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Introduction. Asking the Question

When I started pursuing Women’s Studies, I read the works of many prominent white feminist theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Catherine MacKinnon. I also read some works by black feminist theorists, such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. From this I learned and remained continually baffled by the absence of the perspectives of Asian American feminist theorists. Esther Ngan-ling Chow titled her essay on Asian American women with a question in 1989, “The Feminist Movement: Where are all the Asian American Women?” Over a decade later, at the onset of the twenty-first century, I still ask the same question. The invisibility of Asian American women in feminist networks and discourse cannot be attributed in its entirety to the small population percentage that they compose.

The invisibility of Asian American women is not a feature that is particular to mainstream feminism within the US. Sucheta Mazumbar (1989) writes of Asian American women:

If society has ever thought about these women, it has often been in clichés: the depraved prostitute in nineteenth century San Francisco; the quiet, courteous, and efficient Asian female office worker today. Asian women in America have emerged not as individuals but as nameless and faceless members of an alien community. Their identity has been formed by the lore of the majority community, not by their own history, their own stories (p 1).

Mazumbar’s depiction of Asian American women as “nameless and faceless members of an alien community” is true to the extent that an Asian American woman’s individuality is obscured by the stereotypes and notions circulated by the larger population and by a “perpetual alien residency” that they share with anyone who exhibits physical attributes perceived by the majority population as “non-white.” But Mazumbar’s portrayal of
Asian American women goes awry when she denies the agency of Asian American women to affect the images the majority community created for them—agency that they have and use. Possessing agency does not contradict the state of invisibility. In the history of the US and of Asian Americans, Asian American women remain mostly invisible. And ironically, in the feminist movement that sought to recognize the individuality and voices of each woman, whether through the telling of personal stories or through another method of consciousness-raising, Asian American women have no place. Their namelessness is written by their absence in Women’s Studies curriculum, in feminist literary anthologies.

Although Asian American feminist theory has historically been marginalized from mainstream feminist discourse, Asian American feminist theorists have made significant contributions to the understanding of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in legal, academic, activist, and commercial arenas. They have also generated insights into multiculturalism, critical race theory, and the position of third world women. Feminist theorists of color brought the issues of racial and class oppressions into the white feminist agenda, which resisted mainly, if not solely, sex oppression based on a binary construction of the sexes and sexual identities. In this respect, Asian American feminist theorists share similar concerns with black feminist theorists, for both stress the importance of racial and class stratifications and hierarchies within social constructs and institutions that are already replete with sexist ideologies. However, Asian American feminists add more to the feminist discourse. If black feminists bring the critique of racism into feminist discourse, then Asian American feminists bring the critique of culture.
In this thesis, I will argue that Asian American feminist theory not only addresses the needs of Asian American women, but also enriches feminist discourse in general through the examination of the role of cultural difference in personal lives and in politics, and attention to the “Third World” and “third world women.” Asian American feminists acknowledge that the experiences of culture differ based on context (e.g. the experience of an Indian woman in the US is different from her experience in India) and they take culture into account when analyzing women’s behavior in various situations (e.g. an immigrant woman committing parent child suicide). In many cases, the work of many Asian American feminists is inextricably linked to the “Third World” and “third world women.” By invoking a global perspective, examining the role of third world feminism both inside and outside of the US, Asian American feminists strives for a feminist network that is globally integrated.

Before delving into the origins of Asian American feminism, recognition should be given to the dynamic nature of the words “feminism” and “race.” In the Western sense of the word, feminism has included a drive for equality with men as well as a celebration of differences between the sexes. The meaning of the word is not static, and may mean quite different things to different people. For the purposes of this paper, “feminism” refers to the struggle to end sex oppression. Feminism (whether consciously defined as feminism or not) functions as a vision for ending inequalities and sexual discrimination because it enables an active and critical interpretation of one’s experiences not only of sexism, but also racism and class differentiation. The explanation of the oppression of women necessitates the explanation of racial and socio-economic class oppressions as well, since women belong to various races and social classes, making the
equality between men and women impossible without the equality of men and women between and across classes and races.

This perspective of feminism introduces the other problematic word—race. The etymology of race traces back to the 15th century during the time of European expansion, colonialism, and imperialism. Because of its association with the breeding of animals, the word took on the essence of inheritability, biology, and innateness (Smedley, 1999: 1-11) even though “race” has very little, if anything, to do with biology. Recent theorists have described “race” as a social construct. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986), define race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies... in contrast to the other major distinction of this type, that of gender, there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race.” Like feminism, the definition of race continues to change, and not without serious legal implications. In many cases, the categorization is externally imposed because of a person’s physical attributes. When this categorization becomes discriminatory, racism emerges. Both “feminism” and “race” have relevance for a minority woman confronting sex and race oppression.

A third classification complicates the reality of oppression, that of class. Just as race and sex cast human groups and individuals to descending rungs on the social ladder, class differentiation achieves the same effect. At the crossroads of race, gender, and class, primacy is not given to any one of the three.

In this thesis, I define an Asian American woman as a woman of Asian descent who lives or works primarily in the United States. This Asian American woman cannot be first a woman, then an Asian American, nor can she be first an Asian then an
American. No one single category could be privileged over the other because the experiences of an Asian American woman at any one time are different from the experiences of being only Asian, American, or female. This distinction makes “Asian American woman” a unique identity because “Asian American” does not describe the woman nor does “woman” describe the “Asian American” or the “Asian” describe the “American woman.” The term “Asian American woman” cannot be broken down semantically into modifiers and nouns since the phrase only has meaning when the three words are taken together to refer to an identity.

Another term that must be defined is “theory.” Within academia, which focuses mainly on white feminism, students may wonder (as I did) whether or not any Asian American woman does theory. The answer to that question is yes. Traditionally, theory is defined in an abstract sense, as conceptualization. In “Is Theory Gendered?” Elizabeth Frazer posits that theory exhibits five characteristics. First, it denotes “the conceptualization of objects and relationships, the conceptualization of what there is, and the nature of the objects there are.” Second, it conveys “explicit or implicit values and ideals, prescriptions about how the world ought to be.” The ideas or messages that theories convey may not necessarily be what the theorists intended, since theories are read, interpreted, and represented in speech, writing, and action in ways that the theorists may not have anticipated. The third point follows, then, that “the concepts set out by theorist are subject to syntactical, semantic, and logical analysis.” Fourth, theory is “often critical in a different sense—the sense of looking at structure of a theory, or an ideology, or discourse, or a state of affairs, with a view of asking how it has attained dominance and widespread acceptance, how social power is implicated in this process,
what is suppressed but nevertheless present in articulations of it, how, in other words, its
grip on social reality is maintained.” Lastly, all theories offer models. Given these
characteristics, feminist theories conceptualize sexist oppression, criticize current social
realities, and provide models through which an alternate reality may be conceived. Since
power structures within society are slow to change, feminist theory is “a necessary
corrective to unreflective practices” (Frazer, 1996: 181-183). Feminist theory imposes a
critical analytical gaze on the status quo and the powers that encourage complacency and
conformity. In the definition offered by Frazer, theory is purely intellectual although it
discusses and analyzes practice.

Frazer’s definition of theory as a mechanism through which to conceive an
alternate reality lends itself readily to a different perception of theory—one described by
Georgetown University professor of law, Mari Matsuda. When asked about Asian
American feminist theorists, Matsuda responds:

I know of Asian women running battered women’s shelters, figuring out how
many different kinds of rice to keep in stock to make sure that women of
different Asian ethnicities feel at home in the kitchen; figuring out why the
kitchen is important; and figuring out how patriarchy defines masculinity and
then takes it away, as defined, from Asian men, creating flashpoints that end up
scarring women’s bodies. This is theory. I read women writers. I read their
anthologies, their novels, their self-consciously postmodern papers presented at
academic conferences. This is theory (Matsuda, 1996: X).

For Matsuda, theory is inseparable from practice, and theorists could be writers,
philosophers, workers, mothers, victims of male aggression, anyone. Matsuda is correct;
the radical break between theory and practice does not need to exist. As feminist activist
and scholar Karin Aguilera-San Juan (1997) notes, in the last three decades, “Asian
American women have been involved in many kinds of struggles, from confronting
domestic violence to implementing affirmative action, from teaching Asian American
Studies to organizing for the rights of immigrant workers” (IX). What came out of these struggles is a greater understanding of how gender hierarchies and racial categorization inform every aspect of social life, how identity-based groups as well as broader political circles (the Asian American movement, the mainstream feminist movement, the anarchist movement, etc.) fail to meet the needs of Asian American women. Given the inclement political clime and the nonchalance of various existing political organizations, the Asian American feminist movement plays a key role in projecting the ideas and protecting the interests of Asian American women.

The identification of theory with practice is not very different from the concept of “theory as practice as theory,” which has been a dominant idea in the Western women’s movement since the 1960s. A woman’s experience alone is not political. Politics arise from examining the context and power dynamics from which the very fabric of the woman’s experience is knit. The practice of consciousness-raising demonstrates the translation of theory into practice into theory. Consciousness-raising probes into an intrinsically social situation—through recounting individual experiences in a group setting—and reconstitutes the meaning of women’s collective social experience from the mixture of thoughts, anecdotes, complaints, and material concerns. A collective sharing of individual experiences facilitates a process of empirical discovery where the realization of commonality between group members “transform[s] an experience from an individual one, for example, being flirted with, to the collective and political construction of, for example, sexual harassment” (Frazer, 1996: 177).

“Theory as practice as theory” reconciles intellectuals with activists and with individuals who perceive themselves as neither, as simply living. Because of the
influence that theory and practice bear on each other, one cannot be isolated from the other. In the interplay between academia and the larger community, ideally theory works as the free-flowing currency that connects the two. Intellectuals within the academy produce theory through writing, discussing, and analyzing at the same time that activists within the community contribute to theory through emphasizing different social dilemmas and bringing attention to the most pertinent crisis—be it racial, economic, or sexual—that need be addressed. The two realms influence each other, both holding political sway. Theory affects activism, which in turn, affects theory. The partnership is dynamic and constantly changing. The major departure of the identification of theory with practice from “theory as practice as theory” is the recognition of activist work as theory.

The coalescence of theory with practice underlies “the personal is political.” The feminist catch phrase, “the personal is political” emerged against the backdrop of the collective recapitulation of women’s life experiences. “The personal is political” is more than a feminist rallying phrase, for it often applies cross-culturally, cross-socioeconomically, and cross-generationally. For instance, the Asian American feminist consciousness constitutes a lived knowledge of the social reality of being Asian American and female. The lived knowledge is personal and often theoretical, and yet it corresponds intimately with social realities, which are political and practical. As MacKinnon (1989) writes, “the personal is political” is “not a simile, not a metaphor, and not an analogy. It does not mean that what occurs in personal life is similar to, or comparable with, what occurs in the public arena” (p 119). “The personal is political” emphasizes that “women’s distinctive experience as women occurs within that sphere
that has been socially lived as personal... so that what it is to know the politics of
woman’s situation is to know women’s personal lives, particularly women’s sexual lives”
(MacKinnon, 1989: 120). Since theories shape reality, feminist theories mediate between
the personal and the political, and the point of having feminist theories is to aid the
“project of the establishment of equality between the sexes, although what state of affairs
would count as such equality is contested” (Frazer, 1996: 181), especially since racial and
socioeconomic conflicts also mandate consideration.

Theories, therefore, operate as intermediaries between the academy and the
community, the personal and the political. They can also provide resistance in practice.
Theorizing, when conceptualized as a tool of resistance, can be a penetrating, questioning
gaze that attempts to shake the foundations of an unjust patriarchal, racist, sexist, class
differentiated, homophobic society, and become a valuable tool for the defense of the self
and of marginalized populations. The act of theorizing about the personal creates a
political arena that legitimates personal concerns. In engaging in active dialogue with her
surroundings and responding critically to her life experiences, a woman avoids
victimization and entrapment in an identity prescribed by dominating powers. Only
through looking critically, through what bell hooks calls the “oppositional gaze” could a
person truly confront and overcome injustice. This gaze is important because it extends
beyond the mere recognition of oppression, it lashes out against oppressors and helps
maintain the wholeness of the oppressed. A look can be defiant; it can exude pride and
confidence. Through one look, a person can assert his or her humanity. bell hooks claims
that “the ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance” (hooks 1992:116). This
“oppositional gaze” draws out the political from the personal and validates the complaint
of oppression that had previously been tolerated and dismissed as singular, personal anomalies.

The term “Asian American” is both personal and political. The creation of the term “Asian American” comes from a collective effort to recognize the struggle and give credit to the efforts of a particular group of people of color. “Asian American” is a political identity. It came out of the Asian American Movement during the 1960s as an umbrella term for Americans of various Asian ethnicities, replacing the older “Oriental” or “Yellow.” The emergence of the Asian American Movement is related to the Civil Rights and various ethnic nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Asian Americans united to gain more political leverage, to reject underrepresentation. The panethnic “Asian American” identity underwent institutionalization, going from a mere rhetorical term to a political status, and validated by the establishment of Asian American studies at various educational institutions (first at San Francisco State University then at University of California Berkeley). As Yen Le Espiritu argues, “Asian American” panethnicity is an invented identity\(^1\) that is “the product of material, political, and social processes rather than cultural bonds” (Le Espiritu, 1992: 164). This thesis is based on this understanding of the “Asian American” identity.

