

Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project:  
Author's Note

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May 2, 2014

## Introduction

I came to this project because I could not ignore its blatant absence amidst feminist and other women of color narratives. In junior year, I told myself I would “try out” feminism. I became a Woman Peer Counselor in residence halls, went to a Feminists @ Brown meeting, and participated in a semester-long workshop series called Female Sexuality, or FemSex, where we colored vulvas and learned that sex toys should not be used with silicon lube. [Didn’t feel comfortable] and by the end of the semester, I gave up on feminism. Looking back now, I realize that much of those experiences were with a particular brand of feminism (often White, middle class, individualistic) that limited my history and identity in certain ways. I remember sitting at Au Bon Pain, talking to my White female-presenting friends about experiences of sexism. I angrily told them a story about a time when a White man in the passenger seat of a driving by car had yelled “Asian” noises at me and lowered his head with his hand folded together. My friends frowned and told me that he was racist. I blinked, and told her that I had been recalling an experience with sexism. “Oh,” they said, and proceeded to eat their avocado wraps.

Perhaps these types of experiences with feeling disconnected from (White) feminism is why reading the Dorothy Roberts’s *Killing the Black Body* impacted me so greatly. The book was first introduced to me in Professor Lundy Braun’s class on Biology, Genomics, and Historical Differences, then again in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black Feminist Thought with Professor Tricia Rose. Roberts presented an entirely novel perception of reproductive freedom and justice, one that was couched in the history of economic & racial slavery, prescribed notions of Black women being irresponsible mothers drowning in poverty, as well as the State’s age-old efforts to curb their reproduction through violent measures. Her social, legal, and political analysis of Black reproduction put words to the exclusion that I felt during previous discussions of feminism. I also

found related literature on women of color reproductive oppression, such *Conquest* by Andrea Smith and *Reproducing Empire* by Laura Briggs. As someone who was into a political identity as an Asian American, I also asked the inevitable question that began this project: What about the Asian Americans? What about Asian American reproductive justice?

Unsurprisingly, there was very little academic scholarship on the subject of Asian American reproductive justice. Of the literature I was able to find, most were mere footnote mentions of Asian Americans in broader texts discussing women of color (read: Black and Latina) feminism. For example, the book *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* only included texts on Black, Latina, and Native communities, despite its claim to speak to all women of color. The only texts I found helpful in gaining background knowledge on Asian American reproductive justice were *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* and Lora Jo Foo's *Asian American Women: Issues, Concerns, and Responsive Human and Civil Rights Advocacy*. However, the general dearth of research around this topic made me realize that I had to dig out the knowledge myself.

## **Methodology**

This project was able to take shape in large part to the financial and mentorship support that I received. Brown University's Royce Fellowship funded the project through a \$6,000 grant over the course of June 2013 – May 2014, as well as programmatic support in the form of reflective biweekly debriefs and discussions with other Royce fellows. However, most of the project mentorship came from Dr. Amy G. Lam at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Public Health. I found her name online under the School of Public Health page and cold-called her prior to submitting the oral history proposal. Her mentorship was vital to the project, as she

put me in contact with a preliminary set of Asian American reproductive justice organizers and provided suggestions of primary literature, books, and films for me to review. The rest of the interviewees were selected based on availability and snowball methods (receiving recommendations of potential candidates for interview from existing interviewees). This project would not have been possible without her support, and her own interview is included in the oral history collection.

As for the methods applied in conducting oral history interviews, I relied heavily on Professor Anne Valk at Brown University, who has extensive experience conducting oral history interviews as part of her scholarly research and teaches a course in oral history methods. I also consulted the book *Doing Oral History* by Donald A. Ritchie, per the recommendation of Professor Valk, in the process of drafting interview questions and the legality surrounding the donation of oral histories to an archive. The decision to donate to the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College was made on July 19, 2013 after consultation with Ms. Joyce Follet of Smith College. The consent forms used in the oral history interviews are directly from the Sophia Smith Collection. The interviews were recorded via MP3 format on Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC with the exception of Helen Zia's interview, which was recorded on a SONY cassette-corder M560V due to technical difficulties.

### **The Evolution of Asian American Reproductive Justice**

In this section, I seek to briefly outline the birth of the women of color reproductive justice movement and the development of reproductive justice as a separate concept from reproductive health or reproductive rights. The feminist movement is depicted as a largely middle-class White women's movement that focused majority of their efforts on obtaining abortion rights. The

abortion rights movement succeeded in legalizing abortion in the 1973 landmark case of *Roe v. Wade*, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that abortions were legal under the right to privacy clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>1</sup> But despite these major strides, the feminist movement as a whole failed to address certain issues that impacted women of color, such as welfare policy or sterilization abuse, deeming them “race” problems or issues that would fracture the seemingly cohesive “women’s” community. As Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice founder Mary Luke notes, “It was clear—and unfortunately, it’s clear today that the reproductive choice movement is very much a White women’s movement.”

