965 Asian immigration to the United States, Asian women in America are a complex and changing group composed of different generations and populations. The recent immigrants from South Korea, the Philippines, and South Vietnam leave behind societies greatly disrupted by colonialism, U.S. war, and partition, in the case of Korea and Vietnam. Their countries of origin continue to be disadvantaged economically in relation to the U.S., making Asian immigrants to the U.S. vulnerable to exploitation. As Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich have argued, not only does the underdevelopment associated with U.S. imperialism lay the groundwork for labor emigration, but U.S. industries have special control over laborers who are at the mercy of immigration laws, and who, owing to language, training, culture, and the type of jobs they perform, are outside of unions and the labor movement and often without access to other kinds of support.⁴ For example, there is no union protection for the large workforce of Asian immigrant women in the microchip and semiconductor industries in Silicon Valley, California (although important work is being done by activist groups to protect workers from unhealthy environmental conditions such as inadequately tested toxic chemicals, unsafe lighting, injurious repetitive manual motions, and poor ventilation).⁵ There are also no legal protections for "mail-order brides" and domestic workers from the Philippines, who are dependent upon their "husbands" and "employers" for visas and green cards; their isolation from other women and the Filipino community leaves them with little support to resist the exploitation of their unpaid domestic and sexual labor.⁶ This "trafficking" of Filipinas to the U.S. as "mail-order brides" is continuous with the long history of U.S. militarism and exploitation of sex workers in the Philippines.⁷

Once in the U.S., Asians are asked not only to become fluent in U.S. American language and culture, but to conform to a citizenship narrative in which the immigrant gives up ties to the former homeland to take up membership in the new society. In this narrative, the model citizen transcends their "particular" embeddedness in the concrete conditions of the immigrant and attains the universal perspective of the national collectivity. But at the same time Asian women are working under conditions that prevent them from enjoying the protection and privilege of other U.S. citizens. As she encounters the difference and disparity between her working conditions and the opportunities of the normative U.S. citizen publicized around her, the working Asian immigrant woman may be less likely to *identify* with the model of the citizen than to *disidentify* with it. Her horizon is constituted by the material conditions of her female immigrant "lifeworld": low wages for menial, repetitive labor, poor environmental health conditions in

the workplace, capitalist penetration of the immigrant "home," gender discrimination, and racism exclude her from the equal citizenship promised by democratic inclusion.

American liberal society depends upon the notion that representative democracy is a system to which all individuals have equal access and in which all are represented. Yet the conditions of Asian immigrant women laborers reveal how the myth of equal citizenship is inherently contradictory, to the degree that it holds out the state as an inclusive unity, but asks for the suppression of difference (of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and locality) as a requirement for representation by that state.

Many experiences of Asian immigrant and Asian American women workers are shared by other women of color in the U.S. labor force, particularly Latina immigrants. Latina women also emigrate from nations in which colonialism and neocolonialism have disfigured "native" societies, nations which continue to be economically subordinated to the U.S. In the final section of my discussion, I want to draw out the rich theoretical and practical force of Asian immigrant women workers in relation to existing oppositional social movements in the United States, and in relation to the work already accomplished by U.S. women of color.⁸

Asian immigrant women and other racialized women are formed through the intersecting processes of racial formation, labor exploitation, and gender subordination, and are therefore differentially situated in relation to existing or historical social movements organized around a single form of domination: for example, the liberal feminist critique of patriarchy, the critique of capitalism from the standpoint of class exploitation and class struggle, and the critique of racism and internal colonialism from the standpoint of racialized ethnic minority subjects. The isolation of one axis of power, such as the exploitation of labor under capitalism, underestimates the degree to which capitalism in the U.S. is conjoined with and made more efficient by other systems of discrimination and subordination—patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and heterosexism. U.S. women of color theorists such as Chela Sandoval, Angela Davis, and Evelyn Nakano Glenn have criticized single-axis political organization, pointing out that an exclusive gender politics may obscure class hierarchy and racism, while an exclusive class politics may fail to address gender stratification, race labor, and homophobia.⁹ Moreover, many women of color have argued that the hierarchization of forms of oppression, as well as the false unification of women of color, are impediments to theorizing and organizing movements for social change. In this sense, Asian American and Asian immigrant women are currently a powerful example of the politics of women of color. As a result of being in a dialectical relationship to existing social movements, Asian American and

Asian immigrant women offer a paradigm of struggle and cohesion for cross-ethnic, cross-race, cross-national, multiple-issue politics.