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1 In the nineteenth century, the assimilation, or melting pot, model dominated ideologies regarding the integration of immigrants into the larger community. However, this model does not work “for people of color unless wholesale interracial marriages occur in the United States so as to mix up all the blood and cause a drastic change toward racial homogeneity.” As long as phenotypical attributes, such as dark skin, brown eyes, black hair, are perceptible and differentiable, people would be categorized and classified by physical characteristics. To account for the insufficiencies of the melting pot model, an alternative model of a multicultural society was proposed—that of a tossed salad “wherein each ingredient in the tossed salad retains its own color, texture, taste, and identity” (Kim and Kim, 1998: 115). These models offer two very different accounts of ethnic identity; both have shortcomings. The tossed salad model emerged as a response to the inadequacy of the melting pot model to describe the state of a pluralistic society, but tossed salad does not address the identities that are created or invented precisely because of the multicultural environment. Both ethnic models account for existing ethnicities and histories. Neither model allows the possibility of invented identities. Yet “Asian American” is an invented identity, one that recognizes the special concerns of those that style themselves as such.
Each person who bears the label “Asian American” has individual stories and experiences pertaining to his or her Asian ethnicity, but identification with the broader, umbrella term signifies his or her concerns for the Asian American population as a whole and perhaps a belief in greater political leverage through the act of union. The term, Asian American, is deliberate. It is backed by a history of discrimination, racial violence and hate crimes, and it carries the legacy and responsibility of solidarity among different Asian ethnic groups.²

“Asian American” is also a personal identity. An Asian American woman may identify more with her Asian heritage or more with her current American circumstances, and the extent of this identification influences the whole of her life. Part of the achievement of the Asian American movement is to forge a new hybrid identity that recognizes the challenge and obstacle of asserting a nebulous identity that is stratified in the limbo of ethnic identification. But being an “Asian American” entails more than more retrieving a sense of self-identity; it carries definite political overtones. Choosing “Asian American” over “American” may suggest that the designation “American” too often means “white,” and since Asians or other non-white women “do not have a place of value in the dominant culture,” “American” would not be a fitting title for them (Chow C., 1999: 190-191). In a way, the term “Asian American” can be used as a reminder of the legacy of internment, the history of repressive legislation against Asians of all origins, which cannot be disregarded or neglected when considering the meaning of having Asian heritage in the US, since the impact of historical events resonates through the present and future.

² For historical and political analysis on the Asian American movement and the formation of an Asian panethnicity, refer to The Asian American Movement by William Wei and Asian American Panethnicity by Yen Le Espiritu.
The objective of this thesis is two-fold. First, it attempts to call attention to the exclusion of Asian American feminist theory from mainstream feminist discourse. Second, it highlights the contributions of Asian American feminist theorists to the US mainstream feminist discourse. To do so, I use analytical works and critiques by Asian American writers, mostly women, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Leti Volpp, and Sonia Shah, among others, that address the topics of identity, third world feminism, the cultural defense, and Asian American feminism. I also use works by white, black, and Chicana feminists to contrast with the views of Asian American feminists.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 explains intersectionality as an analytical methodology and uses an intersectional method to examine the place of Asian American feminism within the larger context of feminist networks. I analyze the relation of Asian American feminism to the binary racial paradigm of black and white in the United States, then distinguishes the Asian American feminism as an unique and separate movement. Chapter 1 also examines how and why feminists of color have been excluded from mainstream feminist scholarship. Chapter 2 explores the differences between Asian feminists and Asian American feminists, between women of color and Third World women. It will also look at the relationship between Asian American feminism and Third World feminism. Chapter 3 is devoted to Asian American feminist legal theorists, especially their views on culture as it affects Asian American women in law and the debates over multiculturalism. Chapter 4 explores one of the controversies that has arisen as a result of Asian American feminist engagement in politics: pornography and the sex trade. In this chapter, I will analyze the arguments of both White and Asian American
feminists concerning pornography. I will attempt to answer why Asian American feminists are more concerned about the sex trade than about pornography.
Chapter 1. The Place and Voice of Asian American Feminism

Mainstream feminism in the US is dominated by white, middle-class feminists. While other forms of feminism, such as black feminism, have been given some attention in mainstream feminist discourse, and perhaps recognized through incorporation into mainstream Women's Studies curriculum, the inclusion is superficial and only reinforces their separateness from dominant feminist theories. The exclusion of Asian American feminist theory or, in general, any feminist theory by women of color, from mainstream feminism is due to the inability of feminists of either group to comprehend the other's experiences and resulting standpoint. The omission of an Asian American feminist voice from decision processes in academia and in political groups perpetuates the invisibility of Asian American feminism in both of these realms. However, Asian American women have been active in the feminist discourse even their participation has not been recognized. The Asian American feminist voice has been present in the women of color feminism and has contributed to a more international and cultural feminist perspective. Asian American women have also utilized an intersectional analysis to examine the sources of oppression because the experience of oppression generally is not along any single gender, racial, or social axis. Historically, Asian Americans have been aligned with both blacks and whites, yet fundamentally, they were never integrated into either racial group. Asian American feminism recognizes the unique position of Asian American women, including specific obstacles they face in terms of effective political organization and their concerns, some of which are shared by the Asian American community at large.
Asian American Voice in Women of Color Critique of Mainstream Feminism

A landmark anthology entitled This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color published in 1981 established the validity of women of color feminism. What was initially a reaction to the racism of white feminists became the commitment of two Chicana feminists, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, to recognize the perspectives and ideas of women of color. Their efforts culminated in the publication of an anthology consisting of writings by those they considered to be “radical” women of color. The anthology focused on the major areas of concern for Third World women in the US, and most of the women who contributed to the anthology identified themselves as either Third World women and/or women of color. Cherrie Moraga recognizes that two key features characterize the writings collected in this anthology—first, the anthology provides a more international perspective than that usually found within white feminism, and second, the feminist politics presented in the writings “emerges from the roots of both of our cultural oppression and heritage” (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983: xxiv).

Moraga and Anzaldua perceive the anthology as a “revolutionary tool” (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983: xxvi) for people of all colors. Their insistence on women of color feminism is evident in the writings they chose for the volume, which included works by women of various ethnicities. Their anthology provided a space where women of color could become visible and overcome the exclusion that many had felt in their experiences with mainstream feminism.

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3 Although the first edition of This Bridge Called My Back addresses issues pertinent to Third World women, and hence already offer an international perspective, Cherrie Moraga states in the foreword to the second edition that the 1983 version is even more international in perspective. This change is partly due to the changing demographics of the US, since number of immigrants from the Third World is increasing. Moraga believes that the need to “forge links with women of color from every region grows more and more urgent” (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983).
This Bridge Called My Back included the work of Asian American feminists Nellie Wong, Genny Lim, Mitsuye Yamada, and Merle Woo. Their writing recounted personal experiences, reflected on culture, and critiqued the invisibility of Asian Pacific American women. Their presence in an anthology that was created for women of color feminism demonstrates the early involvement and activity of Asian American women as women of color in the feminist discourse. Writings, such as those of Yamada, date back to the 1970s, indicating an active, although frequently neglected, engagement of Asian American women in earlier stages of mainstream feminism.

**Asian American Feminist Movement**

Although an Asian American feminist movement was already recognized by the Asian American community in the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that it began to gain recognition as a distinct form of feminism with its own cultural and political reference point within the larger feminist network. This recognition came with the realization that most political groups fail to adequately represent Asian American women. Leftist political circles fail to meet the needs of Asian American women. Activist, Juliana Pegues, finds that although “the groups [she] worked with adamantly espoused anti-racist and anti-sexist rhetoric... time and time again [they] refused to accept internal criticism from women and people of color, and leadership from anyone but a white male was unheard of” (Pegues, 1997: 6). Similarly, in Yellow Power and other Asian American groups, Asian American women “often found themselves left out of the decision-making

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4 Mitsuye Yamada argues in her essay “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism” that Asian Pacific American women need to make themselves more visible, and that for her, visibility through the feminist perspective is the only logical step (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983: 71-75).
process and their ideas and concerns relegated to ‘women’s auxiliary’ groups that were marginal to the larger projects at hand” (Shah S. 1997: XVI).

Asian American feminism is not a portion (consequently, sub-category) of current Asian American politics, nor a mutated or parallel version of white feminism. An Asian American woman’s experience is so far removed from a white woman’s that the former has difficulty relating to feminist concerns that come from the latter’s experiences. Asian American feminist movement does not rely on adding up oppressions—minority and woman, nor should it be considered “two movements in one” (i.e. feminist movement + Asian American movement). Because Asian American feminism derives from its own unique cultural and historical context, Sonia Shah (1997) argues that Asian American feminism is “the only movement that will consistently represent Asian American women’s interests” (p XIX).

The Asian American women’s response to the reductionism and universalization of “women” inherent in the white feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has been self-organization, which finally gained more widespread recognition in the 1990s. Asian American feminists acknowledge that the issues of gender cannot be separated from those of ethnicity, class, and culture. They also attempt to highlight whiteness as a standpoint and an implicit norm in the practice of mainstream feminist discourse. By doing so, they engender a greater degree of sensitivity toward racial/ethnic perspectives and biases and greater critical self-reflexivity in their construction of white feminists.

US women’s liberation movement is not the only movement that influenced the Asian American feminist movement. Another motivation for the organization of Asian American women has been their dissatisfaction with their marginalization within the
the Evacuation Order in 1942 was a young Japanese American woman” (Yamada, 1983: 71). As Yamada claims, legal theorist Mari Matsuda confirms, and feminist writer Helena Grice reaffirms, Asian American women have been active in community affairs and speaking and writing about their activities; they have engaged in feminist politics even though their activity was not formally recognized as feminist movement by the majority community. During 1990-1994, a series of significant works by feminists of color were published, including: Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color, Third World Women and the Politics of Struggle, Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture, and Identity, The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women, The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s, Our Feet Walk the Sky, and (Un)Doing the Missionary Position. The second half of 1990s have seen additional contributions by feminists of color, such as Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire, American Mosaic: Selected Readings on America's Multicultural Heritage, and Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism.

The writings of Asian American feminists often concern the gender/ethnic nexus. Because culture is inseparable from gender in the analysis of the sexual politics of many of the lives and experiences of Asian American women, a local, contextual examination of the situation and circumstances becomes necessary, and this analysis is typically done using an intersectional approach, which is discussed in the following section.

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Asian American women have published highly political writings in Asian Women in 1971, which include "incisive and trenchant articles, poems and articles" (Yamada, 1983: 71).
Intersectionality

Because the reality of oppression and discrimination is complicated and multifaceted, a simplistic account of discrimination as solely due to racism, sexism, or classism is inadequate. The identity of an Asian American woman may consist of her stance as an Asian American, as woman, perhaps as mother or daughter or wife, perhaps as a professional or a janitor. To understand her position and her experience, recognition need first be given to the multiplicity and multi-layering of the causes of her experiences of oppression. Women experience oppression for many reasons, and for multiple reasons at any one time. The cross-cutting nature of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender has made these social constructions inseparable from each other when confronting social and political conflicts. The sophistry of the experiences of oppression and discrimination makes intersectionality useful as a method for analysis.

Intersectionality provides a tool for analyzing the ways in which gender, class, class, sexual orientation, and all other forms of distinction in various contexts, produce situations in which men and women become vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, discrimination, and/or oppression. To understand intersectionality, the avenues of power (i.e. race, class, sexual orientation, gender, caste, etc.) are imagined as axes. These axes are sometimes considered to be separate and distinct from each other, but in reality, these axes overlap and intersect, interact and reinforce one another, forming intersections where two or more axes cross.

Intersectional analysis refuses conceptualizing the world through use of dualist and dichotomous categorizations. It further rejects placement of people and experiences on a spectrum based on opposites, such as black and white, rich and poor, heterosexual
and homosexual. Intersectionality allows the possibility of unique and invented identities and social constructions and recognizes that when different identities or axes of power converge, something distinct emerges—the experience of which has different qualities than any of the original identity or axis of color when experienced individually. Because the experiences of Asian American women are multi-faceted and complex, intersectionality is needed in order to comprehend their experiences; and it is through the use of this method of understanding oppression that Asian American feminist theorists contributed a better understanding of discrimination to the larger feminist discourse. Because of the challenges faced by women of color as well as third world women, intersectionality has become a staple of feminist thought.

**Mainstream Feminism Is Normalized to Whiteness**

The dominant feminist paradigm of today developed during second wave feminism, and is led and continued by prominent white feminists, such as Kate Millet, Denise Riley, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Okin, and Katherine MacKinnon. The primary concern of mainstream feminism is sexual politics—the power structures and imbalances between the sexes. Even within mainstream feminism, white feminists disagree on the source of oppression. For Kate Millet (1970), “male supremacy, like other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength, but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological. Superior physical strength is not a factor in political relations—vide those of race and class” (p 27); rather, patriarchy is reinforced and transmitted through a system of socialization. On the other hand, Andrea Dworkin considers the lack of physical integrity, including both sexual and reproductive integrity,
of the female body as one of the causes of women's oppression. Either way, where oppression is concerned, sex has precedence. In the romanticism of oppression, 'women' may be used as a category despite its ambiguities. Denise Riley writes, "'women' is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability—need not worry us" (Riley, 1997: 20).

Oppression has been romanticized through stories of martyrdom, suffering, exploitation told by people who do not live them. The resulting theory is one that is neat and clean, with relatively clear distinctions between the good and the bad (e.g. capitalism exploits poor female Indonesian garment workers)—an explanation, an oppression narrative that is too simplistic to cater to the vagueness, crossovers, and spillovers present realistically. Romanticism of oppression makes universalization possible. Romanticism is how a weathered, fisherwoman in Taichung Harbor could become an Indian woman burning on her husband's pier could become a white female college student could become a female Asian American investment banker, could all become one, become "woman." Because a Chinese woman in Hubei is not the Muslim woman in New Deli is not the French woman in l'Avignon; this separateness is why many feminists and activists of color insist on life experiences. In the romanticism of oppression, the diverse experiences of different women, in different roles—as mother, daughter, teacher, student, factory worker, farmer, bus driver, etc.—reduce to only the experience of oppression along the gender nexus, that is oppression as "woman" by patriarchy, by sexism. Such reductionism neglects the multivariate roles that women play in their community and family and the many sources of oppression that women face due to differences in their
lives and living conditions, such as discrimination due to sexual orientation or socioeconomic background. Because the experience of oppression is almost never due to only one simple cause and because the experience of oppression does not simply add up (i.e. the experience of oppression as an Asian woman is not the totality of the experiences of racial oppression against Asians and sexist oppression against women), many feminists of color insist that theory is only possible after living the oppression, and this romanticism is one of their main critiques of white feminism.

