

Merle Woo on feminism and free speech

MERLE WOO | WINTER 1983



The following article is excerpted from a talk entitled "Feminism and Free Speech," presented by Merle Woo at the National Women's Studies Conference in Columbus, Ohio on June 29, 1983.

All over the world today, working people, revolutionaries, people of color, lesbians and gays are denied their natural right to free speech. But they resist every step of the way — no matter what the retaliation.

Working women are central in this struggle for free speech and association because we have the most to gain and the least to lose by fighting. In Alabama, Black women are jailed for registering voters. In Africa and in Central America, women fight on the front lines of revolution. In South Korea and other Asian countries, women textile and industrial workers speak out, organize, and strike against the inhumane conditions in factories.

Young Irish women and men in Armagh Prison refuse to be silenced, and sing their revolutionary songs although isolated from one another in tiny cells.

In Poland, Anna Walentinowicz, a crane operator and union leader, organized a strike center in the Lenin Shipyards of Gdansk and sparked the 1980 Polish rebellion. She is now in jail.

Here in California, I was fired from my lecturer's position at the University of California at Berkeley for exercising my right to free speech and speaking out against discrimination and oppression. I am fighting now to regain my job.

Women everywhere are persecuted, imprisoned, and put to death — the extreme form of censorship — for exercising the right to free speech and association. Yet, we keep on speaking out because we have to. Censorship is one of the most powerful forms of oppression. It isolates people. It stops criticism, protest, action. It prevents a progressive continuum of struggle. Kept in ignorance, not knowing our history, our roots, we have to start over from the beginning.

In the U.S., free speech is supposed to be constitutionally guaranteed. But that's true only for a certain class of people — not for the majority, whose rights can be cut as abruptly as mine were.

Falling off the ladder. Until June 1982, I was a lecturer: for nine years at San Francisco State University and then for four more at the University of California/Berkeley. A marginal worker, I had few benefits, no job security. I was told that because I was in the lowest echelon of the teaching establishment, I shouldn't have free speech. It is reserved for ladder-rank faculty or professors who receive tenure.

That's what tenure is all about. But it's practically guaranteed that a professor who receives tenure — usually a straight white male with a Ph.D — will have nothing to say that will threaten the capitalist establishment.

He won't protest, for example, that the University of California is not the liberal bastion of free speech it's purported to be; that it supports the Lawrence, Livermore, and Los Alamos warfare labs; that it has investments in white South Africa; that it has just spent over \$1 million to prevent unions from organizing on its campuses; that it has blatantly violated affirmative action policies; or that it has whittled and chopped away at Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and the Educational Opportunity Program since their inception.

I didn't play the tenure game. I supported students in their protests against elimination of student and community participation in Asian American Studies at Berkeley; against the elimination of community language courses; against the firings of staff, student-tutors, and other female lecturers who are community activists; against the elimination of the goal of an autonomous Third World College. All these policy changes signaled the death of the original concept of Ethnic Studies as set forth in 1969.

My stand against the University, the sold-out, opportunistic, self-serving powers-that-be as represented by the ladder-rank faculty in Asian American Studies, did not just include my visible, outspoken criticism of "management." I was also a unionist and a socialist feminist lesbian. I spoke out, criticized, and made statements about who I am, fully and with dignity.

Because I spoke out, I got fired.

The path to protest. I became a radical precisely because I realized that I had no free speech. I grew up in capitalist society. I went to school for 21 years and never heard about Third World people, about women, about lesbians and gays. I had no idea that there is a history of Asians in this country, a history of resistance and struggle, a history of culture and art. We have been censored out! My people are invisible. Maybe we get a paragraph in American history books about being railroad workers or about being interned during World War II. Maybe not.

But I was one of the lucky ones. Because of the civil rights movement and the Third World liberation strikes, I got my first teaching job in 1969 in the Educational Opportunity Program at San Francisco State. And that's when my education began: from students, from Third World men and women, and from the materials that we began to discover together.

In the mid-'70s, I became aware of the women's movement and discovered books about and by women. I taught a class on Third World women in Women's Studies at San Francisco State, and again a reciprocal learning process occurred between me and my students.

In 1977, I was scared to call myself a feminist. I didn't want my Asian American community to reject me-as if the Asian American community is a gigantic monolith with a single perspective! But as I grew as a radical and a feminist, I realized that the *establishment* sector of the Asian American community exercises its own form of censorship — to keep women and gays in their subordinate, invisible places. The establishment maintains this subordination through cultural nationalism, a political tendency that says race liberation is primary, that we are all Asian American "brothers and sisters" and women's liberation can come later.

Asian American women, like all women of color, are under incredible pressure not to be feminists or to speak out against the sexism in our families and communities. We get called emasculators. So we put our feminism in the closet and come out as Asian Americans, period.

Asian American lesbians are the hardest hit within our communities. Our mere existence is a stand against the status quo. We're not dependent on men or the family to make us whole, visible. We are seen as unnatural, sick, immoral, or products of decadent Western civilization. In practically every single publication put out today by and about Asian America, there is not one mention of the existence of lesbians and gay men. We are invisible within an already invisible American minority.

We get sexism and homophobia from our families and community, racism and class oppression from the women's community, and the whole shebang from society at large. That's censorship.

So for radicals, the struggle against censorship is central to our struggle for liberation.

Persistence, persistence. I was the only educator in Asian American Studies (AAS) to teach the interconnections between race, sex, sexuality, and class, the only one to talk about lesbian and gay and feminist issues. The ladder-rank faculty in AAS meanwhile sold students, community activists, feminists, radicals, lesbians and gays down the river. These faculty members became agents of the University and lined up against the student tutors and me because we were outspoken. If I had played the game, I might have been tolerated; ranked-faculty might have bragged that they, too, had "one of those."

But I wouldn't ever have been part of their buddy system, attending their socials and book parties and moving up the ladder. I would merely have been tolerated and joked about. And fired when they felt it was expedient.

So you see, none of us has anything to lose by speaking out. What do we have in our silence? Do we really think that in this time and place silence will give Third World men and women, or Third World lesbians job security? We would just be practicing more of the self-denial and censorship that we have practiced for centuries.

I intend to fight that self-denial. We, the Merle Woo Defense Committee and I, are taking my case to the state and federal courts, charging UC/Berkeley with violation of my First Amendment rights, violation of due process, and discrimination based on race, sex, sexuality, and political ideology. We are also trying the case in the community where it belongs, writing our briefs with an eye to the general reader. We want the case public in order to educate and to expose the University's institutionalized oppression and censorship.

These issues have gained us national and international support. People have endorsed the case and donated money who don't even know who I am, but who know that what has happened to me can eventually happen to them. Many know that we're living in a terrible economic depression, that we're seeing the decline of capitalism, and that fascism is beginning to stretch and gape its jaws.

Cases like mine are very important means to an end. They help expose the nature of our oppressive capitalist institutions — how they censor and subjugate all who are not straight, white, and male, in order to meet the political and economic needs of the profit system.

By exposing the system for what it is, by speaking the truth in a public arena, by organizing people, and by educating, picketing, demonstrating, and striking, we are on the way to closing this system down. We will create anew, free society where all can speak out fully and with dignity; where we will produce for need and not for profit; a free, all-embracing society, which will give men and women the chance to reach our fullest potential. This is our basic right as human beings.



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