Ultimately, Asian "American" women (I use quotation marks here to signal the ambivalent and multidirectional sets of identifications that both U.S.-born Asian and Asian immigrant women have to the nationalist construction "American") must be situated in a dialogue with women working in colonized, neocolonized, or economically subordinated regions, as well as with women workers migrating to the U.S. from these areas. Given the transnational context of women's oppression in the U.S. and the global nature of the garment and electronics industries, this linkage seems crucial to Asian American feminist and women of color politics.

From the early post-World War II years through the 1960s, the U.S. political economy was dominated by the notion of development—the capital, technological, and educational development of the U.S., as well as neocolonial development and the appropriation by the U.S. of surplus profits in Asia and Latin America. In that period, opposition to these forms of capitalist and imperialist development was primarily articulated in terms of class issues.¹⁰ The late 1960s marked the beginning of a period in which the expression of opposition to oppression became increasingly mediated by analyses of other forms of domination, not only capitalism and imperialism, but also patriarchy and racism.¹¹ Following the 1970s, "free-trade zones" were established in various sites of the "Third World," in which tax-free privileges in trade were combined with new incentives, such as the provision of buildings and utilities by local governments and the ease of profit repatriation. By the 1970s, networks of industrial zones throughout Southeast Asia and Latin America opened up these regions to investment by Japanese and U.S. transnational companies. Trade policies like GATT and NAFTA have accelerated the flow of capital, goods, and services across national boundaries while undermining the few existing laws protecting workers, consumers, and the environment. With U.S. capitalism's shift of production globally, the use of nonwhite women's labor worldwide has led to a reorganization of the categories and relations of national, racial, and gender differences that were characteristic of the earlier mode of capitalism that had once concentrated production within the U.S.

U.S. oppositional social movements of the 1970s—feminist, labor, civil rights, and ethno-nationalist—produced particular narratives of political development for people resisting domination. According to these narratives, the "woman," "worker," and "racial or ethnic minority" were to develop from a pre-class-identified position to that of politicized participants who become "conscious" of their exploitation under patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. Asian American women, like other U.S. women of color, had a

different political formation than that prescribed by *either* the narratives of liberal capitalist development and citizenship or the narratives proposed by these oppositional movements of the 1970s. The experience of Asian American women and U.S. women of color of the 1970s was more complex than that of the "woman" posited by feminist discourse, or the "proletariat" described by Marxism, or the "ethnic" subject projected by civil rights and ethno-nationalist movements. A different social history, a different narrative of politicization, and a different logic of political organization distinguish women of color from the subjects of these oppositional movements. It is in encountering these "differences," and in encountering the practical obstacles of "differences" among women of color, that women of color politics has historically articulated its necessity, and its predicament.¹²

Since the political subject woman of color does not "develop" solely as a "woman," a "worker," or an "ethnic" subject, women of color may be said to be politically "anti-identitarian" in representation and practice. Norma Alarcón has argued that the association of "identity politics" with the women of color movement is a false one, that the concept of women of color has always been predicated upon differences—of class, sexuality, race, geography, national origin, religion, and generation.¹³

Narratives of consciousness aim at developing a subject position or perspective from which totalization becomes possible, whereas women of color have tended to locate themselves in relationship to intersecting dominations, often translating these locations into powerful critical positions. In the 1980s, work by Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and the collective Asian Women United of California, for example, exemplify "situated" nontotalizing perspectives on conjoined dominations, as well as the emergence of politicized critiques of those conjunctions.¹⁴

While Marxism proposes that the classical contradiction exists between capital and labor, the situation of working women of color makes it apparent that we must always speak of more than one contradiction. We may speak of a racial contradiction by which the state claims to be a democratic body in which all subjects are granted membership, yet racial, ethnic, and immigrant subjects continue to be disenfranchised and excluded from political participation in that state. And we may speak of gender contradictions: that the economic concept of abstract labor (that work is equivalent to pay) fails to account for unwaged female domestic labor in the home and unequal pay for women in the workplace; or that the discourse of formal legal equality is contradicted when a woman's choice to conceive or bear a child may still be contested by husband, father, or state. Throughout lived social relations, it is apparent that labor is gendered, sexuality is racialized, and race is class-associated. A multiplicity of social contradictions with different origins converge at different sites within any social formation—the family, education, religion, communications media, sites of capitalist production. Each set of

contradictions is uneven and incommensurable, with certain contradictions taking priority over others in response to the material conditions of a given historical moment. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the "life-world" of women of color, who are situated within multiple sets of social relations.