**Exclusion in White Feminism Due to Universalization**

During the Second Wave (1970-1985) of mainstream feminism in the US, feminists, consisting mainly of white heterosexual middle and upper class privileged women, sought to create a movement on behalf of all women. Whether the movement be defined in theoretical or practical terms, the scope—all women—sets it out to be a task of impossibility, for “all women” includes half of the world population dispersed across seven continents, speaking different languages, engaging in different rituals, endorsing different values, and confronting different economic circumstances. That feminism is ambitious. It intrudes upon the realms of racism and class oppression in an attempt to form a unified front that fights for a vision of sexual equality. By using a somewhat out-of-context (non-intersectional) approach to examine “white, middle-class women’s lives through the singular prism of gender” then extending it to all womankind (Aguilar D., 1997: 153), white feminists effectively excluded most women, except the white, middle-class women they based their theories upon. Journalist Helen Zia says of white feminists, “their lives as white women were so removed from mine, which was entwined with my
life as an Asian American" (Zia, 2000: 19). Despite the all-inclusive intention of the mainstream feminist movement within the US, Asian American women do not conform to it because “white feminists... insist on the primacy of gender, thereby dismissing racism and other structures of oppression” (Le Espiritu, 1997: 135). It was not until the 1990s that mainstream feminism started to incorporate the ideas and writings of women of color into its rhetoric.

Despite recognition of the volatility of a term, such as “women,” mainstream feminism characteristically romanticize feminist concepts and theories, imparting universality upon them. Indeed, this false universalization of the category “woman” is one of the main charges women of color have against feminist theory. When Hester Einstein points out, “feminist theorists argued that, although the effects of patriarchy were everywhere palpable, they were not necessarily visible to most women” (Einstein, 1984: 35), she contributed to what Adrienne Rich called “white solipsism;” she forgot to add is that these feminist theorists that she speaks of are white. White feminists tend “to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world” (Spelman, 1988: 117). The privilege of white, middle-class women is the possibility of talking about “woman” simply “as a woman” (Spelman, 1988: 186). bell hooks notes that the gender analysis of mainstream feminism “centers on the experiences of white, middle-class women and ignores the way women in different racial groups and social classes experience oppression” (Le Espiritu, 2000: 5). For women of color and/or of working-class background, gender consist only part of the oppression; race and class distinctions are also major contributors to their experience of subordination.
While theory plays a critical role in the construction of social reality, the possibility of creating a singular feminist theory for all women is nil, because feminism itself is fragmentized by race, class, and sexual orientations, both self- and externally imposed. If distinctively different theories and realities may exist for different groups, "reasonable agreement about goals for social change... [would require] complicated negotiation" (Frazer, 1996: 177). As expected, there is no one feminism for all women, instead, many different forms of it exist to reflect the different social realities for different groups of women. Within the subject of feminism itself, conflicts and power struggles abound. Class and racial inequalities are in place; working class feminists feel exclusion due to the lack of concern and urgency of mainstream feminism for socioeconomic issues, and feminists of color sometimes feel exclusion from the study of women even though "minority discourse" exists as an official lingo within feminism. Perhaps by coining this special terminology, the exclusion is propagated through the continuous reminder of a dualist construction of a major and a minor.

White feminist theorist, Sandra Lee Bartky (1977) describes feminist consciousness as "a radically altered consciousness of oneself, of others, and of what for lack of a better term [she] shall call 'social reality'" (p 19). In her paper "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," she "would like to examine not the full global experience of liberation, involving as it does new ways of being as well as new ways of perceiving, but, more narrowly, those distinctive ways of perceiving which characterize feminist consciousness" (Bartky, 1977: 23). Her writing is strictly from a white feminist's perspective, for only through that view could a "full global experience of liberation" be possible. Only through the perspective of a white, middle-class woman

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could a feminist consciousness—a radically different consciousness—one that gives primacy to ‘woman’ come about. A separation of race and class issues from women’s issues characterizes white feminism. This separation is part of what reinforces the system of exclusion of nonwhite and working-class women within academia. But racism has become a feminist issue, mainly due to the efforts of grassroots, activist women’s movement. Women of color and working-class women conceive of feminism as inseparable from racism and classism because no one aspect of their identity could take precedence over the others.

**Exclusion of Women of Color and Working Class Women from Academia**

Women of color and women of working class background have been continually excluded from women’s studies in the United States. Because women’s studies resides in the margin of academia, the discipline has sought to “validate the field through association with prestigious institutions of higher education” (Zinn et al., 1990: 31), where there are very few women of color. The result of this preference is that “women of color and women from working-class backgrounds have few opportunities to become part of the networks that produce or monitor knowledge in women’s studies” (Zinn et al., 1990: 31), since most of the scholarly research and writing that take place in the United States are conducted at these prestigious institutes. The exclusion of nonwhite and working-class women from women’s studies means that these women are not present when problems are defined and strategies are suggested. At the same time, while “women of color are excluded from feminist theory...their books are read in the
classroom and/or duly footnoted" (Alarcon, 1990: 365); hence women of color are not absolutely ignored.

The absence of nonwhite and working class women has important consequences for feminist theory. In the dominant paradigm of feminist theory, race and class are treated as secondary features. To integrate racism and classism into traditional feminist scholarship, feminist scholars need to acknowledge the differences and interconnectedness among the experiences of not only white women and women of color, but also white men and men of color. This recognition is necessary since not all males in the US society benefit from a patriarchal system in the same way. In particular, racism and classism requires clarification of the position that white women hold over women and men of color. Beginning in the early 1990s, “mainstream feminists finally began including a ‘microlevel of difference’ by ‘pouring and stirring’ African American women writers into their discourse and theory.” Nonetheless, the focus remains on white European and American feminists, and the voices of Asian American feminists do not figure at all in mainstream feminist theory.

African American women writers have been “poured and stirred” but still not integrated into mainstream feminist discourse and theory. In mainstream feminist theory curriculum, in classes that serve as an introduction to women’s studies, works of feminists of color are rarely featured. Mainstream curricula generally acknowledges the existence of a black feminist perspective by devoting a week or two to the theories produced by black feminist theorists, usually bell hooks and sometimes also Patricia Hill Collins. While the setup of having a special and different black feminist week in the

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6 Works by Chandra Mohanty are often included in Women’s Studies syllabuses. This Bridge Called My Back is also referenced in classes.
curriculum recognizes black feminism, it reinforces the separateness and otherness of black feminism from white feminism, for black feminism is still “black” feminism, not feminism, which is taken to be from the white perspective. Black feminism is “poured and stirred” into a feminist curriculum; in other words, it is acknowledged but not incorporated. The couple of classes or a week featuring black feminists remain sprinkles mixed into a batter of nearly entirely white curriculum.

The exclusion of Asian Americans and African Americans from mainstream feminism is not due solely to rejection by white feminists and exclusion from white-dominated institutions, Asian American and African American feminists themselves contributed to the phenomenon. Asian American critics and writers harbored “resentment of and antagonism to the overrepresentation of white, middle class constituent in the mainstream feminist movement.” Asian American feminists manifest this resentment by keeping a distance from mainstream feminist movement, which perpetuates their invisibility.

**Black Feminism—Operation from an Unique Knowledge Base**

Black feminism has been the main proponent to bring the critique of racism into mainstream feminist discourse. Black feminist critiques of white feminism point out the reticence of white feminist theorists on the issues of race. The general trend “has been to mention black and Third World feminists who first called attention to the glaring fallacies in essentialist analysis and to claims of a homogeneous ‘womanhood’, ‘woman’s culture’, and ‘partriarchal oppression of women’” (Higginbotham, 1997: 183). As with gender, “race must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of
difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another” (Higginbotham, 1997: 185). Poignant awareness of racism and racialization characterizes black feminism. Because black feminists felt that white feminism failed to adequately represent their concerns, “African-American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women’s oppression but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself” (Collins, 1989: 746). Black feminists view “racism and racist behavior as...white patriarchal legacy” (Smith, 1982: 26). While they accept that certain patterns of behavior are transmitted, but they condemn the lack of serious effort to change these patterns. They especially oppose the white feminist belief in superiority over Third World women and note that this attitude is communicated in both blatant and subtle ways (Smith, 1990: 26).

African American women have historically been visible and politically active. The “people of color have always theorized—but in quite different forms” (Christian, 1989: 336). In the works of contemporary Black feminist intellectuals, they contend that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression characterized by two interlocking components. First, “Black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups” (Collins, 1989: 747). Second, “the experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality” (Collins, 1989: 748). As with the practice of consciousness-raising, these two interlocking components reiterate the feminist concept of theory as practice as theory. The theory is that Black women’s unique position in society provides them with
experiences of a different view on material reality; the experiences make the practice, which in turn fuels the theory. Rather than accepting a consciousness of victimization, Black feminism gives agency to people under oppression by recognizing that “a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group” (Collins, 1989: 748).

Black feminist theory “specializes in formulating and rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women” (Collins, 1989: 750). Theorizing, for Black feminists, not only demonstrates that Black women can produce independent, specialized knowledge that adds to the general body of knowledge concerning oppression, but it also encourages a collective identity for Black women by offering them a different perspective through which to view themselves and their world. In other words, theorizing has given them an alternative viewpoint than that offered by the dominant culture. Because theories come entirely from their own knowledge base, the act of theorizing is empowering, if not liberating, for Black women. It functions as an additional tool with which they can resist subordination. Through theorizing, through creating an unique knowledge base, black women—or any oppressed population—can attain legitimacy for their place in scholarship and in social order.

Writer and philosopher Alice Walker rejects the idea of Black feminism all together. Using her own unique knowledge base, she creates “womanism” and styles herself as a “womanist.” By “womanist,” Walker refers to “a black feminist or feminist of color...a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually... [and is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1990:
In an analogy, Walker likens the relationship between womanist and feminist to that between purple and lavender. To reject feminism but embrace womanism is perhaps to discard the racial and class-related shortcomings within feminist theories while keeping the issues pertaining to women, including racial and class issues, as the priori.

**Between Black and Asian American Feminism**

If neither Asian American feminists nor black feminists conform to mainstream feminism, perhaps they may have more in common with each other, since they share the experience of oppression and the concern for class oppression in addition to sexism and racism. bell hooks says, “the willingness to see feminism as a lifestyle choice rather than a political commitment reflects the class nature of the movement” (hooks 2000: 28). If feminism is a lifestyle, abiding by it would invariably mean the loss of certain racial and class privileges. The loss of rights and privileges threatens the privileged, white feminists and could possibly be one of the reasons why they are unable to include black or Asian American feminist concerns in their agenda. For hooks, “struggle is rarely safe or pleasurable” (hooks 2000: 30). Given the conflicts that Asian American feminism wrought in its own community, many Asian American feminists would agree with hooks.

Despite similar concerns about race and class, issues on the Asian American feminist agenda differ from that of black feminists in several respects. Asian American feminists are concerned with the question of visibility, both within their own Asian American community and the American society at large. They scrutinize the need to uphold “traditions,” including the rigid, hierarchical social organization dictated by the Confucian principle of dominant versus subordinate where kinship is arranged in a male-
dominated pecking order. They worry about patriarchy and how it affects the lives of women. Yet aside from problems with gender and gender roles, Asian American feminists share many of the concerns with male Asian American activists, such as cracking the glass-ceiling and breaking out of the model-minority stereotype.

**Chicana Feminism**

Like Black feminism, which brought race issues to the core of feminism, Chicana feminism focuses on issues of religion and violence, machismo, and sexual practices. The term “Chicana” refer to women of Mexican descent born and/or raised in the United States. Chicana feminists recognize that sexism, racism, homophobia, and poverty are interlinked issues. They assert that the oppressions suffered by Chicanas is different from those suffered by most women in the country because they are subject to racism practiced against La Raza, against the working class (since most Chicanos are workers), and against women. On the surface, Black women also seem to share this triple form of oppression. Perhaps the categorization may be similar, but the content is different. For example, the struggle against Catholic ideas and machismo in the home and in the feminist movement is particular to Chicanas. One of the pressing issues on their feminist agenda is for adequate childcare (Vidal).

**Lesbian Feminism**

Feminists offer an alternative view of lesbianism—one that thwarts the conventional understanding of the term, which had been understood solely through the

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7 *La Raza* is the Spanish word for “race,” and it is used by Chicanos to refer to themselves as a group, connoting pride and solidarity with others of the same ethnicity and facing similar discrimination, usually along racial lines.
perspective of sex and sexual practices. To see lesbianism as a political act requires relinquishing the limiting idea that homosexuality is defined through sexual acts. Lesbianism, like male homosexuality, “is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles” (RadicalLesbians, 1970: 1). In a different perspective, the lesbian is woman-identified such that her sense of self, energies, and concerns all center around women. She commits “herself to women not only as an alternative to oppressive male/female relationships but primarily because she loves women” (Bunch, 1972: 8). The lesbian chooses to give love and support to women over men. In this way, lesbianism can be regarded as more than a sexual preference, but a political choice.