The rise of women of color reproductive health organizations in the 1980s, thus, speaks to the exclusionary nature of the mainstream feminist movement. The first such organization to arise was the National Black Women’s Health Project in 1984. Others followed suit, with the Mother’s Milk Project in 1985, National Latina Health Organization in 1986, Native American Women’s Health Education and Resource Center in 1988, and Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice (APIC) in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Many women of color’s critique of the mainstream feminist movement was not only rooted in its largely White demographic but also extended to its singular focus on abortion and the employment of the individualistic “choice” rhetoric. As reproductive justice Loretta Ross states, “It’s about abortion, but it’s not just about abortion.”<sup>3</sup> Abortion, or the choice to not have children was often not a “choice” for many women of color, who were deemed “too fertile,” “promiscuous,” or “unfitting parents” by the State. Women of color sought to have the right to have children, as much as the right to not have them, especially given the violent legacy of forced sterilizations and population control. A former Executive Director of Asian Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell University, Legal Information Institute, “Roe v. Wade,” <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/410/113> (accessed April 9, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, “A New Vision for advancing our movement,” <http://forwardtogether.org/assets/docs/ACRJ-A-New-Vision.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> AOL, “Makers: Loretta Ross,” MAKERS, <http://www.makers.com/loretta-ross> (accessed March 2, 2014).

Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH; formerly APIC) Yin Ling Leung speaks to the reasons behind the organization's ideological and rhetorical shift away from "choice":

The reason why there was this evolution towards this term, 'Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health' was really understanding that the framework of choice was too narrow. It's very much about an individual being able to decide, [which is] a very traditional American individual framework, and yet if you understand what goes on in these [Asian American] communities, it's not an individual choice; it's all these other social determinants that inform and control your choice. So we wanted to work from that broader framework.

Loretta Ross and other participants of a Black women's caucus at the 1995 Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance Conference expressed similar sentiments around the "choice" rhetoric and cited it as being one of their motivations behind coining the term, reproductive justice.<sup>4</sup> Ross states that reproductive justice promotes "a human rights way of looking at the totality of women's lives," including the historical and social pressures that influence one's individual choice.<sup>5</sup>

In 2005, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) released an important report titled, "A New Vision for advancing our movement," which draws clear demarcations between the concepts of reproductive health, rights, and justice. The report argues that reproductive health is a "service delivery model" (i.e. contraceptive access, health clinics), while reproductive rights is a "legal and advocacy-based model," which has historically dealt with legalizing abortion. Reproductive health and reproductive rights efforts are far better funded and supported. Planned Parenthood and National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) are the two national non-profit "giants" that are involved in this area of service and advocacy.

These two areas are distinct from the third framework of reproductive justice, which is "rooted in the recognition of the histories of reproductive oppression and abuse in all

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<sup>4</sup> Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. "A New Vision for advancing our movement." <http://forwardtogether.org/assets/docs/ACRJ-A-New-Vision.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> AOL, "Makers: Loretta Ross."

communities” and can be used to “change structural power inequalities.” Although providing reproductive health services via clinics and gaining legal protection have significant impact on people’s lives, they do not fundamentally challenge the structure that gave rise to the discrepancies in the first place. Whereas direct service and legal advocacy can be seen as radical acts of “survival,” allowing the oppressed communities to continue existing under a system that constantly seeks to eliminate them, I believe reproductive justice can work to mobilize communities towards “collective liberation.” Reproductive justice is not only about broadening the scope for a more inclusive movement, but fundamental shifting the way we view and address reproductive oppression—as an extension of the white heteropatriarchy that must be dismantled for people of all races and genders to achieve self-determination.

Although originating from women of color activism, the reproductive justice rhetoric has also gained significant traction in the mainstream feminist movement, even for slower-moving organizations such as Planned Parenthood. In her interview, Professor Lisa Ikemoto of University of California, Davis discusses her experience at the 2004 Reproductive Justice for All Conference at Smith College and the participation of larger feminist organizations, such as Planned Parenthood, which had been “for so long, white and law-focused.” The supposed “embracing” of the reproductive justice framework by these larger organizations speaks to the impact of the reproductive justice rhetoric. In conjunction with this ideological shift in the overall feminist movement, Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH) also underwent another name change to become Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) in 2004, then finally Forward Together in 2012.

## **Significance of Asian American Reproductive Justice**

The seemingly narrow scope of the project raises the question of whether Asian American reproductive justice has a unique perspective to provide, distinct from the broader scope of women of color reproductive justice. I argue that although technically inclusive of Asian American narratives, broader women of color frameworks often focus solely on Black and Latina experiences. As such, Asian American experiences are rarely viewed as being legitimate entryways into talking about race and/or gender. During a student of color orientation, I presented a sexism workshop on women of color's experiences with colonization, sexualization, and reproductive control. The section titled, "Chained Bodies," discussed the sexualization of Asian American women and yellow fever. After the presentation, three Black women commented that the Asian American section was not relatable and should be moved to the racism workshop, as it was an issue dealing with Asian American race rather than gender. I challenged them to question whether sexualization and fetishization were truly issues irrelevant to themselves as Black women, or if they simply had a difficult time relating to the case study of Asian Americans due to their perceived lack of legitimacy in discussing such issues.