The necessary alliances between women of color within, outside, and across the border of the U.S. grow out of the contemporary conditions of global capitalism. Immigrant women working in the garment industries of Los Angeles are virtually part of the same labor force as those employed in Asia or Latin America. The sweatshops of the garment industry located in San Francisco and Los Angeles, for example, employ immigrant women from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, China, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, while in these countries of origin, U.S. transnational corporations are also conducting garment assembly work.¹⁵ Third World women migrate from countries of origin already "colonized" and distorted by U.S. corporate capital and come to labor as racialized "women of color" in the U.S. In this sense, despite the obstacles of national, cultural, and linguistic differences, there are material continuities between the conditions of Chicanas and Latinas working in the U.S., the women working in maquilas and low-cost manufacturing zones in Latin America, and the Asian women occupationally segregated both within the U.S. and in Asian zones of assembly and manufacturing.

While the determinations of class, race, and gender make possible the continuation of labor exploitation for women of color, it may also precisely constitute the ground from which the cross-generational, cross-national, cross-class, anti-racist, and feminist struggles against those dominations emerge. The important work of organizations like AIWA (Asian Immigrant Women Advocates) in the San Francisco Bay Area, in which second- and third-generation Asian American women work for the empowerment of immigrant Asian women workers in the garment, hotel, and electronics industries, or the Garment Workers' Justice Center in Los Angeles and La Mujer Obrera in El Paso, suggests some ways of thinking about the mutual processes of politicization that occur between "U.S. women of color" and "Third World women." AIWA is an inspiring example of a kind of organization whose practices combine the forces, ideas, and labors of diverse Asian American and Asian immigrant women. The cross-generational women in AIWA are from different national origins, classes, and language backgrounds. While AIWA organizes Asian immigrant women around the more traditional labor issue of workers' rights—as in the campaign to secure pay for the seamstresses in the shop contracted by manufacturer Jessica McClintock—it also focuses on bringing Asian American and Asian immigrant women together as members of Asian communities, and addresses issues that are of concern "outside" of the workplace, such as childcare,

healthcare, language, and literacy. In this way, AIWA and other groups are able to address the specific issues confronting immigrant women who do not easily "fit" into mainstream unions. AIWA does not organize itself in a traditional hierarchy that would place "organizers" above "workers" or Asian American women above immigrant women; instead, AIWA's structure encourages reciprocally transformative relationships between Asian American organizers and Asian immigrant working women.¹⁶ Miriam Ching Louie writes: "The challenge to AIWA organizers is to use the classes (in English) so that workers can reflect on their own lives, determine what is fair, visualize alternatives to oppressive conditions, and practice demanding their rights. . . . Organizers must also transform themselves in the process."¹⁷

Other projects create and maintain solidarity across racial and ethnic groups, and across national boundaries: groups like the Border Workers Regional Support Committee (CAFOR) and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM) have helped Mexican maquiladora workers organize against U.S.- and Japanese-owned parent companies. The Support Committee for the Maquiladora Workers in San Diego, some of whom are Asian immigrant women, helps document the exploitative, unsafe working conditions of the maquiladoras and provides various support services for the mostly female Mexican workers.¹⁸ Recently, the Support Committee helped retrieve back wages for workers formerly employed at Exportadora de Mano de Obra in Tijuana, Mexico, through bringing suit in U.S. courts against the parent company, National O-Ring, a division of American United Global Corporation. One hundred and eighty workers had lost their wages when National O-Ring suddenly closed the Exportadora plant in Tijuana, precipitated by the women workers having brought charges of sexual harassment against the company president. "Solidarity among workers should cross the border as easily as companies move production," says Mary Tong, the director of the Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers. Asian "American" projects are changing in response to the changes in immigration and immigrant communities over the last two decades, and shifting to take on the difficult work of forging understanding and political solidarity between Asian and non-Asian groups across racial and national boundaries.

Chandra Mohanty has written about the movements *between* cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meanings and power that "experience must be historically interpreted and theorized if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial."¹⁹ As Asian "American" women, we must struggle to understand not only the process of our various "minoritizations" as racialized women, but also the different processes of newly immigrant women who may already be a proletarianized, gendered labor force in their "home" countries. The experiences of women in sites as

different as South Korea, Sri Lanka, or Egypt are determined by their specific national histories of colonialism, decolonization, nationalist struggles, postindependence capitalist development, and multinational incursions.²⁰ Asian American women of color must be as vigilant as we have always had to be to avoid universalizing nationalist notions of "womanhood" or struggle. Audre Lorde wrote in 1979, "Community must not mean a shedding of our differences . . . [but] learning how to take our differences and make them strengths."²¹ This attention to "difference" is still, and all the more, crucial for Asian American women today.