**Asian American Feminism as Between Black and White**

Despite the multi-variance of races and ethnicities within the US, the mainstream societal view only permits a dichotomous opposition of race—between black and white. On a political spectrum, Asian American feminism sits in between black and white feminism, because depending on the context, Asian American feminists may align themselves with one group or the other. Taking Kate Millet as a representative of white feminism, she chose to frame her arguments of sexual politics on four categories: races, castes, classes, and sexes (Millet, 1970: 24). On the other hand, hooks recognizes that different people have different agendas with respect to feminism and does not distinguish between forces that interact to create sexual politics. According to Millet, consent to the pattern of power distribution is mainly determined by the socialization of both sexes. In the process of socialization and conditioning, qualities such as passivity is reinforced and
thought of as “feminine” and desirable for women (Millet, 1970: 31). Asian American women agree with this perspective on passivity. In the predominantly patriarchal Asian culture, Asian American women are instructed to honor the commands of their fathers and to abide by cultural values. Given this mode of socialization, some women may not be aware of the existence of sexual politics or oppression. Still, other women might benefit from current sexual politics, and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. For Millet (1970), racism, class oppression, as well as other forms of oppression would be resolved once sexism is overcome for she seems to suggest that the “sexual caste supersedes all other forms of inegalitarianism: racial, political, or economic” (p 20).

At this point, Asian American feminists would disagree with Millet and take up hooks’ perspective. hooks does not think any form of oppression is more fundamental or important than another. She comments on the compatibility of sexist, racial, and class struggles, that they did not have to be mutually exclusive, nor do their participants have to choose to be more one than the other (hooks 2000: 31). In the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 70s, Asian American women were urged to abandon their feminist concerns for the sake of cultural nationalism. The Asian American feminist movement that emerged since then rejects the mutually exclusive paradigm of feminism and cultural nationalism. Instead, Asian American feminists allow the two to coexist since an instance of oppression could exhibit (though not always) both sexist and racist elements.
Asian American Feminism as Neither Black nor White

Asian American feminism is consciously organized along racial lines. Like the Chicanas, Asian American women have had to forge their own identity. Historically, Asian Americans have been aligned with both blacks and whites, and they still sometimes choose to identify with one group or the other. In the nineteenth century, with the surge of anti-Chinese sentiments, Asian Americans had been portrayed with dark skin, curly hair, and big lips—physically features that are stereotypically read as black. In the post-World War II era, Asian American became the model minority (Le Espiritu, 2000: 109)—ones that did not cause trouble and abided by the laws; ones that knew their place; one that were nearly “white” but still “colored” and therefore inferior. Interestingly, in certain instances, Asian Americans have out-whited the whites. (An example would be the number of Asian Americans that wear Tommy Hilfiger—a line of clothing considered stylistically very White American. There was news that the designer was upset about this situation then proceeded to make his designs even more White American.) Yet however Asian Americans were portrayed, they were never truly accepted by the dominant culture. Asian American have served the larger white community, whether as ‘near-blacks’ in the past, working as manual laborers who built railroads or bent their backs in the fields, being used as a source of cheap, exploitable labor, or as ‘near-whites’ in the present, creating business as successful entrepreneurs in the technological fields or running a modest Laundromat. Asian Americans remain “‘marginal men’ in both the past and the present” (Okihiro, 1994: 34), because they can only achieve proximity to two races recognized by the dominant racial paradigm. Asian Americans could never be black or white, hence Asian Americans always exist in the margins of the current racial
construction in society. Yellow is neither Black nor White. This disidentification with either end of the black and white divide is evident in racial violence, as in the LA Riots, and in political discrimination, as in the Wen Ho Lee debates. Asian American feminism cannot be placed on a spectrum with White feminism on one end and Black on the other. Racial identity does not fit neatly on a two-dimensional grid of color gradients. Asian American feminism needs its own place.

The experiences of Asian American women can be likened to that of the “No Name Woman” in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Starting the building of the transcontinental railroads, the coolie trade, the bachelor societies and the gold rush, Asian American history consists of mostly the deeds and stories of men. Women “constitute a forgotten factor in Asian American history. They have ‘no name’” (Okihiro, 1994: 65). Even during the mid-twentieth century, when the Asian American movement began to gain impetus, the women were silenced. Only during the 1990s did the Asian American woman’s voice began to be heard.

**Marginalization of Asian American Woman’s Movement**

The Asian American women’s movement has been active since the Asian American movement although it has often been considered a subset of the latter, possibly because “the contradictions in the [Asian American] movement...gave rise to the Asian American women’s movement” (Wei, 1993: 73). The Asian American movement called for a critical look at not only “the dominant society’s race-based institutions and values, but also prompted a critical examination of its own gender-based attitudes and actions” (Wei, 1993: 74-75). The awareness of sex oppression within the Asian American
community and activist groups led to internal and external conflicts for women activists. On one hand, they supported nationalism and pride in being Asian American; on the other, they oppose the male-dominated power structures within their own community. These two competing elements led to the fear of being perceived and labeled as disloyal to their ethnic group. The “relative absence of gender as a lens for Asian American activism and resistance through the 1970s until the present” (Le Espiritu, 2000: 114) reflects this conflict. In addition, the “Asian American men can see only race oppression, and not gender domination, they are unable, or unwilling, to view themselves as both oppressed and oppressor” (Le Espiritu, 2000: 114). The consequence of this dichotomous dance is the marginalization of Asian American women and their needs within the Asian American movement itself. The absence of strong Asian American feminist voices is neither “an indication of the absence of gender inequality nor of the disengagement of Asian American women from the issues of social justice” (Aguilar-San Juan, 1997: X); rather, it suggests sensitivity toward Asian American men and their gender privileges as well as a fear of alienating the men.

**Conflict Between Culture and Politics**

Ambiguity in the boundary between culture and politics is used to invalidate Asian American feminist concerns. From an anti-feminist viewpoint, culture, which is private, cannot be political because politics rests in the public realm. By separating the two, political messages are diluted, since topics such as marriage or division of labor do not qualify as legitimate political subjects. At times, the intrusion of culture into political matters is not intentional, but is a result of competing political interests. During a
roundtable discussion on the Asian American movement; community organizer and activist Meizhu Lui comments, “with my parent’s generation, part of their strategy for survival, as well as part of their culture, as not to let the foreigners know the problems going on within their own communities. Violence against women was one of those things” (Chiang et al., 1997: 65). In this case, to project a united front for the Asian American movement, problems with violence against women were muted. The competitive relationship between feminism and cultural nationalism is not unique to Asian Americans; other women of color face the same conflict (Bow, 2001: 26). This opposition between cultural identity and sexual identity results from a dualistic conception of identity where one representation must triumph over the other as the primary identity. The question of culture versus politics becomes even more complicated with the concept of multiculturalism, where, ideally, all peoples—white, brown, yellow, black, and red—live together harmoniously (Shah S., 1997: XVII).

**Identity as Political Organization for Asian American Women**

Identity-based groups, which are essentially consciousness-raising groups, provide a method of organizing for Asian American women. This form of organization is effective among Asian American women because it allows them to question the way power is maintained, inside and outside of the home. Where the line between politics and culture begins to blur, identity politics is a strict reminder that “traditions,” social customs, and intimacy between people all provide valid political arenas for dialogue (Shah P., 1997: 46). Although identity succeeds in creating a space for political conversation between Asian American women, writer and activist Karin Aguilera-San
Juan cautions that organizing along the lines of identity might reduce race to a matter of personal identity. Instead of expanding the experiences of racism into a critique of the society, which is one of the objectives of the feminist movement, a person might focus on building Asian American pride (Pegues, 1997: 12-13).

Identity politics affect more than organizational methods, it influences self-image, image as perceived by the non-self; it has legal implications. It also has the potential to instigate hostility and animosity through actions and behavior interpreted as excluding or secretive. Identity politics alter and is altered by stereotypes maintained by dominant groups of minority groups, but also vice versa. Identity politics rest at the intersection of many identities, racial, sexual, class, vocational, etc., and affect more than personal experiences. As feminist writer, Sonia Shah points out, “there is no political point in just talking about Asian American women’s experiences, even as the very question rests upon the years of vital scholarship and creative work done on detailing that experience. What makes political sense to talk about is how the forces of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism specifically affect Asian American women... [and] most importantly, about a racially conscious, international feminism: Asian American Feminism” (Shah S., 1997: XIII-XIV).

**The Problematic of “Minority”**

According to the 2000 Census, Asian Americans comprise of 4% of the total population of the US. Statistically, Asian Americans qualify as minorities. As a minority, the Asian American population is highly stratified. For instance, Japanese Americans have a per capita income of $19,373, which is higher than the national
average of $14,143, yet on the other end of the financial spectrum, the per capita income for Hmong is $2,692. Poverty rates were similarly distributed—very high for Hmong and Cambodian, and low for Filipino and Japanese. This bimodal population distribution has resulted in some complications. At certain educational institutions, such as MIT, because of the relatively large number of Asian American students, Asian Americans are not considered minority students and therefore do not enjoy the benefits, political alliances, and political consciousness of being a minority; yet Asian Americans are a minority with respect to the population of the US. This situation demonstrates that the volatility of Asian Americans’ position as a minority.

In the US context, the term “minority” is often used synonymously with the term, “people of color.” While many Asian American women identify themselves as women of color, some do not. The term women of color can be used to refer to any woman who is non-white, and Asian Americans would fall under this category. However, some women identify themselves as “women of color” but are not accepted as “minority” by either white or black people. Likewise, other women consider themselves to be “minorities” but not “women of color.”

At times “women of color” is also used interchangeably with the term “third world women.” The confusion between these terms and the fluidity with which people utilize these terms make these terms problematic. “Minority” refers to both women of color and third world women. Women of color may also refer to minority and third world women. While many Asian American women identify themselves as women of color and as a minority, they may not perceive themselves as third world women. Hence
the context in which these terms are used has operative importance in determining who is included.

"Third world women" may be interpreted as a subset of "minority" or "women of color," yet it is itself a volatile term and could be geographic or social. For example, Chandra Mohanty equates "third world women" with "women of color." "Third world women" is also used to apply to people under "internal colonialism," such as African Americans living in the inner cities. The topic of the "Third World" and its relation to Asian American feminism and to women of color is investigated in the next chapter.
Many Asian American feminists are descendants of immigrants or immigrants themselves from Third World, or developing, countries. Many immigrant women have already been involved in feminism within their home countries. When they immigrated to the US, some are surprised to find that sexism exists within the US. In addition to encounters with sexism, their experiences are further complicated by racism. The presence of a history of feminist activism of immigrant women combined with the new encounters with sexism and racism upon arriving in the US give these immigrant feminists a unique perspective.

Unlike their immigrant parents, second generation Asian American feminists grew up in the US. While their experience of growing up is within the US, they are granted, regardless of their sentiments, “perpetual alien residency,” to be seen as sojourners from another country and to return there, to that “homeland,” one day, some day. Some Asian American feminists choose to write Third World feminist theory and concern themselves with the plight of Third World women both within the US and in the Third World. In fact, some feminists identify themselves as third world women. However, while they may identify with third world women, these feminists produce Asian American feminist theory nonetheless because they work mainly within the US and their targeted audience are largely Asian Americans. Just as third world women and Asian Americans could be distinct and overlapping, third world women, Asian American, and women of color could also be distinct and overlapping depending on the political and social contexts in which the identities are used. Asian American feminists insists on the
multiplicity of identity and demonstrates, through shifting their self-identifications, that identification is contextual and deeply political.

**On the “Margins of Marginality”**

Despite its generalized, umbrella definition, at the onset of the 21st century today, the term “Asian American” conjures up the mental image of an East Asian more frequently than that of a South Asian. To discuss Asian American women as one unit assumes an unilateral organization that refuses to account for the differences among groups of and individual Asian American women. Because South Asian women are underrepresented in Asian American feminist politics—which typically go to advance the interests of East Asians—the writings of many South Asian feminist theorists address the position of South Asian women as people on the “margins of the marginality” (Islam, 1993: 242).

Yet even within the South Asian American community, conflicts due to generalization abound, for “the use of the term ‘South Asian’ has become interchangeable with the term ‘Indian’” (Islam, 1993: 244). India is the largest country on the subcontinent, but several other countries also inhabit the subcontinent. These “other” South Asian countries include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. From the analysis and experiences of double marginalization—first within the larger American population as Asian Americans, then within the Asian American population as South Asians—South Asian American feminist theorists, such as Chandra Mohanty, offer unique insight about the practice of feminism and the politics of gender and race in the construction of a South Asian American identity.
Mohanty (1997) points out that the racialization of first-generation immigrants from South Asia differs from that of second-generation South Asian Americans. The difference “between these two generations would be between the experience of racism as a phenomenon specific to the US versus the ever-present shadow of racism in which South Asians born in the US grow up” (p. 123). Any family with immigrant parents and US-born and raised children, who do not conform to the “average white American” image circulated by mass culture, share this difference in the experience of racism. Using the Dasgupta family as an example, Shamita Das Dasgupta, an immigrant mother who had been involved in feminism in India, struggles to “forge a balance between adaptation and marginalization, between progressive politics and cultural preservation, between global and local feminist consciousness” in order to bring up “a Third World child in an immigrant community within the first World” (Das Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 1997: 123).

In response to Das Dasgupta’s efforts, her daughter, Sayantani Dasgupta, attained an unique South Asian feminist perspective that resulted from the “schizophrenia between mainstream feminism and [her] reality as [a woman] of color” (Das Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 1997: 123). To Dasgupta, “mainstream American feminism taught [her] that being an Indian woman was antithetical to being a political activist.” She felt that “Asian American women seemed to be summarily dismissed as inherently passive and submissive” (Das Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 1997: 129). Her reasons for identifying herself initially as a “South Asian feminist”; are “because the term was inclusive of women from other countries in the subcontinent and because the term ‘Indian’ was too often confused
with ‘Native American”’ (Das Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 1997: 129). However, she realized that her concerns differed from those of immigrant women. Consequently, she had to restructure her identity as a South Asian American feminist.