I believe Asian American reproductive justice can be a unique and valuable lens through which structures of racism and sexism can be examined, especially considering the deeply engrained history of imperialism and war in Asian American history. For example, transnational sex trafficking is a relevant issue that is intertwined with and sexualized perceptions of Asian women. Research shows that there are over 18,000 people being sexually trafficked in to the U.S. every year, with most originating from Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> The hypersexualization of Asian

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<sup>6</sup> Courtney Chappell, "Reclaiming Choice, Broadening the Movement: Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Asian Pacific American Women," [http://napawf.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/working/pdfs/NAPAWF\\_Reclaiming\\_Choice.pdf](http://napawf.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/working/pdfs/NAPAWF_Reclaiming_Choice.pdf) (accessed April 3, 2014).



women and their disproportionately high numbers in the sex tourism and global trafficking industry is not a coincidence. Sexualization of Asian women have been a long recurring theme, as evidenced by the 1875 Page Act restricted the admission of Chinese and other Asian women into the United States due to their unilateral perception as prostitutes that sought to lure White men. The establishment of U.S. military bases across the globe also meant an increase in “military prostitution,” a term coined by feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe. Vietnam War and its unapologetic establishment of military brothels within each division’s camp also highlights how Asian women were frequently perceived within sexual context.<sup>7</sup> All of these parallels around bodily and national autonomy, as well as connection between imperialist military efforts and sexual violence against local women, are further illuminated through the Asian American reproductive justice lens.

## **Discussion**

The Atlanta-based multiracial reproductive justice coalition SisterSong defines reproductive justice as “the right to have children, not have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments.”<sup>8</sup> However, the on-the-ground interviewing process highlighted the broad, expansive nature of reproductive justice within the Asian American community. The interviewees that spoke with me all understood that their interview would be filed under the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History collection, and many of them spoke directly to how they conceptualized the relationship between their work and reproductive justice. The

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against our will: men, women and rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 95.

<sup>8</sup> SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, “What is RJ,” [http://www.sistersong.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=141&Itemid=81](http://www.sistersong.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=141&Itemid=81) (accessed April 2, 2014).

scope of reproductive justice began to broaden as I conducted more interviews, and the working definition of reproductive justice encompasses not only traditional issues of abortion rights and comprehensive sexual education, but also gender based violence, disability justice, labor rights, and reproductive technologies. Mia Mingus, a transformative justice and disability justice activist, specifically spoke to the connections between the medical industrial complex, reproductive justice, and the prison industrial complex—associations that I would not have been able to make, coming from the rigid framework of academia.

The individual nature of the oral history also unveiled the complexity and diversity of perspectives as to what constitutes reproductive justice. Beckie Masaki of the Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence spoke to me extensively about how her previous work at the Asian Women's Shelter with issues of domestic violence contributed to the broader reproductive justice movement. However, another member of the same organization declined to be interviewed, because she did not perceive her work as being part of the RJ movement. I received a similar decline from a domestic worker organizer, who I had wanted to ask about the complexities of women of color population serving as a labor force to allow for White career women to provide economic labor. These interactions truly highlighted the discrepancy that often exists between an imposed theoretical analysis of reproductive justice and the on-the-ground organizing, which often defined its boundaries by funding sources, coalitions they partook in, or smaller goals they worked toward.

### **Limitations & Moving Forward**

The major concern regarding the project's implementation was simply my own lack of knowledge around reproductive justice as a whole. I spent the first four weeks reading any

women of color reproductive rights and justice text I could get my hands on, but even then, I lacked direct experience within the movement. I strongly believe more extensive knowledge around organizing, coalition building, and tension diffusion within a movement would have lent to a more nuanced set of interview questions that offered greater insight into the Asian American reproductive justice movement.

Another challenge I came up against were the inherent limitations of the snowball method, which can act to homogenize the pool of interviewees as later interviewees are directly referred by the original set of interviewees. Perhaps it was due to this method that most of my interviewees were cisgender East Asian women in non-profit work or academia, who could only speak in a limited capacity on the issues that affect LGBT, Southeast Asian, or South Asian communities. However, I also believe that I focused too heavily on organizations and not enough on the people and the movement that existed beyond the 501(c)3 nonprofits. I used this opportunity to build my own understanding of the non-profit industrial complex, as to research new and better ways to avoid this pitfall in the future.

On a more logistical level, there were technical difficulties with the electronic recorder in the case of the Helen Zia interview, and I had to use Ms. Zia's cassette recorder, which may have compromised the audio quality. There were also a list of people whom I was unable to interview due to scheduling conflicts or lack of personal financial means to travel—including Mia Sullivan (Civil Liberties and Public Policy), Miriam Yeung (NAPAWF), Mary Chung (NAWHO), Kalpana Krishnamurthy (formerly at Western States Center), Tiloma Jayasignhe (Sakhi for South Asian Women), and Priscilla Huang (APIAHF). My hope is that this oral history collection serves as a launching pad for further research into Asian American reproductive

justice, and future efforts will use this list of interviewees as a preliminary starting point to build a more robust scholarship.

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