One major difference between South Asian feminists and South Asian American feminists is the presence and understanding of racism, which Mohanty addressed. Das Dasgupta was once Indian, in the majority, before she arrived in the US and became targeted as a minority woman of color. But for her daughter, racism was always present; she “never felt included in the ‘majority’ group.” In addition, Dasgupta, “like all children of immigrants... had to juggle with multiple cultures and grapple with [her] ethnic identity” (Das Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 1997: 129). Dasgupta’s American experience—her experience of growing up in America—differentiates her from most South Asian feminists who immigrated to the US as adults. This differentiation, which Dasgupta, described, generalizes to apply to Asian feminists and Asian American feminists.

**Situating the Third World**

Many feminists of colors have defined and written about the “Third World” and “Third World women.” For each, the terms mean slightly different things, and often are not be confined to geographical regions. Gayatri Spivak positions the Third World in terms of old and new world orders. She explains that the term “Third World” initially appeared in 1955 in the “Bandung Conference (1955) to establish a third way—neither with the Eastern nor within the Western bloc—in the world system, in response to seemingly new world order established after the Second World War, was not
accompanied by a commensurate intellectual effort” (Spivak, 1996: 270). The Third World represented an anti-imperialist, nationalist voice.

Chandra Mohanty imparts a much more geographic definition to the term, “Third World.” She groups “the nation-states of Latin America, the Carribean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-east Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania” as Third World regions, and “black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous people in the U.S., Europe, Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third worlds” (Mohanty, 1991: 5) as Third World peoples. The black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous people in the US, to whom Mohanty referred, are subjected to “internal colonialism.” The internally colonized population typically lives in the inner city ghettos and suffers from poverty and discrimination. Their impoverished state is usually due to a history of ghettozation and exclusion from the industrial economy and discrimination in housing and lending, an analogous state to the oppression of “colonialism.” Mohanty’s definition of the “Third World” differs significantly from that of KumKum Sangari, who argues that “Third World” not only designates geographic areas but includes imaginary spaces as well. These imaginary spaces are created to make possible the lumping of people as perceived by the majority community as “underdeveloped” or from a region that is “underdeveloped” because this “underdeveloped” region may not really exist geographically. She is critical of the way the term “Third World” is used to lump together different regions into a single category characterized by “underdevelopment” (Sangari, 1990: 217).

While Mohanty chooses to define the “Third World” geographically and politically, she uses the term “Third World women” interchangeably with “women of
color.” She is able to equate the two terms because she believes that “Third World women” and “women of color” are not united so much by their color or racial identifications, but rather by a common context of struggle. In addition to a similar experience of discrimination, “Third World women” and “women of color” also share political commonality in their opposition to sexist, racist, and imperialistic political structures. Mohanty (1991) points out that scholars often locate “third world women” in terms of “underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and ‘overpopulation’ of particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countires” (p 6). While these terms do inform useful and necessary aspects of the lives of “third world women,” these “social indicators” by no means do justice to the meaning of the day-to-day experiences of women living in the “Third World.” “Third world women” do not form an unitary, monolithic group. The group maintain internal alliances and divisions of class, religion, sexuality, and history. Hence “third world women,” like “women of color” in the United States, consist of diversified groups, and their basis for their formation of any form of constituency is not biological, geographical, or sociological. Instead, they form solidarity is political, based on the context of struggles against exploitative structures.

Rather than mapping imaginary terrains or grappling with the meaning of “underdevelopment,” “Third World” in the context of this chapter will reference Mohanty’s political definition. In the next section, the differences between third world feminism and Asian American feminism will be expounded upon and the complexities involved in First World Asian American feminists writing third world feminist theory will also be discussed.
Asian American Feminism is not Third World Feminism

Asian American feminism is not to be confused with third world feminism because Asian American feminists derive their experiences of oppression in the first world while third world feminists possess lived knowledge of the third world. Asian American feminists write about third world feminism and third world women, but do not produce "third world feminism." Yet, despite their differences, Asian American women share certain feelings with third world women. Non-western women, both in and out of the so-called Third World, voice anger about the singular priority that is given to "woman" by bourgeois liberal feminism. This anger stems from the lived reality that non-western women's experiences as "women" can "never be pinned down to the narrowly sexualized aspect of that category as 'women' versus 'men' only" (Chow C., 1999: 83). In this sense, Asian American women stand united with Third World women in their insistence on integrating racism and classism into feminism. But for Third World feminists, their perspective is further complicated by the affairs of the state, the relations between "developing" and "developed" countries. They worry about the effects of colonialism and the ways in which the material lack of the economy impact the lives of women and their placement in society. The framework, or context, in which the feminist theorizes, differentiates an Asian American feminist from a Third World feminist. An Asian American feminist works within the US, physically and theoretically. Her thoughts would be applicable to the US, the country from which she draws her experiences of oppression and subversion. While Asian American feminists may be concerned about the plight of their international Third World sisters, they are not the
same. Asian Americans have been regarded as sojourners in the US because of their physical attributes—taken as unmistakable signs of “otherness.” Part of the goal Asian American feminism is to reinstate Asian American women’s rightful place in mainstream feminist movement and discourse in the US. In this respect, Asian American feminists are disidentified with Asian and Third World feminists.

Identification with and as Third World Women

Many South Asian American feminist and some Asian American feminist scholars consider themselves to be or are deeply concerned with the plight of Third World women. For scholars such as Mohanty, the home is a profoundly political topic, especially when a person is displaced from the place s/he considers home or when s/he is told to “go home” by the majority of the people in the place s/he considers home. After living in the US for fifteen years, Mohanty recalls a conversation with a professional white man, during which he asks her which school she went to and when she planned to go home. She realizes, from experiences such as the one cited, that “few third world women are granted professional status in the US, even if... clear characteristics of adulthood like gray hair and facial lines [are exhibited]” (Mohanty, 1997: 119). Certain physical attributes, like skin and hair color—racial characteristics—seem to override the importance of wrinkles and white hair—age characteristics—in the mass culture’s evaluation of third world women, or women of color who might be presumed to be third world women.

Both the terms South Asian and Third World, only make sense in contexts outside of “South Asia” and the Third World. Mohanty, who refuses to obtain US citizenship
and continues to hold on to her status as a resident alien, considers herself a South Asian who lives primarily in the US and works with communities and grass-root organizations in both the US and India. She was not South Asian in India; there, she was Indian. Her reasoning for identification as South Asian resonates with one of the reasons for the emergence of an Asian American identity—she found that “identifying as South Asian rather than Indian adds number and hence power within the US State” (Mohanty, 1997: 118). In addition, “regional differences among those from different South Asian countries are often less relevant than the commonality based on... histories of immigration and... experiences in the US” (Mohanty, 1997: 120). The latter point is especially true for second or subsequent generations of South Asians, who might grow to be increasingly distant from the occurrences in the Third World and who share the common experience of growing up in America as minorities and as people of color.

Self-defined Third World women, like Mohanty and Trinh T. Minh-ha, who inhabit a place within First World feminist academia come under critique by First World and Third World feminist scholars alike because they destabilize the concept of “Third World women.” If Mohanty and Trinh are Third World women and live in the First World, who are the Third World women living in the Third World. Doubt is cast on the question of whether or not Third World women living in the First World adequately represent and theorize about Third World women living in the Third World. Also, the theories of Third World women living in the First World are often addressed to audiences within the First World. Uncertainty hovers about the authenticity of Third World feminist theorists who choose to make their home in the First World.
Third World Feminism for a First World Audience

Third world feminisms within the US propelled by Asian American feminists have advanced the status of women of color within the US and made contributions to the understanding of feminist theory and politics. In the introduction to the groundbreaking anthology edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back, the editors listed the major concerns for a political movement by US third world women:

1) how visibility/invisibility as women of color forms our radicalism; 2) the ways in which Third World women derive a feminist theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience; 3) the destructive and demoralizing effects of racism in the women’s movement; 4) the cultural, class, and sexuality differences that divide women of color; 5) Third world women’s writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution; and 6) the ways and means of a Third World feminist future (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983: xxiv).

The repeated reclamation of racial and ethnic background and values within the feminist framework raises the suspicion of “feminism,” namely White feminism, as an unproductive ground for struggle.

In an essay by Aida Hurtado (1989), she argues that “the personal is political” carry different meanings for communities of white women and women of color in the US. The distinction of the public and private sphere have different relevance for American white middle- and upper-class women and women of color and women of working lass background. Hurtado (1989) insists that “there is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment” (p 849). Working-class women and women of color have historically been subject to state intervention in their domestic lives. As a result, the politics and definition of “personal life” differ drastically for middle-class whites and for people of color.
Third world feminism has maintained a local analysis of oppression and discrimination, arguing for the rewriting of history based on “the specific locations and histories of struggles of people of color and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples” (Mohanty, 1991: 10). Third world feminists use intersectional analysis to understand oppression in terms of the experiences of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist discourse and politics in the histories of racism and imperialism. They also emphasize the use of memory and writing as ways to create oppositional agency.

In discussing the relation of third world feminism to white feminism, white feminist Ann Russo posits that in terms of “context,” the history of white feminism does not differ significantly from the history of third world feminism because both histories emerged in relation to other struggles present at the time. The white feminist movement arose from the politics of the civil rights and new left movements, just as third world feminism within the US utilized various nationalist movements and the white feminist movement itself as the starting point. Drawing from her experiences with third world feminism, Ann Russo urges white women to react to racism with outrage rather than guilt or defensiveness.

Russo emphasizes that racism concerns more than third world women because of the interrelatedness of race and gender. But the interrelatedness connects more than just race and gender, it also brings in class and sexual orientation and any other line of division where the distinction between a dominant and a subordinate is possible. As Mohanty points out, the challenge for the larger population arising from a third world feminist analysis of the power relations is “the rewriting of all hegemonic history, not just
the history of people of color” (Mohanty, 1991: 13). This rewriting and re-envisioning becomes necessary once the larger population decides to take seriously the location and struggles of third world women, because the interrelatedness meant that one history is never apart from the other.

**The Danger of Specialness for Third World Feminist Scholars**

Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, “difference” is essentially “division” in the understanding of many. “Third world” gives context to the placement of a particular group of women, but this “third world” designation should not be confused with a sense of specialness because being the “first” or “only” third world woman is different from having a consciousness of difference. Trinh suggests that everyone has the potential to be special and each may have an unique way to relate to the story of specialness. This sense specialness emerges from being paid extra attention and given praise because a third world feminist scholar is paving the way for less “fortunate” sisters, from being able to “make it” in the world despite the setbacks of discrimination and inability to access resources available more readily to the larger population. But Trinh warns of the danger of this sense of specialness because the work done by third world feminist scholars would eventually end this specialness, as a greater number of third world women enter and participate in academia, in the workplace. To feel special, in this sense, helps the dominant culture perpetuate its cycle of oppression on minorities. Trinh states clearly the possible corrosive nature of a sense of specialness, “specialness as a soporific soothes, anaesthetizes my sense of justice; it is, to the wo/man of ambition, as effective a drug of
psychological self-intoxication as alcohol is to the exiles of society” (Trinh, 1989: 88).

Feminists of color need be wary of the sense of specialness.

Specialness and special development must be rejected because they help maintain existing power structures and lines of division. To be special is to be an anomaly, to be different, the other. Trinh (1989) tells the story where she goes to speak to a First World audience, “my audience expects and demands it; otherwise people would feel cheated: We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First World, We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can’t have and to divert us from the monotony of sameness” (p 88). As long as third world feminists, or any feminist of color, feels that sense of specialness, they can take it as a telltale sign that they remain outsiders to mainstream rhetoric.

**Discursive Colonization by Western Feminist Scholars**

In “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Mohanty critiques the way the works of mainstream, Western feminism construct “the third world woman” as a monolithic subject (and object) of knowledge. She draws attention to a “colonization” of the feminist discourse in scholarship, which reproduces unequal relations of power. Mohanty notes the struggle within feminist scholarship to address the question of “woman” as an ideological and cultural construct and “women” as real, material subjects from historical and social contexts. Mohanty writes:

the assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the
other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world (Mohanty, 1991: 53).

The assumption of privilege and inadequate self-consciousness resulted in a discursive colonization of the material and denial of heterogeneity of women in the third world. Just as "sexual difference" as a cross-culturally singular notion of patriarchy or male dominance, Mohanty calls the similarly reductive and homogeneous notion used by many Western feminists in talking about third world women, the "third world difference." The discursive colonization appropriates and erases the constitutive complexities that characterize the lives of women living in the third world.

While the problem of discursive colonization is an abstract, analytical one, it becomes concrete given the context of the domination of Western scholarship in the practical sense—"the production, publication, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas" (Mohanty, 1991: 55). Given the domination of the representation of Western feminist scholarship, the political implications of the analytical problem of discursive colonization need to be examined. Mohanty names three basic analytic principles that are present in Western feminist discourse on women in the third world. The first is the assumption of third world women as a single, coherent, ahistorical group with similar, if not identical, interests and concerns and is a group that is undifferentiated by other factors such as class, ethnicity, geographical location, etc. The second presupposition concerns the problematic use of evidence to prove the first assumption. According to Mohanty, within Western scholarship, the universality and cross-cultural validity of notions such as "sexual difference" is proven through three main ways—first, the use through arithmetic model; second, application of concepts (such as religion, family, and reproduction) without grounding in social and political contexts; and third,
application of superordinate structural categories (such as male-female) to organize cross-cultural work. The third basic analytic principle is a result of the first two—that the model of struggle and subjectivity developed by Western feminist to describe third world women does not allow for sufficient agency for the women studied. The three basic analytic principles undermines the agency of third world women, but as Mohanty proposes and stresses, if women in the third world were to share a group status, the reason for their solidarity and unity is not their shared status as victims or objects, but rather, they are united by their shared history of agency.

In response to the discursive colonization of third world women, Mohanty urges the use of intersectional analysis when approaching issues concerning third world women. By constructing careful, politically focused, local analysis, the heterogeneity among third world women can be acknowledged as political or social problematics are addressed within context. Mohanty suggests that only through highly context-specific analysis would the agency of third world women be accredited.

The intersectional approach to examining women and women's experiences has proliferated within legal practices through efforts of various critical race theorists and legal practitioners. In the next chapter, the role of culture within legal discourse and how this linkage affects the lives of women are discussed.
Asian American feminists have made significant contributions to critical race theory, critical legal studies, and legal tools such as “cultural defense.” They have helped to bring legal and political attention to the issue of multiculturalism and the effects that it bears on the lives of men and women. Because the perspective Asian American feminist legal theorist use is an intersectional one, they permit the possibility of an interpretation of law that takes into account the cultural values and norms of people. This chapter starts out with a section that examines the debates of and linkages between feminism and multiculturalism, and uses the work of Sung Sil Lee Sohng to propose a possible critical feminist inquiry into multiculturalism. Next, the chapter addresses critical race theory, its formation and applications to people of color, and discusses the theories of Mari Matsuda, who was a major proponent in critical race theory. Lastly, the chapter takes a close examination of Leti Volpp’s critique of the “cultural defense.”

The Multiculturalism Debates

On the surface, multiculturalism means what it spells out—the state of having multiple cultures. But as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, “multiculturalism does not lead us very far if it remains a question of differences only between one culture and another” (Trinh, 1991: 107) because differences can be understood within one culture. In addition, differences need to be understood with the conditions of time, place, economic circumstances, etc. Trinh associates the words intercultural, intersubjective, and
interdisciplinary with multiculturalism, for through these three different approaches a
more complete social and political depiction be constructed. These three approaches cut
across boundaries to reject "simplistic attempts at classifying, to resist the comfort of
belonging to a classification, and of producing classifiable works" (Trinh, 1991: 108).
Multiculturalism is not merely a conglomeration of many cultures. It is to live with
heterogeneity, to grapple with differences, to confront conflicts. Another interpretation
of multiculturalism posits that it "is the radical idea that people in other cultures, foreign
and domestic, are human beings, too—moral equals, entitled to equal respect and
concern, not to be discounted or treated as a subordinate caste" (Cohen et al., 1999: 4),
and it is this latter formulation regarding group rights that thrusts itself against what some
consider feminist concerns, especially for women perceived to be from a different
culture.

In 1997, political theorist Susan Moller Okin published a controversial piece on
multiculturalism entitled "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Okin's essay observes
that cultural ideas sometimes functioned to dictate women's behavior and women's lives.
Okin argues that "when the dominant ideas and practices in a group offend so deeply
against the idea that men and women are moral equals... we ought to be less solicitous of
the group and more attentive to the costs visited on female members" (Cohen et al., 1999:
4). As a result of Okin's essay, the multiculturalism debates gained more recognition as
many feminist scholars and thinkers responded with subsequent articles and essays,
mostly published in the Boston Review where Okin's essay first appeared.

In her essay, Okin attempts to address one central question—"what should be
done when the claims of minority cultures or religions clash with the norms of gender
equality that is at least endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in their practices)?” (Okin, 1999: 9). To demonstrate the tension between multiculturalism and feminism, Okin cited the example of the French accommodation of polygamy. In this case, the right to contract polygamous marriages constituted a group right that was not available to the remainder of the population. In the end, the French government decided to consider all other marriage annulled except for one, insisting on monogamy after French reporters (according to Okin) finally got around to interviewing the wives involved in polygamous marriages and found that the women affected by polygamy “regard it as an inescapable and barely tolerable institution in their African countries of origin” (Okin, 1999: 10).

Okin argues that the advocates of group rights for minorities within liberal states have not adequately addressed the critique of group rights due to a monolithic treatment of cultural groups (especially between men and women) and the negligence of the private sphere, which bears a greater influence on women’s lives than on men’s. Because of the tension between multiculturalism as a way to assert group rights and feminism as a means to protect the interests of women, whichever culture they belong to, Okin concludes that group rights could only be “part of the solution” (Okin, 1999: 22). She cautions advocates of liberal arguments for the rights of groups to take special care in examining the inequalities within the group, especially those between the sexes.

The responses to Okin’s essay range widely. Some emphasized the plasticity of cultures to adapt to demands of political morality. Some argued that the problem with multiculturalism is not particular to women (or feminism), but rather that liberals should question group rights whenever a culture constrains its members. In this second
formulation, multiculturalism conflicts with human rights. Still others argue that Okin has confused greater debates about human morality with details pertaining to local analysis of particular human conditions (i.e. that of one specific group within a specific social and political context). The confusion between the two resulted in Okin’s neglect of cultural differences. These responses to Okin’s essay are collected in an anthological volume under the same title Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? and include works by thinkers from various ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, one of the main contributors to the multiculturalism discourse, Leti Volpp, was left out of this volume. Leti Volpp had written considerably on multiculturalism and its effects on Asian women’s lives, especially in terms of the law in the form of cultural defense. Volpp’s work helped make multiculturalism a valid and urgent topic of feminist concern. Her absence from this volume supports the exclusion of Asian American feminist scholars from the greater feminist discourse. Volpp’s work and ideas will be discussed in a later section in this chapter.

Besides conflicts between group rights and women’s rights, multiculturalism raises a question concerning liberal states in general. Liberal states seem more willing to embrace class and race issues, as with Marxism and Civil Rights movement. Class and racial tensions seem to work with the liberal concept of equality, giving attention to the impoverished, the proletariat; ending segregation and discrimination practices based on race. However, liberalism along the cultural axis becomes problematic since cultures sometimes include regulations that seem contradictory to equality (i.e. women wearing the veil). The nature of certain cultural practices (such as polygamy) sometimes impinges upon the liberal concept of equality (i.e. man and woman form an equal
partnership in monogamy). The contradictions regarding multiculturalism within liberal states remain unresolved. However, many insights have been made into the role of multiculturalism in various disciplines, and many of the contributors are Asian American feminist theorists.

Feminist Scholarship in Multiculturalism

Korean American feminist, Sung Sil Lee Sohng, outlines four key points to a critical feminist inquiry that links critical feminist scholarship to multiculturalism. The first is a feminist critique of history. Most historical documents record the differences between the sexes or races; few offer an understanding of why those differences exist and how they are related to each other. A historically grounded feminist analysis would “present minority women’s behavior with attention to the opportunity structures shaping their lives” (Sohng, 1998: 18). The second point is the use of feminist insights for the processes of social change. This point repeats the idea of “theory as practice as theory,” for only through feminist insights (theory) could social changes (practice) be realized. These feminist insights are lived. Engaging in critical inquiry means confronting “prevailing social practices by being continually skeptical of stereotypes, taken-for-granted patterns, and public rhetoric in [the] daily [life]” (Sohng, 1998: 18). Sohng’s (1998) third point establishes that a critical stance has a cultural dimension. This clarification is necessary because ethnic cultural heritage and ethnic knowledge “remain outside the formal scientific structure and is constantly being devalued and suppressed by the dominant science” (p.18). This devaluation is part of the reason why the dominant population can accept problematic behavior as “cultural” without obtaining some
understanding of that culture. The last point to Sohng’s critical feminist inquiry is freedom from values. Since the purpose of her critical inquiry is to “analyze links between economic, political, and cultural factors, and gain insight into the dynamic relationships between groups of women” (Sohng, 1998: 19), the critical inquiry begins with the recognition of all concepts as political claims, such that no one idea is granted the privileged status of an universal truth. The inquiry recognizes that “an analysis of oppressive social structures is in itself a political act” (p.19). The next section expounds on such an inquiry into the legal arena in the form of Critical Race Theory.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is one of the most controversial fields within legal and cultural studies. Critical Race Theorists examines how race has operated within legal discourse, how it has been ignored as a critical component that explains differential treatment individuals receive within American society in the face of laws that are supposed to protect the right to freedom and happiness for all. CRT is linked to the development of African American thought in the post civil rights era through works of Derrick Bell and Allan Freeman in the 1970s. In the 1980s, Richard Delgado and Kimberly Crenshaw made significant contributions to the CRT discourse. Proponents of CRT maintain that the logic and structure of the law grew out of power relations already present within the society, and therefore the law exists to serve the interests of the group of people that forms it. For Critical Race Theorists, the law is a collection of beliefs and prejudices that legitimize the dominant interests of a society and is used to uphold those interests. The law is not neutral or value free.
Asian Americans have historically been interested and active in the law, and have been implementing a cultural perspective in interpreting the law. As early as the 1870's, lawyers for Chinese immigrants have been using Civil Rights arguments to obtain equal protection for the Chinese, resulting in the court’s decision to forbid discriminatory taxes and penalties for the Chinese. In 1895, the case of US versus Wong Kim Ark set the precedence for the application of the 14th amendment. Wong had lived in the US but was barred from reentry after a visit to China. Wong argued and won the case that he was a citizen because he was born in the US. The Chinese in the US during the nineteenth century helped establish that the 14th amendment applies to non-citizens and that the court could examine motivation for the law. These early instances where Chinese immigrants questioned and examined the “neutrality” of the law resonates with current practices in critical legal studies.

CRT is very similar to feminism in several respects. Both CRT and feminism contend that “the perspectives of the discriminated against, oppressed individual or group must be better understood by the larger society, and that the law should look not to the wrongs of perpetrators but to helping those who have been victims of discrimination” (Asch, 2000). Both CRT and feminism express skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy. Both CRT and feminism challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual, historical, if not also local, analysis of oppressive circumstances. CRT also share characteristics of feminisms that arose from minority populations. CRT insists on recognition of experiential, lived knowledge of people of color. It is interdisciplinary and eclectic, borrowing from several traditions.
CRT works toward the goal of ending all forms of oppression by helping end racial oppression.

Asian American Critical Race Theorist Mari Matsuda contends that the public and the courts must understand the experiences and responses of people who are regularly mistreated because of their “race.” Only through understanding could the courts and the law began to do justice to the people for whom the laws were not written and who did not write them. Matsuda further contends that the society will balk at making modifications that address minority concerns unless dominant members of that society can be perceived to benefit as a by-product of these changes. Whenever an unequal situation arises, the questions of “who reaps the benefits and who pays the price?” should always be asked.

Mari Matsuda was part of a group of Civil Rights activists, scholars, and lawyers who helped formulate CRT in the 1980s as a way to combat the problem of increased hate speech incidents in the US. Like other Asian American feminist theorists such as Mohanty and Trinh, Matsuda recognizes the value of experiential knowledge. Matsuda validates the minority experience by prioritizing the subjective experience—taking the authority of one’s personal experience and giving it legal legitimacy and relevance. CRT shifts the balance of power from the perpetrator to its victims to destabilize the structural racism inherent in the legal and social organization of the US.

Matsuda (1996) writes, “the method of derivation and presentation of critical race theory is marked by consciousness of the history and experience of subordinated people” (p 51). Matsuda’s CRT uses stories, testimonials, and accounts of personal and mythical experiences to create a worldview that challenges the status quo in legal discourse. The stories of victims are used as valid legal sources, challenging the traditional
understanding of law. Like feminist consciousness-raising, the “use of storytelling creates a tension between a tale of oppression and a tale of innocence, leading to only two possible conclusions: someone is lying, or someone is deeply deluded” (Matsuda, 1996: 51).

In CRT, Matsuda defines justice to be antiracist, substantive, and attainable. CRT views racism as a resilient, antiprogressive force in American history, and suggests that anti-racism is important to the conception of justice. Within CRT, the law is a mechanism that is used to end oppression. Mari Matsuda made significant contributions to the formulation and understanding of CRT. She also actively teaches critical legal studies. The following sections examine how the changing Asian American demographics have affected the focus of legal discourses and investigates one application of critical legal studies—that of cultural defense, which illustrates how the use of stories and the insistence on cultural differences could be both beneficial and harmful to minorities—and highlights the work of Leti Volpp, one of the main Asian American voices within the multiculturalism discourse.

**Changing Demographics of Asian Americans**

The preoccupation of Asian American feminist scholars with the topics of critical race theory, multiculturalism, and cultural defense reflects the changing demographics of the Asian American population. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of the Asian American population were descendants of early immigrants and laborers. However, after the 1965 Immigration Law abolished “national origins” as basis for allocating immigration quotas to various countries, the US saw a huge influx of
immigrants from Asia, including over 130,000 refugees from Vietnam, Kampuchea, Cambodia, and Laos. Because of the large number of immigrants from Asia, the conditions of immigrants and of third world people became pertinent Asian American feminist concerns. This shift in population demographics is reflected in the increased focus on legal theories dealing with immigrants and in the interest of Asian American feminists in third world women.

Cultural Defense

To the extent that a woman of color sees herself and is seen by others as colored, "it is impossible to step outside culture and thus to shed the culturally constructed self" (Friedman, 1993: 243). If ethnicity composes a central part of a woman's identity, then her actions and decisions would reflect the culture from which she draws her values, morals, and norms. To accept a society as multicultural means to acknowledge the many different identities and value systems that comprise the whole. While this pluralism may not be readily evident in the humdrum of daily life, it takes a critical position in legal theory in the form of "cultural defense"—a "legal strategy that defendants use in attempts to excuse criminal behavior or to mitigate culpability based on a lack of requisite mens rea" (Volpp, 1994: 57). The theory underlying "cultural defense" argues that "defendant, usually a recent immigrant to the United States, acted according to the dictates of his or her "culture," and therefore deserve leniency" (Volpp, 1994: 57). This legal strategy could either harm or assist minority women, depending on how it is implemented. On one hand, it could explain the logic of certain behaviors ascribed to minority women, such as parent-child suicide; on the other, it could confine women of color to and legitimate
the acts of sex oppression permitted (or sometimes not permitted) by their supposed
culture of origin. Yet still a larger question looming over this entire debate is whether or
not multiculturalism is good for women? Perhaps strategies like "cultural defense" could
only reinforce cultural myths about human groups of which the dominant population is
susceptible. Perhaps multiculturalism would only act to further sex oppression and
isolate minority groups, preventing them from integrating fully into the larger society.
Also, at what point would "cultural defense" stop being applicable for a minority person?
Would it apply to an American-self-identified first generation immigrant, to an Asian-
identified second generation American?

Asian American feminist legal theorist, Leti Volpp (1994), notes two
representative types of cases implementing "cultural defense" where Asian women have
most often been involved. The first is that of an Asian man seeking "cultural defense"
for his violence toward an Asian woman. The other is an Asian woman seeking to use
cultural factors as explanation for her mental state when attempting to commit parent-
child suicide (p. 59-60). In the former case, violence against women is justified, and
sometimes given permission by acquittal of the Asian man, through cultural factors. In
the latter, the Asian woman is relieved of punishment for trying to keep family honor in a
society that does not approve of honor retained through suicide. Volpp insists that the
decision of whether or not to support the use of cultural defense is a difficult one.

Critics of "cultural defense," such as Nilda Rimonte, warn that the use of the
defense might incorporate and perpetuate the patriarchal values in Asian cultures.
Rimonte believes that "the best way to help her clients is to help their community by
reconciling—whenever possible, in a nonconfrontational manner—the inconsistencies
between their culture and the dominant United States culture" (Coleman, 1996: 1145). Volpp show that she shares a similar concern by establishing what she calls the "antisubordination principle," since it is primarily immigrant women who are subordinated and oppressed by both their men and the dominant population. Due to this principle, Volpp supports the use of cultural defense for female defendants and not for male defendants. The debate and disagreement over the use of "cultural defense" reflect not only differences in the interpretation of legal theory and of equality, but also illuminates the problematization of "culture."

Leti Volpp examines the boundaries between behaviors that are considered "cultural" and those that are not. In her analysis of forced and voluntary adolescent marriages, Volpp finds that behavior that is shocking or less acceptable "is more often causally attributed to a group-defined culture when the actor is perceived to 'have' culture" (Volpp, 2000: 89). With White Americans, who are perceived as "cultureless," their behavior, even if strange or out-of-place, would not be racialized; instead, non-cultural explanations are constructed. The association of behavior with cultural differences results in an exaggerated perception that equates ethnic difference with moral difference. Volpp coins the term "discursive representations" to mean "narratives that underlie public perception, legal discourse, and scholarly writing" (Volpp, 2000: 90). She probes into identity politics by questions ways in which identities cast individuals outside the boundaries of the social body—these boundaries include distinctions of class, sexuality, drug-use, etc.

To prove the point that problematic behavior is designated as "cultural" where racialization of the individuals involved in possible, Volpp cites the example of the
voluntary marriages between Tina Akers and Wayne Compton and between Adela Quintana and Pedro Sotelo. Akers, 13, married Compton, 29, after getting pregnant. Both individuals are white. While the community disapproved of their marriage, asking that Compton be investigated for sexual assault and passing a bill raising the age of consent for minors to marry, their marriage was never referenced as a cultural phenomenon of white American culture. Instead, the marriage was understood as “aberrant behavior,” falling in the category with other behaviors like child abuse, sexual perversion, and corruption of a minor (Volpp, 2000: 91-92). Unlike the Akers/Compton case, when Quintana, 14, and Sotelo, 22, had a child in Texas, their behavior was used as an example to illustrate the “cultural divide” between Mexican and American cultures. Despite the fact that Mexican laws actually provided stricter requirements for marriage than Texas law and that marriage at a young age was common in Texas (“annually an average of 470 girls fourteen and younger marry there”), Quintana and Sotelo’s behavior was cultural. Sotelo was “an innocent player in a big cultural misunderstanding” (Volpp, 2000: 93). The Quintana/Sotelo case is taken as representative of Mexican culture, and the American public appears to be readily accepting of that depiction. Volpp (2000) writes, “for communities of color, a specific individual act is assumed to be the product of a group identity and further, is used to define the group” (p.95). The larger society seems willing to believe in the power of cultural influences, and racializes individual behavior even when the action is not itself culturally inspired or pertaining to the cultural norm. The ready acceptance of problematic behavior as “cultural” derives from the “notion that non-Western people are governed by culture” (Volpp, 2000: 96). This governance by culture suggests that these people have “a limited capacity for agency,
will, or rational thought” (Volpp, 2000: 96). To say that people of color act as their culture dictates depoliticizes them because it neglects the power of the “white culture,” the invisible culture, the “non-culture.” Governance of culture over individual behavior could be used as the scapegoat for faults of the white non-culture, such as inadequate government policies.

“Cultural defense” reflects the notion that people of color are governed by cultural dictates, and because they lack agency, will, or rational thought to react with different behavior, their actions deserves leniency in legal litigations. If a crime of domestic abuse is committed, the behavior is due to “culture”—the husband is giving his wife the just punishment as prescribed by his community of origin; his decision and actions are natural and as expected. The cause of his behavior is culture; it is not him, but his culture, that clashes with the US law. This interpretation of culture places women of color at a disadvantage, because the law is unable to protect them from their own culture. Because of this conflict, some feminist theorists (such as Doriane Coleman and Iris Young) believe that “cultural defense” forces a choice between multiculturalism and women’s progress. The dualist argument that one aspect of oppression must have primacy over another remerges, such that “supporting the right of women requires abandoning any consideration of race or culture” (Volpp, 1996: 1580). Volpp responds to this dualism by pointing out that women of color are subject to multiple oppressions, and the dualist perspective does not justly describe their circumstances. In accounting for both multiculturalism and feminism, she proposes the use of intersectionality—a methodology that “disrupts the categorization of race and gender as exclusive or separable” (Volpp, 1994: 59). With intersectional analysis, the positionalities of minorities or people of
color can be “understood as the result of various social relations formed through different discourses and [their] own reappropriation of tradition” (Volpp, 1996: 1581). By having many different axis in a framework used to examine an individual experiences as gendered, class, and racial subject, Volpp can better appreciate the complexity of her subject’s identity. With regard to “cultural defense,” Volpp suggests that it be used only for female defendants. While this special women-only application appears unfair initially, when considering the patriarchal culture from which many of the immigrant women and non-white women originate, the application serves to protect their well-being. When placed in a framework with many different axis, instead of having a single measure of culture, multiculturalism is reconciled to feminism, and the differential treatment between immigrant women and men in terms of “cultural defense” is justified. Through intersectionality, Volpp restores wholeness to human subjects in legal theory, where a person of color is perceived to act on more than cultural dictates. Within the realm of law, several others theories, in addition to intersectionality, have been proposed that pertains to the convergence of law, race, and ethnicity. Among these are critical legal theory and critical race theory. Both theories are concerned with the power of the dominating classes over the outcome of legal processes. Critical race theory, in particular, seeks to uncover “racist structures within the legal system and asks how and whether law is a means to attain justice” (Matsuda, 1996: 47). The emergence of these theories shows that sensitivity to racism and classism has increased in the legal arena over the last two decades.

As revealed by legal theories, gender, class, race, and sexual orientation are inseparable in many instances. Inquiries, whether feminist, racist, or class-oriented, are
situated in a multicultural, multiethnic context. Like legal practitioners, feminists have to resolve the inadequacy of using old racial paradigms to deal with a new, multicultural reality. Some feminists of color hope to act as catalysts for a merger of multiculturalism and feminism.
Chapter 4. Asian American vs. Mainstream Feminist Perspectives on Pornography

Feminists (both white feminists and feminists of color) are deeply divided in their attitudes toward pornography. The reason could be ethical, legal, religious, or personal. This division suggests that these issues illuminate unresolved ideological and practical problems concerning the freedom of expression, sexual equality, and representation of women. Uncertainty, ambivalence, and discord over the definition, regulation, and social effects of pornography generate many questions that remain unanswered or partially answered. In this chapter, I will attempt to explain the major disagreements over pornography situated within white feminism, within Asian American feminism, and between the two. These disagreements include the definition of pornography, the false representation of women and women’s desires, the harm pornography does to women, the regulation of pornography, and the focus on sex trade instead of pornography. The debates over pornography and sex trade brings out different ideas and concerns about sexual equality that help to elucidate the Asian American feminist position within the mainstream discourse of sexual politics.

Mainstream Feminist Perspective on Pornography

Feminists disagree over what pornography means and what qualifies as pornographic, possibly due to the controversies and paradoxes regarding the subject. An example illustrates the conflicting nature of porn. Pornography presents images of sex. These images are illusions because the participants are actors; their actions do not come from their own will but from a written script. In the sense that these images serve
entertainment purposes, they count as a form of art, yet at the same time, the actions of the actors, such as sex, are performed on real people. The boundary between reality and illusion, life and art blurs. Catherine MacKinnon stresses this crossover, "it is not that life and art imitate each other; in this sexuality, they are each other." She emphasizes, "sex in life is no less mediated than it is in art" when women are constructed as sex objects in porn, according to their looks with respect to their possible uses (various sexual feats). For her, "pornography participates in its audience's eroticism, through creating an accessible sexual object"— "men have sex with their image of a woman" (MacKinnon, 1987: 173). The ambiguity between sexual reality and pornographic art complicates the definition of porn.

Given the complex nature of pornography, feminists continue to grapple with the term. Ellen Willis points out, "if feminists define pornography, per se, as the enemy, the result will be to make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them" (Willis, 1994: 162). Some women enjoy pornography, and not because they have been "brainwashed by male values" (Willis, 1994: 163). She suggests examining the "qualitative distinctions" in pornography and considers the possibility that pornography may not all be "equally bad" (Willis, 1994: 162). Willis also questions the notion that eroticism for women emphasizes "relationships, not (yuck) organs," saying that this view of sex is not "feminist but feminine" (Willis, 1994: 163). Ann Snitow may disagree with this view of female eroticism although she seems agree with Willis on differentiating between various types of porn. According to Snitow (1994), in "pornography for women... sex is bathed in romance, diffused, always implied rather than enacted at all" (p 183-184). Snitow refers to Harlequin romance, but comments that
pornography is different for women than men. Snitow’s pornography for women exhibits the attributes that Willis deem feminine and not feminist.

Other mainstream feminists give definitions of pornography that carry legal and social implications. Rosemarie Tong\(^8\) (1984) notes, “traditional notions of pornography, especially those embedded in Anglo-American law... conflate the notion of pornography with obscenity” (p.7). Pornography cannot and should not be equated with obscenity because “the notion of sexually explicit depictions (pornography) is not the same idea as that of the abuse of a bodily/personal function (obscenity) that causes one to react with disgust (such as coprophagy)” (Tong, 1984: 7). In recent years, the awareness of the distinction between “sexually explicit material that is obscene/pornographic and sexually explicit material that is not” has begun to increase (Tong, 1984: 8). However, because the “sensitivities of persons vary enormously,” what qualifies as an unacceptable, offensive sexually explicit depiction is unclear. This uncertainty further complicates the regulation and legislation of pornography, and feminists “find it difficult not only to distinguish between those modes of pornography they think are objectionable (women-degrading) and those modes of pornography they think are unobjectionable, but also to suggest appropriate legal remedies for the former” (Tong, 1984: 9). Tong writes that feminists have “advanced at least two plausible tests for identifying women-degrading pornography: It depicts disrespect for women’s wishes as sexual beings and it falsely portrays women’s wishes as sexual beings” (Tong, 1984: 9). The operative criterion that determines whether or not a sexual depiction is objectionable is its potential to degrade women. MacKinnon’s definition of pornography agrees with Tong’s in that it also opposes demeaning portrayals of women. But, unlike Tong, MacKinnon takes the

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\(^8\) Rosmarie Tong is a mainstream feminist theorist married to an Asian American man.
argument further to invoke graphic images of the harm done to the women used to create pornography. MacKinnon defines pornography as:

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual (MacKinnon, 1987: 176).

Both Tong and MacKinnon strongly objects to demeaning depictions of women, especially in a sexual context.

As Tong says, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sexually explicit material is ambiguous, and this ambiguity remains unresolved for feminists. Longino (1994) believes “whether or not [a sexual depiction] is pornographic is a function of contextual features” (p 154). More specifically, what makes anything pornographic is the “implicit, if not explicit, approval and recommendation of sexual behavior that is immoral, i.e., that physically or psychologically violates the personhood of one of the participants” (Longino, 1994: 154). Longino (1994) defines pornography in much the same way as Tong—the portrayal is degrading to the participants and serves to “endorse the degradation” (p 155). Yet even if the women-degrading is accepted as the defining characteristic of pornography, what a person feels is women-degrading still covers a varied range of sexual depictions. Tong responds to this ambiguity by pointing out that “even if women do not have al the answers… they do have some of the answers” (Tong, 1984: 13). Feminists concentrate “on blatant examples of women-degrading pornography (gyno thanatica) rather than on more ambiguous instances of it” (Tong,
1984: 13) (such as erotica) because of its indisputable nature. Still, focusing on one particular genre of pornography seems to leave too many questions unanswered.

**Asian American Feminist Perspective—Pornography vs. the Sex Trade**

Most Asian American feminists do not focus on any particular genre of pornography. They broaden the subject of pornography to include concerns about actual sexual practices and commerce. For Asian American feminists, pornography is not so much a representation of women as much as it is part of the commercialization of sex—an enterprise that includes prostitution. Mainstream feminists focus heavily on the subject of pornography itself, but for Asian American feminists, the issue of pornography is inextricably connected to the more pressing problems of sex trade and sex tourism, both internationally and within the United States. Asian American feminists have not produced much literature on the subject of pornography. Perhaps because of the prevalence of international sex trade and sex tourism, Asian American feminists seem more involved in activism working toward ending exploitation in sexual commerce.

Asian American feminists' preoccupation with the sex trade stems from a history of Asian American involvement in prostitution, which had been the largest illegal industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Light, 1977: 467) and from the concerns of immigrant women, especially since the upsurge of immigrant population after the 1965 Immigration Law. In 1890, the ratio of Chinese immigrant men to women was 2679 to 100. This imbalance in sex ratio in the immigrant community encouraged the development of brothel prostitution and eliminated streetwalking. Chinese prostitutes were full-time professionals working in brothels. These prostitutes were sex workers, not
sex objects. The early history of Asian women's engagement in sex commerce as professionals within the US resonates with the concern of Asian American feminists today with the material aspects of sex (i.e. sex tourism and the sex trade) rather than with the representational aspects (i.e. pornography).

The sex trade within the US entraps many female immigrants. The method through which these female immigrants are trafficked takes advantage of the allure of American life and the difficulty to survive within the country once arrived without a supportive network. In the case of Alyssa Chainut, a smuggler offered to take her to the US. For a fee of $40,000, he would have everything arranged for her: a fake Thai passport, a U.S. visa, and a plane ticket. After arriving in the US, Chainut was to pay off her debt through sex work. After four months and about 400 encounters of paid sex, Chainut cleared her debt. Chainut's story is hardly unique. According to the CIA, up to 50,000 women and children from around the world are trafficked every year to the US; and as police in the Philadelphia area discovered, the number of brothels posing as massage parlors, health spas, or acupressure clinics is flourishing. In Operation Lost Thai, immigration officials have launched an investigation that has identified 250 brothels in 26 cities that employ victims of trafficking (Lin, 2000).

The problem of the sex trade looms bigger yet. Most of the trafficked women in the US come from Asia, Russia, central Europe and Mexico, but the sex trade to the US is only part of a global epidemic that is a $7-billion industry (Lin, 2000). Albanian women are kidnapped to work as prostitutes in Italy. Nepalese girls are sold by their parents to brothel owners in India. The sex trade is not just the concern of Asian American

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9 Through travel agencies in the US, American men fly to the Philippines and, with the help of tour guides, are taken to several places to meet girls and their mothers. Many of these girls are taken to the US on fiancée visa and then abandoned to become prostitutes (Ignacio, 2000).
feminists, but also feminists worldwide, feminists from the countries where women are
taken. However, the sex trade is more relevant to Asian American feminists when
compared to mainstream feminists because of the number of Asian women involved in
the sex trade, and the many third world prostitutes who are slaves or indentured servants.

Asian Americans are active in the effort to end sexual exploitation. Captive
Daughters, an organization of Asian American women activists, calls on the US
government and state attorney general and district attorneys to use existing laws to
prosecute both sex tourists and tour operators. In the fall of 1998, Asian American
advocates in Southern California targeted Ventura-County based Philippine Adventure
Tours, accusing it of facilitating trips to the Philippines in which tour guides arrange
liaisons with prostitutes. About 150 protesters, two-thirds of whom were Filipino
Americans, confronted owner Al Gaynor as he left for one of the tours. Although he was
not stopped, the confrontation shows evidence of Asian American activism (Lee & Dang,
1999).

*Same Subject of Pornography, Different Concerns about Representation*

While images of women by themselves are not harmful to women, images of
women seen through a male gaze, then marketed and sold as true representations of
women create a false reality for both men and women; they also help generate a society
that mistreats women because women are told who they are and what they desire.
Mainstream feminist, Rosemarie Tong expressed concern for this aspect of pornography
when she defined pornography as women-degrading. Especially with respect to
gynothanatic pornography, Tong believes that pornography is women-degrading not only
because it “typically suggests that ‘sexuality and violence are congruent,’ and that what women want as sexual beings is irrelevant, but also because it often relays pernicious lies about what women want as sexual beings, suggesting that ‘for women sex is essentially masochistic, humiliation pleasurable, physical abuse erotic’” (Tong, 1984: 10-11). MacKinnon shares in Tong’s sentiments. To her, pornography shows “women’s bodies trussed and maimed and raped and made into things to be hurt and obtained and accessed, and this presented as the nature of women” (MacKinnon, 1987: 147), making visible sexual coercion invisible. Andrea Dworkin has a similar view. For Dworkin, “pornography says that women want to be hurt, forced, and abused; pornography says that women want to be raped, battered, kidnapped, maimed; pornography says women want to be humiliated, shamed, defamed; pornography says that women say No but mean Yes—Yes to violence, Yes to pain” (Dworkin, 1994: 152). All three mainstream feminists, Tong, MacKinnon, and Dworkin describe the false representation of women and of women’s desires in different words, but equally strong language. All three believe that pornography lies about women.

The response of Asian American feminists to the portrayal of Asian American women in pornography differs slightly from mainstream feminists. While they agree on the false representation of women, they react particularly to the cultural stereotypes and images embedded in the sexual presentation of Asian women. Kristina Sheryl Wong, otherwise known as the “Big Bad Chinese Mama,” sets out “to subvert the expectations of a nasty guy in search of petite naked Asian bodies by showing him the full ugliness of ‘Sweet Asian girls’” (Wong). What ensued was the creation of a mail-order bride site complete with a “harem of angst” filled with pictures of Asian women, who are not
exotic. By marketing her website as Asian porn, Wong received over “130,000 hits in a matter of months, merchandise sales that [had her] on biweekly pilgrimages to the post office, invites for speaking engagements and guest lecture presentations in university classes throughout California, feature articles on major sites and publications, and thousands of letters and messages from fans and enemies” (Wong). The lively reception of Wong’s “Asian Porn” website corresponds with another complaint of Asian American women related to pornography, namely pornography on the Internet.

Internet-based pornography portraying Asian American women has come under the attack of Asian American feminists. A casual search “using keywords like ‘Asian’ and ‘girls’ turns up countless websites touting mail-order brides, phone- and cyber-sex, and even sex tours” (Lee & Dang, 1999). A search using “white” and “girls” turns up a few pornography websites, but not as numerous as search results with ethnic signifier. Ethnicity is closely associated with the notion with exoticism, which has been a staple for pornography. In using racialized subjects, pornography not only markets the female body, but also the culture (or perception of exoticism associated with the culture) that is ascribed to the female subject. In response to internet-based pornography featuring Asian American women, Irene Shen (1999) developed a web search engine called AsiangURLs.com to combat rampant internet-based Asian American pornography and to provide a means to search for contents relevant to “Asian” or “Asian women” without getting returns of Asian pornography websites.
Ethnic/Cultural Context in Pornography

A few considerations regarding the issue of pornography that have not been brought to the forefront of mainstream feminism include important topics such as the racial features within pornography or the relevance of pornography for women of various ethnic backgrounds. Tracey Gardner points out, "when a person of color is used in pornography, it's not the physical appearance of that person which makes it racist. Rather, it's how pornography capitalizes on the underlying history and myths surrounding and oppressing people of color in this country which makes it racist" (Gardner, 1994: 171). Pornography featuring Asian women frequently capitalizes on the stereotype of Asian women as passive and submissive. While the depiction of the female body in pornography is sexual, the layout of the image and the portrayal of the woman in the camera frame carry racial and cultural overtones depending on the setting and the posture or action of the female actor.

The experience of pornography may also differ for women of color. Gardner (1994) claims, "it's difficult for a Black woman to identify totally with what white women feel about [soft-core] pornography" (p 175). Similarly, it is difficult for an Asian woman, a Hispanic woman, and a Native American woman to relate to each other's experiences with and in pornography. While sex is an activity that applies cross-culturally and racially, the portrayal of the sexual experience and desire of racialized subjects in pornography could result in disidentification between women of color regarding pornography. When a black man uses pornography with white female participants, the black woman may not perceive the women-degrading aspect as readily as the racial aspect. For black women, the pornography could be suggesting "that black
women are not sufficiently attractive to merit black men’s attention” (Tong, 1984: 157).
The multi-layering of racialized actors in pornography with the cultural notions and
(perhaps) misrepresentations of the pornographer with the pre-existing social notions of
the viewers of pornography makes the experience of women of color with and in
pornography a complex subject to discuss. But by focusing entirely on the sex
oppression in pornography as many white feminists do, the inherent racial violence can
be overlooked; and what remains is a reductionist version of a complicated topic. If
women are to come together and discuss pornography openly, the racial aspect of it
warrants more attention than it has gotten historically.

The Voices of Asian American and White Women Involved in Pornography

Not all women, white or of color, would agree that pornography represent women
falsely. In “Confessions of a Feminist Porno Star,” Nina Hartley says of pornography,
“it’s a game where there is a possibility of the players, over time, getting some of the
rules changed” (Hartley, 1994: 177). She “can look back on all [her] performances and
see that [she has] not contributed to any negative images or depictions of women”
(Hartley, 1994: 178) in other words, her portrayals of women have not lied about women.
But even if her words were true, she is still only one—one feminist porno star among
hundreds of others who continue to “strip,” “copulate,” “suck cocks,” “fuck,” and present
false images of women and of women’s sexuality. Perhaps lesbian pornographer, Cindy
Patton, says it best, “pornography retains qualities of both views of the real and the
natural, occupying an uncomfortable position between documentary and art” (Patton,
1994: 179). While some pornography obviously contain false representations of women,
such as in gyno thanatica where dismembering could be made out to be sexual, other type of pornography, such as erotica, could present realistic portrayals of female sexuality.

One Asian undergraduate student Oedipa Ho (pseudonym) posed for series of nude shots in a special college edition of a well-known adult-oriented magazine in 1998. She claims that her motives were for the most part political, that by “reaching this core audience of policy-makers and influential people, [she is] helping promote awareness of Asian American issues and what it is like to be an Asian American today” (Song, 1999). Ho’s comment reveals the assumption of an audience with political power. Yet despite her ambitious claim of making an “impact in society today,” other comments are troubling. For instance, she says, “as a liberated woman, I have made my choice to be exploited” by the adult industry. Still, Ho presents the point of view of a confident and successful worker in the sex commerce.
Conclusion

The efforts of many Asian American feminist theorists work to terminate exclusive practices and to connect women of different political stances, in different geographic locations, with different lived knowledge of oppression. While Asian American feminists reside in the US, many are concerned with “third world feminism.” The literature they generate regarding third world women may not necessarily address a “Third World” audience; instead, these “Third World” feminists in the US involve feminist discourse in a “Third World” perspective. On one hand, the addition of “Third World” benefits feminist discourse overall by further diversifying and destabilizing the concept of “women” as an unitary category. Nevertheless, the status of “Third World” feminists living in the “First World” raises questions about their experiential knowledge and hence the credibility of their theories of third world feminism. Asian American feminist theorists brought the critique of cultural difference to feminist discourse within the US. Legal theorists, such as Mari Matsuda, helped formulate critical race theory and critical legal studies—both of which arose and remain active mainly in the US. Critical race theory is similar to concern for third world women, because critical legal practices, like cultural defense, are applied to immigrant or refugee people from the third world.

Several themes recur in theories generated by Asian American feminists. The first is concern with third world women and the issues of sex trade or labor exploitation in the Third World. While Asian Americans theorize within the US, they frequently discuss experiences and matters situated in a different part of the world. Second, Asian American feminists, especially those involved in the academy, generally theorize the
gender-ethnicity nexus. This proliferation of theory along these racial/ethnic lines is partly a response to the Eurocentric perspective that has historically dominated feminist discourse and partly an effort to satisfy the need to address social realities for Asian Americans, which are embedded in gender/ethnic problematics. Third, attitudes about the role of culture in both personal life and politics are ambivalent. Culture and cultural norms figure heavily into the lives of third world and immigrant people. In law, critical race theory insists on examining the cultural contexts and perspectives of those involved; however, as Leti Volpp has demonstrated, taking culture into account could harm women. Furthermore, legally problematic behavior on the part of people of color could be construed as “cultural,” leading to the confounding of bad behavior with particular cultures, and the misinterpretation of behavioral conflicts as conflicts between cultures (i.e. American versus Mexican).

By adding the critique of culture to feminist discourse, Asian American feminists reemphasize the importance of context. The same word has different meanings in different contexts. Similarly, culture becomes different depending on the agents involved, the setting, and the time period. Chinese culture in China as perceived by Chinese people is hardly the same as Chinese culture in the US as perceived by Asian Americans; yet in both cases, culture play a significant role in the lived experience of each group of people. Hence, a local, intersectional analysis becomes helpful in teasing apart the major players in any conflict, cultural or behavioral.

The last ten years have seen tremendous growth in Asian American feminism. The expressions of Asian American feminists are sometimes angry, sometimes very clinical and impersonal, and sometimes humorous. Although I still ask the same question
that Esther Chow had posed in 1989: where are all the Asian American women? I cannot deny that the content of the feminist discourse is changing, albeit extremely slowly. Although better representations of Asian American women are underway, the struggles to gain visibility both within the academy and within larger communities remains immense.
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